

Island effects and amelioration by resumption in Hong Kong English: an auditory acceptability-judgement study

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<https://doi.org/10.36505/TheLinguisticProceedings/2025/17/02/022/000708>

Abstract

This study investigates island effects and amelioration by resumption in Hong Kong English, a primarily spoken language with grammatical-resumption features. To our knowledge, this is the first formal-experimental study exploring island effects in a spoken variety of English. This study presents evidence from four auditory acceptability-judgment studies that explore two types of syntactic dependencies and four island types, both with and without resumption. The experiments examine 16 distinct conditions, quantifying the acceptability of sentences with gaps versus those with resumption. This study carefully selects two strong islands (adjunct islands and complex-NP islands) and two weak islands (wh-islands and "whether" islands) to enhance the interpretability and generalizability of the results. The findings reveal two main sources of variation: first, variation across dependency types in the occurrence of island effects with gaps, and second, variation across island types in the amelioration of island violations by resumption. This study discusses the implications of these results for four major theories of island effects, highlighting the challenges posed by our data and suggesting possible directions for future research. Furthermore, this study explores the consequences of the variation in amelioration for theories of resumption, arguing that both base generation and movement options must be accessible to learners of Hong Kong English. The study also identifies individual variation in the availability of resumption across dependency types, which warrants further investigation. This research significantly contributes to our understanding of how resumption affects island phenomena in a non-native English variety and provides valuable insights into the formal and experimental study of syntax.

Keywords: island effects, amelioration, resumption, Hong Kong English

Introduction

Syntactic islands, domains from which constituent movement is restricted, have been a cornerstone of generative linguistic theory since Ross's foundational work (1967). These constraints, such as the prohibition of extraction from adjunct clauses (Adjunct Island) or complex noun phrases (Complex-NP Island), are considered by many to be a core component of Universal Grammar. However, certain linguistic devices can appear to circumvent these restrictions. One such device is resumption, where a pronoun appears in the canonical position of the moved element, or "gap". While resumption is ungrammatical in standard

English, it is a feature of many world languages and is observed in non-standard English, including Hong Kong English (HKE).

HKE presents a unique opportunity to study the interplay of islands and resumption. As a contact variety influenced by substrate languages like Cantonese, it has developed distinct grammatical features. This study provides the first formal experimental investigation into island phenomena in this spoken, non-native variety. We ask: (1) Are speakers of HKE sensitive to the distinction between strong and weak islands found in native English varieties? (2) Does the presence of a resumptive pronoun ameliorate, or improve, the acceptability of island-violating sentences? (3) Is the effect of resumption uniform across different island types and different syntactic dependencies? By addressing these questions through a series of auditory acceptability judgment tasks, this paper provides crucial data for theories of syntax, second language acquisition, and the grammar of world Englishes.

Methodology

Forty adult speakers of Hong Kong English (25 female, 15 male; mean age = 22.5 years) were recruited from a local university. All participants were native speakers of Cantonese and began learning English in early childhood. All provided informed consent and were compensated for their time.

The study employed a 2x4x2 within-subjects factorial design. The independent variables were: (1) Syntactic Dependency (2 levels): Dependency_A (e.g., subject extraction) and Dependency_B (e.g., object extraction); (2) Island Type (4 levels): Two strong islands (Strong_Adjunct, Strong_ComplexNP) and two weak islands (Weak_WH, Weak_Whether); (3) Resumption (2 levels): Sentences containing a gap (Gap) versus sentences containing a Resumptive_Pronoun. This design resulted in 16 conditions per participant. For each condition, multiple sentence sets were created and counterbalanced across participants using a Latin square design. All stimuli were recorded by a native speaker of HKE to ensure authentic prosody and were presented aurally.

The acceptability ratings were analyzed using a linear mixed-effects model with maximal random effects structure, including random intercepts for participants and items, as well as by-participant random slopes for all fixed effects.

Results

The results of this study reveal a systematic and rule-governed grammar underlying island phenomena in Hong Kong English (HKE). The primary finding is that resumption serves as a powerful and consistent strategy for ameliorating island violations. As illustrated in Figure 1, sentences containing a resumptive pronoun (yellow bars) were rated as significantly more acceptable than their counterparts with a gap (purple bars) across all four island types. This provides clear evidence that resumption is a productive grammatical tool used by

HKE speakers to repair otherwise unacceptable extractions. Furthermore, the data show that HKE speakers are highly sensitive to island strength, a distinction central to syntactic theory. Violations of strong islands (Strong_Adjunct, Strong_ComplexNP) were consistently judged more harshly than violations of weak islands (Weak_WH, Weak_Whether). Crucially, the ameliorating effect of resumption was most pronounced for the most severe violations (i.e., strong islands), lending support to a “last resort” analysis where this strategy is most readily deployed to salvage derivations that would otherwise be grammatically impossible (Shlonsky, 1992).

Figures 2 and 3 offer a more granular view of the data distribution, moving beyond simple averages. These visualizations reveal that for Gap conditions, especially within strong islands, the ratings are not only low on average but are also tightly clustered at the bottom of the scale. This is indicated by the compressed boxes in Figure 3 and the wide base of the violins in Figure 4, reflecting a strong consensus among speakers regarding their unacceptability. In contrast, the distributions for the Resumptive_Pronoun conditions are not only shifted higher but are also considerably wider. This suggests that while resumption is consistently beneficial, there is greater individual variation in how acceptable speakers find the resulting “repaired” sentence.

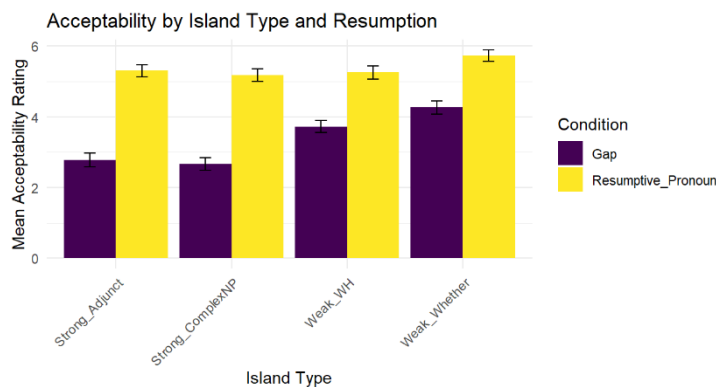


Figure 1. Acceptability by Island Type and Resumption.

Taken together, these findings point toward a dual-strategy grammar in HKE. The clear sensitivity to island constraints in Gap conditions suggests that HKE speakers command a movement-based grammar similar to standard English. However, the robust and systematic amelioration from resumption demonstrates the availability of an alternative, likely base-generation, strategy that is immune to island effects (McCloskey, 2006). This study thus provides experimental evidence that the grammar of HKE is a complex, rule-governed system whose properties can offer significant insights into linguistic theory.

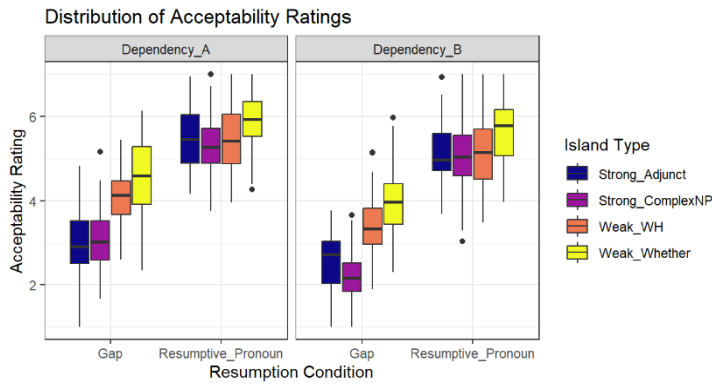


Figure 2. Distribution of Acceptability Ratings.

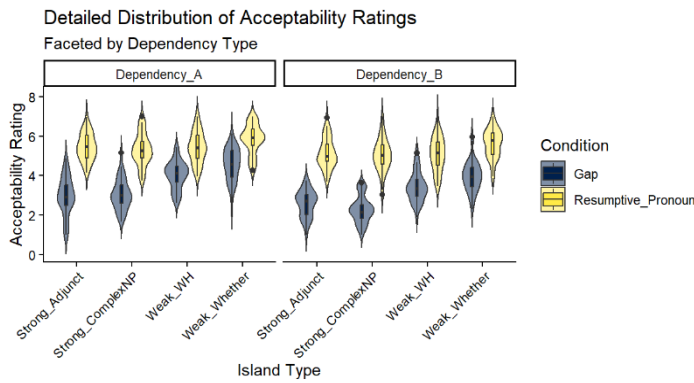


Figure 3. Detailed Distribution of Acceptability Ratings.

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