“What does syntax have to do with island effects?”

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Abstract: One of the most remarkable aspects of human communication is the fact that words that go together in meaning can occur far away from each other, often in different clauses. An example of such a Long-Distance Dependency (LDD) is seen in the attested example in (1).

(1) This is [something] that most cognitive scientists think about _ but never consider the implications of _.

As indicated by the '_' symbol, the phrase "something" is interpreted in (1) as if it were next to the words "about" and "of". In addition to the puzzle of why LDDs exist in language at all, there is another puzzle, concerning certain constraints on the possible range of LDDs. For example, even though "I saw Robin with the detective yesterday" and "I saw Robin and the detective yesterday" are perfectly acceptable sentences, and very similar in meaning, only the former allows an LDD:

(2) This is [the detective] who I saw Robin with _ yesterday.
(3) *This is [the detective] who I saw Robin and _ yesterday.

The oddness of (3) is traditionally referred to as an "Island effect", given that a syntactic structure (in this case, coordination) acts as a barrier to an LDD. Mainstream syntactic theories take island constraints to reflect deep (universal) architectural properties of natural language syntax.

In this talk I will challenge the configurational/universalist position in two ways. First, I argue that the (rare) island effects which are due to syntax can be explained in terms of the syntax-semantic interface, without any appeal to universal language architecture. Second, I argue that most island effects are in fact not due to syntax. Rather, most islands are more likely caused by independently motivated semantic, pragmatic, and performance factors, of which probabilistic knowledge about the syntactic distribution of LDDs plays an important role. In support of this claim I provide new off-line and on-line experimental evidence which directly challenges the configurational/universalist position.