

Experimental syntax and island extractions in Danish

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In this talk, I will first discuss the need for an experimental approach to syntax. There is an ongoing debate whether theoretical syntax needs to incorporate quantitative experiments or whether standard introspection is sufficient. I shall argue that experiments may on the one hand offer empirical support or counter-evidence for theoretical constructs and on the other hand, help avoid certain types of bias that may otherwise give rise to incorrect analyses or flawed theories. I shall then present data from a series of studies on extractions in Danish – extractions from contexts otherwise standardly assumed to be syntactic islands (wh-questions and relative clauses). These studies show that not only is extraction possible, but the acceptability rating is also dependent on non-syntactic factors, including working memory and plausibility of temporary interpretation. The licensing of this temporary interpretation, however, is shown to be determined by syntactic information (sub-categorization), not by semantics (plausibility/selection restrictions). Furthermore, the standardly assumed difference in acceptability between argument and adjunct extractions is not supported by the empirical data. Finally, I shall discuss some of the implications for syntactic theory.