Coherence and finiteness effects in extraction from adjunct islands in English

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It has traditionally been assumed that adjunct clauses are strong islands for extraction across languages, including in English (the Adjunct Condition, Huang, 1982). However, recent studies have claimed that extraction from adjunct clauses is possible in English given certain conditions.

Semi-coherence: Extraction from adjunct clauses is possible in English, provided that a coherence relation (e.g., a causal, as opposed to a purely temporal relation) holds between the events referred to by the matrix and the adjunct clause (1a vs. 1b) (Truswell, 2011; Tanaka, 2015).

(1a) Who, did John get upset after talking to John? (Truswell, 2011: 129)
(1b) *Who, which letter did John break a glass after writing it? (Truswell, 2011: 141)

Finiteness: It has been argued that in English extraction from coherent adjuncts is only possible if the adjunct is non-finite (2a vs. 2b) (Truswell, 2011).

(2a) Who, did John go home after talking to John? 
(2b) *Who, did John go home after he talked to John?

If coherence and/or finiteness indeed have an impact on the acceptability and/or processing of extraction from adjunct clauses, then this would call into question claims that filler-gap association is suspended in island domains, as has been argued for subject islands (Stowe, 1986) and relative clause islands in English (e.g., Traxler & Pickering, 1996).

The current study

The current study investigates how coherence and finiteness affect the acceptability (Exp. 1) and the real-time processing (Exp. 2) of adjunct island extraction in English.

Hypotheses:

- Predicted main effect of coherence: For Experiment 1, a higher level of sentential coherence will increase the acceptability of extraction from the adjunct as measured via higher ratings for coherent structures. For Experiment 2, higher coherence is expected to facilitate reading times at the embedded adjunct verb (R9) and splitover region (R10) where dependency formation is expected to occur.
- The presence of finiteness on the adjunct verb is expected to degrade the acceptability of extraction (Exp. 1) and slow processing at the adjunct verb (Exp. 2), provided that sentences are coherent – with no additional effect being hypothesized for non-coherent structures.

Finding an influence of either factor on dependency formation could be taken as evidence of the online permeability of such structures.