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An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Island

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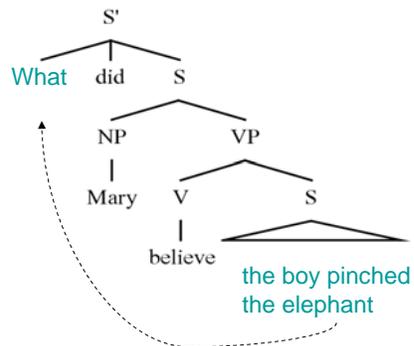
Movement in syntax

Movement is used here as a
metaphor for expressing
correlations between gaps and
their fillers.

Using this metaphor, what we are
seeing here is the extraction of a
syntactic constituent to outside its
original domain.

Slide 2

Island

- An island in syntax refers to a syntactic domain from which its constituents cannot be extracted.
- In other words, a gap inside an island cannot be filled by an antecedent outside of that island.
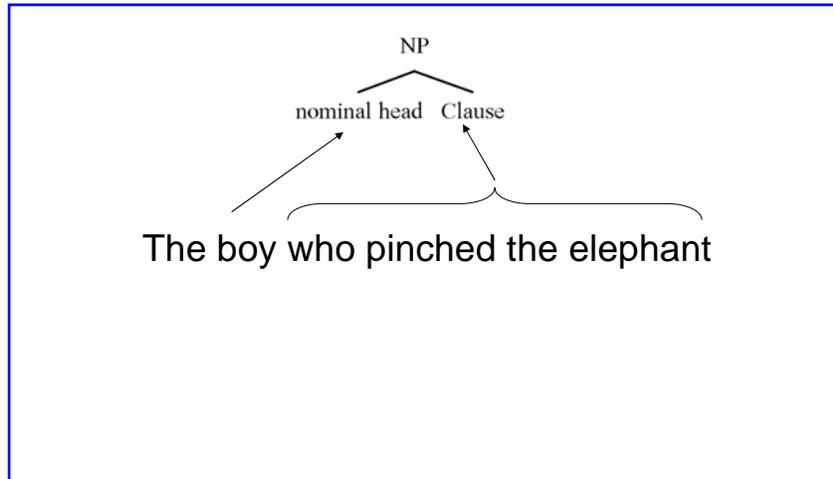- First discovered by Ross (1967).

Types of islands

- Complex NP island
- Subject island
- Adjunct island
- Question island
- Left-branch constraint
- Coordinate structure constraint

Complex NP

NP

nominal head   Clause

The boy who pinched the elephant

Complex NP island

The boy pinched the elephant .

What did the boy pinch _____?

Susan believed the boy pinched the elephant .

What did Susan believe the boy pinched _____?

Susan believed the boy who pinched the elephant .

*What did Susan believe the boy who pinched _____?

The complex NP is an island. One cannot move items out of it.

Subject island

The boy pinched the trunk of the elephant.

What did the boy pinch the trunk of _____?

The trunk of the elephant fascinated many biologists.

*What did the trunk of _____ fascinate many biologists?

The subject of a clause is an island. One cannot move items out of it.

Adjunct island

Chloe gasped because Tim kissed Carrie.

*Who did Chloe gasped because Tim kissed _____?

The adjunct of a clause is an island. One cannot move items out of it.

Question island

Lily knew that the boy pinched the elephant .

What did Lily know that the boy pinched _____?

Lily knew who pinched the elephant.

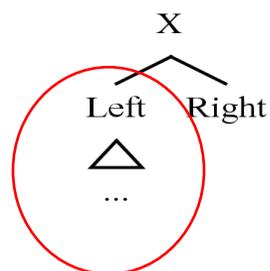*What did Lily believe who pinched _____?

The Question clause is an island. One cannot move items out of it.

The left branch

X

Left   Right

△

...

Left-branch constraint

Tiffany tore the cover of the book.

What did Tiffany tear the cover of _____?
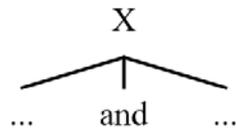
Tiffany tore the cover of the book.

*What did Tiffany tear _____ of the book?

The left-branch is trapped. One cannot move it or items from it.

Slide 11

Coordinate structure

The coordinate structure is an island.
One cannot move items out of it.

Slide 12

Coordinate structure constraint

1. a. Tom saw the boy and the girl.
   b. *Who did Tom see the boy and ___?
2. a. Tom rode a bike and whistled a song.
   b. *What did Tom ride ___ and whistle a song?
3. a. Tom pinched Susan and Mary kissed Bill.
   b. *Who did Tom pinch Susan and Mary kiss ___?

Slide 13

Summary

- Movement (metaphor for gap-filler relationships) is common in syntax.
- Islands are cases where movement is forbidden.
- Though illustrated using English here, the island constraints are found across many languages.

Slide 14

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Further reading

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The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
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