

Transfer of Constraints or Constraints on Transfer? Syntactic Islands in Danish L2 English

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Abstract : In the syntax literature, it has standardly been assumed that relative clauses and complement wh-clauses are islands for extraction in English, and that constraints on extraction from syntactic islands are universal. However, the Mainland Scandinavian languages has been known to provide counterexamples. Previous research on Danish has shown that neither relative clauses nor embedded questions are strong islands in Danish. Instead, extraction from this type of syntactic environment is degraded due to structural complexity and it interacts with nonstructural factors such as the frequency of occurrence of the matrix verb, the possibility of temporary misanalysis leading to semantic incongruity and exposure over time. We argue that these facts can be accounted for with parametric variation in the availability of CP-recursion, resulting in the patterns observed, as Danish would then “suspend” the ban on movement out of relative clauses and embedded questions. Given that Danish does not seem to adhere to allegedly universal syntactic constraints, such as the Complex NP Constraint and the Wh-Island Constraint, what happens in L2 English? We present results from a study investigating how native Danish speakers judge extractions from island structures in L2 English. Our findings suggest that Danes transfer their native language parameter setting when asked to judge island constructions in English. This is compatible with the Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis, as the latter predicts that Danish would have difficulties resetting their [+/- CP-recursion] parameter in English because they are not exposed to negative evidence.

Keywords : syntax, islands, second language acquisition, danish

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