



Do resumptive pronouns ever rescue illicit gaps in English?

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Background

The literature presents a contradictory picture of resumptive pronouns in English. On the one hand, corpus studies [1, 2, 3] show that:

- Resumptive pronouns are frequent in speech.

and theoretical syntacticians [4, 5] and an experimental study [6] claim that:

- Resumptive pronouns can “rescue” illicit gaps.

On the other hand, other experimental studies [7, 8] show that:

- Resumptive pronouns are never better than illicit gaps.

Questions

- Are resumptive pronouns ever better than illicit gaps?
- If so, when?
- Why in just those circumstances?

Experiment

Large-scale acceptability study

- 121 participants
- 11-point scale
- 4 x 2 x 2 design
 - 4 levels of sentence type
 - 2 levels of position (subject, object)
 - 2 levels of gap type (gap, resumptive)
- Each participant sees 2 tokens of each condition.
- Latin square design
- 2:1 filler/experimental ratio

See “Materials” section for sample stimuli.

Materials

Subjects

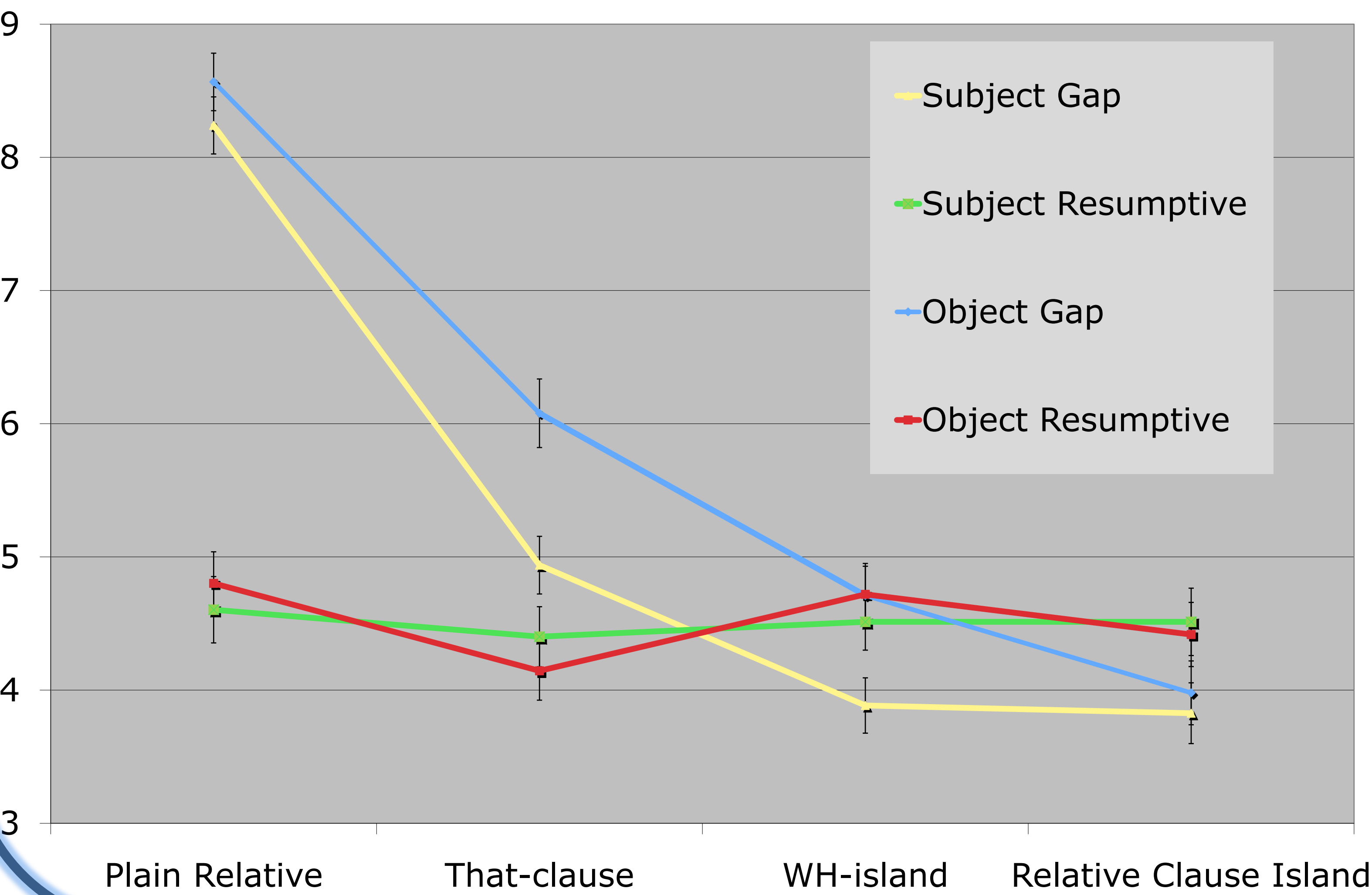
	Gap	Resumptive pronoun
Plain Relative	This is the chef that ___ prepared the potatoes.	This is the chef that <u>she</u> prepared the potatoes.
Embedded that-clause	This is the chef that Ted realized that ___ prepared the potatoes.	This is the chef that Ted realized that <u>she</u> prepared the potatoes.
Wh-island	This is the chef that Ted inquired how ___ prepared the potatoes.	This is the chef that Ted inquired how <u>she</u> prepared the potatoes.
Relative Clause Island	This is the chef that Ted devoured the potatoes that ___ prepared.	This is the chef that Ted devoured the potatoes that <u>she</u> prepared.

Objects

	Gap	Resumptive pronoun
Plain Relative	These are the potatoes that Ted prepared ___.	These are the potatoes that Ted prepared <u>them</u> .
Embedded that-clause	These are the potatoes that Ted realized that the chef prepared ___.	These are the potatoes that Ted realized that the chef prepared <u>them</u> .
Wh-island	These are the potatoes that Ted inquired how the chef prepared ___.	These are the potatoes that Ted inquired how the chef prepared <u>them</u> .
Relative Clause Island	These are the potatoes that Ted flirted with the chef that prepared ___.	These are the potatoes that Ted flirted with the chef that prepared <u>them</u> .

Results

Acceptability on 1 – 11 scale (zoomed in on 3 – 9):



What this shows

1. **Resumptive pronouns do not rescue simple island violations:** Object resumptives are as bad as gaps in island conditions.
2. **Resumptive pronouns do not rescue simple ECP violations:** Subject resumptives are as bad as gaps in embedded *that*-clause condition.
3. **Resumptives do rescue combined island + ECP violations:** Subject resumptives are better than gaps in island conditions.
4. **Resumptives show a relatively constant level of acceptability regardless of the structure where they are found.**

Implications

These results suggest that:

- Using a resumptive pronoun in English imposes a uniform penalty on acceptability, regardless of the position.
- This penalty is worse than that affecting gaps in simple island or ECP configurations.
- This penalty is not as bad as that affecting a gap violating an island + ECP, where the effect is additive.
- This penalty appears to be less severe in speech than in writing.

Overall conclusion: Resumptive pronouns can “rescue” illicit gaps in just those cases where the fixed resumptive pronoun penalty is less than that affecting the gap.

References

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