The case of adjunct islands in Italian

This paper reports and discusses results from an acceptability judgment task conducted to test adjunct island effects in Italian. In particular, this pilot test wants to investigate (i) differences among adjuncts islands, (ii) the effect of embedding on islands and parasitic gaps, and (iii) the effect of resumption on island contexts. Experimental syntax is particularly useful in this field, in that judgments of these sentences are gradient and subtle.

Material A 2x2x2 factorial design was employed (see also Beltrama & Xiang, 2016), with a total of 8 conditions resulting from crossing three factors: (i) structure (parasitic gap/island); (ii) level of embedding; (iii) use of resumption (gap/clitic). Clitic in parasitic gaps were further divided into low clitic, high and doubled, for a total of 12 conditions, which were tested among three types of adjuncts (different from those investigated in Sprouse et al., 2016): dopo (after), prima (before) and senza (without). The island condition for all of the adjuncts can be seen in sentences in (1):

(1) a. Quali dolci Luca è scappato [dopo aver rubato _]?  
which sweets Luca run away after having stolen
  b. Quale ragazzo Silvia è partita [senza salutare _]?  
which boy Silvia has left without saying-goodbye
  c. Quale libro Anna si è preoccupata [prima di trovare _]?  
which book Anna has worried before finding

Hence, material consisted of 36 target items, and 36 filler sentences (50% acceptable and 50% unacceptable). The 72 sentences were presented in a pseudo-randomized order and divided into three blocks, which were presented in different orders among participants. All participants saw all stimuli.

Participants: 12 native speakers of Italian (given that this is a pilot test) from a uniform subject pool (in order to understand whether there was variation among them).

Procedure: Items were presented in a written form. Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of the sentences using a 7-point Likert scale (1= unacceptable, 7= acceptable). Participants were instructed to follow their intuition as native speakers, rather than the grammar rules they learnt.

Results: For statistical analysis, raw scores of each individual subject were first transformed in z-scores to avoid scale-biases. A mixed-effects model was conducted on transformed data with the R statistical package lme4. Fixed effect predictors were sum coded, with island, 1-embedding and gap coded as 1, non island, no embedding, resumption coded as -1. Random effects included subject and items.

I found a significant effect of structure (island effect) in all three adjuncts types, although it was much weaker in the case of extraction out of senza, which was judged as acceptable by many participants. The effect of embedding was significant only in the case of extraction out of dopo, but in other sentences the level of embedding did not decreased the acceptability of the structure. Finally, no effect of resumption was found in any of the adjuncts considered.

Discussion: This pilot test (which is meant to be extended to a more consistent subject pool) showed that extraction out of adjuncts in Italian is opaque, and that both the level of embedding and the use of resumption are not influential in acceptability judgments. However, there are clear differences among this group of islands: (i) the effect of embedding was significant only in the case of dopo; (ii) the island effect was much weaker in the case of extraction out of senza, which is particularly evident in several participants who accepted these structures. The discussion will also take into account the amount of variation among participants, which was found in many of the proposed items.

Keywords: experimental, syntax, islands, adjunct, variation.