Competing analyses of relative clauses

Two main classes of hypotheses have been proposed concerning the structure of relative clauses (RCs):

- Head-external analyses, on which the head of the RC is base-generated outside the RC
- Head-internal analyses, on which there is a representation of the head inside the RC

Bhatt (2002) argues that a head-internal structure is available for English RCs on the basis of negative polarity item (NPI) licensing. An NPI (e.g., ever) must be locally c-commanded by an NPI-licensor (e.g., only), as shown by (1).

1. a. Only John ever said that Tolstoy wrote War and Peace.
b. *Only John said that Tolstoy ever wrote War and Peace.

In (1a) the NPI ever is locally licensed by only; while in (1b) it is not local enough to to only be licensed.

Bhatt claims that (2a-b) are both acceptable, and concludes that there must be a representation of the head only book inside the RC, where it can locally license the NPI ever.

2. a. The only book that John ever said that Tolstoy wrote was War and Peace.
b. The only book that John said that Tolstoy ever wrote was War and Peace.

Exp. 1: NPI licensing and RC structure

Do Bhatt’s judgments generalize to a larger population of English speakers? If they do, this will suggest that head-internal structures for RCs are available for English speakers more generally.

- Fully crossed 3 x 2 acceptability study:
  - presence or absence of RC
  - presence or absence of NPI-licensor (only)
  - surface locality or non-locality of NPI (even) to only

(3) Even the doctor (ever,)_j thought that the hospital had (ever,)_k overcharged the patient.

(4) The only patient that the doctor (ever,)_j thought that the hospital (ever,)_k overcharged died.

Participants were asked to rate sentences on a scale of 1 (least acceptable) to 5 (most acceptable).

- 190 experimental items and 64 fillers.

- Participants included 39 UCSC undergraduates.

Exp. 2: Subordinators and RC structure

Are head-internal structures for RCs barred with wh-subordinates such as which, as suggested by a reviewer of Bhatt (2002:83, fn. 23)?

- Fully crossed 2 x 2 acceptability study on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best):
  - RC introduced by that or which
  - surface locality or non-locality of NPI (ever to only)

5. The only game (which,)_j that Beatrix (ever,)_k imagined that Leif (ever,)_m played was chess.

- 64 experimental items and 34 fillers.

- 103 volunteers recruited online.

Conclusions

- In general, sentences containing NPIs are best when the NPIs are licensed, and licensed locally.

- In Experiment 1, the positive effect of local NPI licensing was offset by the interaction effect. Local NPI licensing improved non-RC structures, but did not affect the acceptability of relativization structures.

- This result bears out the predictions of head-internal analyses of RCs, suggesting that head-internal structures for RCs are available in the relevant population of English speakers.

- The choice of subordinator (which vs. that) did not significantly affect ratings, suggesting that there exists a population of English speakers for whom the contrast cited by Bhatt’s (2002:83, fn. 23) reviewer does not hold.

Reference