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Islands Result from Clash of Functions: Single-conjunct *Wh-Q*s

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Abstract

When we produce utterances, we aim to express our message in a coherent way. While listeners generally prefer semantically related constituents to be close together in the string ("local"), certain constructions allow long-distance dependencies (LLDs). There is growing evidence that constraints on LDDs involve information structure, but conjunction is recognized to require its own unique constraints. Here we offer 4 experimental studies aimed to illuminate *why* conjunctions resist LDDs, by investigating a particular case experimentally in detail: English *wh*-questions that query only the final conjunct in verb phrase conjunction. The first two studies demonstrate that gradient acceptability is predicted by the extent to which a conjunction expresses a single complex event rather than two separate events. Exp. 3 demonstrates a role for the information structure constraint that holds of LDDs generally: more prominent (less backgrounded) conjuncts combine with *wh*-questions more easily. A final experiment *manipulates* construal as a single event *and* the prominence of a conjunct. Results demonstrate an additive causal role for both factors.

Keywords: language; islands; conjunctions; complex events

Introduction

When we speak or sign, we choose constructions whose functions will express our intended message. For instance, if we wish to convey a suspicion that Sam ate the pies, we might say, *they said Sam ate the pies,* but if we want to emphasize someone is upset about the pies being eaten, we might instead say, *they grumbled Sam ate the pies.*

Utterances typically combine several constructions, and the functions of these constructions must be compatible. For instance, if we want to ask what Sam ate in either of the previous examples, we could combine them with an information question (*wh-Q*) construction, as in (1). Note, however, that (1a) is more acceptable than (1b). The reduced acceptability of the second question has been termed an "island effect" (Ross 1967). Put simply, islands are constituents that do not readily combine with long-distance dependency constructions (LDDs), where LDDs are semantic dependencies between a constituent and the more canonical position of that constituent. For example, the examples in (1) require language users to observe a semantic relationship between *what* and the verb that semantically licenses that argument (underlined):

1a. <u>What</u> did they say Sam <u>ate</u>?

b. ?? <u>What</u> did they grumble Sam <u>ate</u>?

Here we investigate a particular type of island effect, which has not been examined experimentally to our knowledge: extraction from a single verb phrase conjunct. The degraded acceptability of extraction from single-VP conjuncts is a part of the Coordinate Structure Constraint:

> **Coordinate Structure Constraint (CSC):** In a coordinate structure, no conjunct may be moved, nor may any element contained in a conjunct be moved out of that conjunct. (Ross, 1967).

The CSC captures the fact that it is generally unacceptable to query an argument from a single conjunct, as in (2):

2. ?? What does she like to [[drink gin] and [eat _]]?

Yet as Ross (1967) had already noted, there are many cases where the CSC does not hold. For instance, examples like (3) appear to be acceptable (see also Altshuler & Truswell, 2022; Bošković, 2019; Goldberg, 1998; Goldsmith, 1985; Kehler, 2002; Lakoff, 1986; Oda, 2017; Schmerling, 1975; Stjepanovic, 2014).

3. What did Alex [[run to the store] and [buy _]]?

Here we ask, *why* does this CSC generally exist? And will an understanding of why it exists explain why it seems to apply to some conjunctions more than others? We report four experiments aimed at explaining the gradient variability in acceptability of 1-conjunct-*wh*-Qs like those in (2) and (3).

A Clash of Functions

In the most general terms, we propose that unacceptability results from a clash in discourse functions of constructions being combined (Abeille et al., 2020; Ambridge & Goldberg, 2008; Cuneo & Goldberg, 2022; Goldberg, 2006, 2013; Lu, Pan & Degen, 2024; Namboordiripad et al., 2022; Winckel et al., 2024). We demonstrate that islands involving VP conjunctions result from two types of clashes.

One type of clash concerns the hypothesis that backgrounded constructions are islands (BCI) (Goldberg, 2006, 2013):

> **Backgrounded Constructions are Islands (BCI)**: Constructions are islands to long-distance dependency constructions to the extent that their

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content is backgrounded within the domain of the long-distance dependency construction.

The BCI claims that island effects arise because a *wh-Q* makes a constituent prominent while island constructions background information to varying degrees. For example, it is infelicitous to both foreground (via a *wh-Q*) and background (via the licensing verb) the same constituent. Critically, the BCI proposes that backgroundedness and island effects are gradient rather than binary such that the more backgrounded a constituent, the larger the island effect (Abeille et al., 2024; Ambridge & Goldberg, 2008; Cuneo & Goldberg, 2023; Dabrowska, 2013; Goldberg, 2006, 2013; Lu et al., 2024; Namboodiripad et al., 2022).

Cuneo and Goldberg (2023) conducted a large-scale experiment to directly test whether backgroundedness predicts island effects across ten different constructions and three types of long-distance dependencies (including *wh-Q*s and relative clauses). Separate groups of participants provided acceptability judgments on base sentences or one type of LDD. An independent measure of Backgroundedness was separately collected. The measure relies on the observation that when an entire sentence is negated, information that is presupposed or taken for granted (i.e. backgrounded) is not affected (Karttunen, 1973). For instance, in (4a), it is less likely that Gabe ate the pies than in (4b), indicating that the information is more at-issue (less backgrounded) and so more influenced by negation:

4a. They didn't say Gabe ate the pies.
b. They didn't grumble Gabe ate the pies.

The Functions of VP Conjunction

As stated earlier, in order for constructions to combine, their functions must be compatible. What is the function of a conjunction? The function of logical conjunction is to depict two or more distinct entities, events, or states *of equal prominence* as in (5).

5. She likes to drink gin and eat steak.

However, natural language is not logic (e.g., Ariel & Mauri, 2019; Ariel, 2023) and some conjunctions do not indicate two distinct events or states. Instead, some conjunctions are better described as depicting a single complex event. We suggest this is the case in (6).

6. Alex ran to the store and bought apples.

We propose a gradient distinction between the functions of the conjunctions in (5) and (6) and predict that this difference explains the extent to which island effects arise in the corresponding *wh-Q*s (2 *vs.* 3).

Hypothesis: It is infelicitous for a speaker to choose a symmetric construction (logical conjunction) if they are simultaneously choosing to make only (part of) *one* conjunct prominent, as in a single-conjunct *wh-Q*.

Prediction: *wh-Q*s of a single conjunct VP will be more acceptable to the extent that the conjoined VP is construed as **a single complex event or state**.

Others have suggested theoretical proposals that are closely related: e.g., certain types of event sequencies allow 1-conjunct LDDs (Lakoff, 1986); conversely, symmetric events resist 1-conjunct LDDs (Altshuler & Truswell, 2022); construal as a single complex event or semantic frame licenses 1-conjunct LDDs (Goldberg, 1998; Harris 2011); or conjuncts that are causally related allow 1-conjunct LDDs (Kehler, 2002). Here we operationalize the extent to which conjunctions are construed as a single complex event and test the hypothesis in Exp. 1 and 2, as described below.

In Exp. 3, we investigate the role of Backgroundedness, found relevant in prior work. Finally, Exp. 4 brings the two factors together by manipulating both experimentally. The combination of current results provides robust quantitative evidence that semantic and information structure factors explain the gradient acceptability judgments of *wh-Qs* from the second of two conjuncts.

Participants and Acceptability Judgments

Participants

A total of 442 English-dominant participants were recruited from Prolific and paid for their time. This number allowed roughly 20 participants to judge each item on a single task.

Stimuli

Forty-six declarative sentences (7) containing verb-phrase conjunctions were created with the intention that they should all be plausible and reasonably natural. These sentences (henceforth, *base sentences*) were used to create corresponding *wh-Q*s that queried the direct object argument of the second of two conjuncts. Presentation of items was randomized for each participant. Stimuli, data, and analysis scripts can be found here: https://researchbox.org/4228.

7a. The team won a prize and ate pizza to celebrate.
b. She woke up and thought of a great solution.

Acceptability Judgments

Acceptability judgments were collected on base sentences and corresponding *wh-Q*s separately. Participants used a 7-point Likert scale labelled [1: completely unnatural] to [7: perfectly natural]. Each participant also saw a random subset of fillers, half of which were relatively acceptable and half, unacceptable.

Models

Ordinal (clmm) models were created for analyses of Exps. 1-3 and an analysis of (in)transitivity. Acceptability ratings were then predicted by an interaction of BorQ (base sentences vs. *wh*-Qs) and the factor measured in each Exp. Maximal

random effect structure that convergence allowed was included in each model.

Single Complex Events are More Amenable to *Wh-Q*s

Single Complex Event #1: Explicit Query

The first task is straightforward and explicit: we simply asked participants whether each base sentence, e.g. (7) expressed a single complex event (or state) or two separate events (or states). Item order was randomized for each participant.

Results The ordinal model shows that higher likelihood of judging a conjunction as two distinct events predicts lower ratings of *wh-Q*s, with no influence on the base sentences themselves. I.e., the predicted interaction is significant (β = -2.68 z = -35.22 p < .00001).

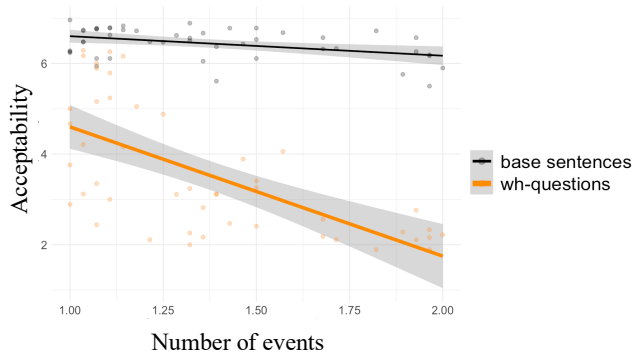

Figure 1: x-axis: Mean judgments on whether VP conjunctions depict a single complex event/state or two distinct events/states; y-axis: Acceptability ratings on *wh*-Qs (orange) and base sentences (grey).

Single Complex Event #2: Negating Disjunction *vs.* Conjunction

Exp. 2 offers an implicit measure of the extent to which conjoined verb phrases are construed as a single complex event (or state) rather than two distinct events (or states). Observe that the negation of logical conjunction is expressed with disjunction (*or*) rather than *and* (see 8 below): i.e., - (A & B) ←→ -A or -B (DeMorgan's law).

8a. She doesn't like to drink gin **or** eat steak.
b. ?? She doesn't like to drink gin **and** eat steak.

Yet as noted, conjunction does not necessarily receive a strictly logical interpretation. By hypothesis, English conjunction can be used to describe a single complex event rather than two distinct events. In this case, negation should have scope over the conjunction, and negation with *and* should be acceptable. Exp. 2 asks participants to rate the acceptability of negated conjunctions (9a, 10a) and negated disjunctions (9b, 10b). Stimuli was created by negating each of the 46 base sentences and including *and* in one version and *or* in the other (92 sentence stimuli in total).

9a. The team didn't win a prize and eat pizza to celebrate.
b. The team didn't win a prize or eat pizza to celebrate.

10a. She didn't wake up and think of a great solution.
b. She didn't wake up or think of a great solution.

We predicted that the larger the difference in acceptability between negated disjunction and negated conjunction, the less acceptable the corresponding *wh-Q*s should be.

Results As predicted, the less acceptable the negated conjunctions were compared to the negated disjunctions (i.e., the greater the tendency toward logical construal), the less acceptable the corresponding *wh-Q*s were, with no influence on acceptability judgments of base sentences (Figure 2). More specifically, an ordinal model, with maximal random effect structure, shows that the difference in acceptability between negated disjunction and negated conjunction predicted acceptability ratings on *wh-Q*s more than base sentences (the predicted interaction: β = -1.13; z = -31.2; p < .00001). See Figure 2.

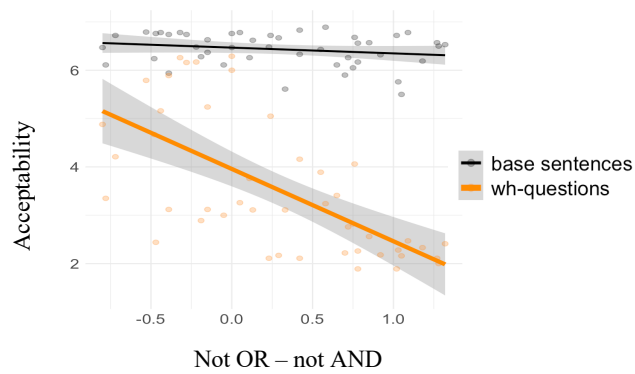

Figure 2: x-axis: Mean acceptability judgments of [not OR] – [not AND] for each stimulus (greater values indicate 2 events). Points: Mean acceptability on base sentences (grey) and *wh-Q*s (orange).

The measures collected in Exp. 1 and 2 were intended to capture the same construct. Indeed, both ways of measuring construal as a single complex event strongly correlate with one another (r = .77, t(44) = 8.03, p < .00001), and a model that includes both interactions fails converge.

#3: *Wh-Q*s are More Acceptable When to-be-Queried Conjunct Expresses the Main Idea

Exp. #3 is motivated by prior work on the role of information structure on LDD ratings as described in the introduction. Specifically, the BCI proposal predicts that more prominent constituents should be more available for LDDs in comparison to constituents that are more backgrounded. To test whether *wh-Q*s are more acceptable when querying a conjunct that is more prominent (less Backgrounded), we

provided a new group of 40 participants a 3-alternative forced choice task, and asked them to select, for each base sentence, whether the main idea was expressed by the first conjunct, the second conjunct, or "can't tell". We predicted that when the second conjunct tended to express the main idea, acceptability ratings of the corresponding *wh-Q*s which queried the second conjunct should be higher, with no particular influence on acceptability of the base sentences themselves.

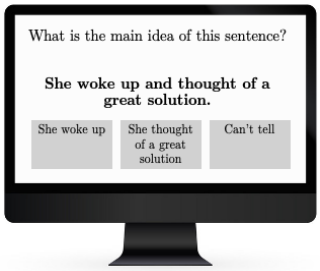

Figure 3: Example item from Exp. #3

Results

The ordinal model was created with acceptability as the outcome and sentence type (base or *wh-Q*) interacting with mean proportion of selections of the second conjunct as the main idea, centered at 0, and random effects as convergence would allow. Results once again show the predicted interaction ($\beta = 0.03$; $z = 29.71$; $p < .00001$). See Fig. 4.

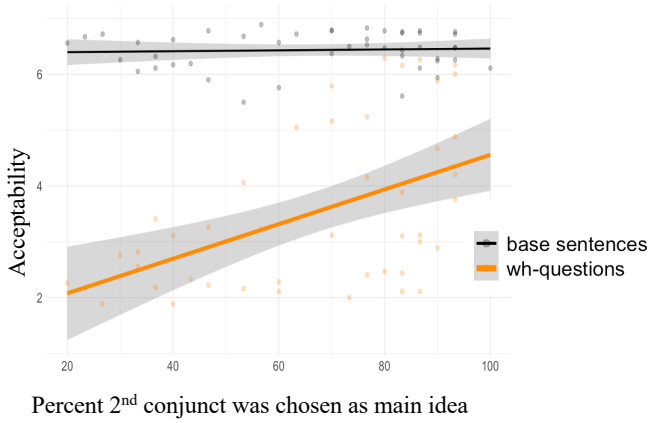

Figure 4: *Wh-Q*s increase in acceptability to the extent that the targeting (2nd) conjunct expresses the main idea

Transitivity of the First Conjunct

Many examples in the literature that are used to illustrate acceptable LDDs from a single conjunct include intransitive first conjuncts (e.g., [5] *What did Alex go to the store and buy*?). So, for the sake of completeness, we also tested whether this factor influences the acceptability of *wh-Q*s more than base sentences. We treated transitivity as a ternary factor: the first conjunct was intransitive in 18 stimuli (coded as .5); the first conjunct included a plural direct object without determiner in 12 stimuli (coded as 0); and the first conjunct included a direct object with a determiner in 16 items (coded as .5). We once again created an ordinal model to predict acceptability ratings on the basis of BorQ now interacting with the transitivity of the first conjunct, and the maximum random effect structure convergence allowed. As was the case with both construal as a single event and prominence of the to-be-queried constituent, intransitivity of the first conjunct predicts the acceptability of *wh-Q*s, but not the base sentences. I.e., the interaction was significant ($\beta = -2.66$; $z = -44.74$; $p < .00001$).

The influence of the first conjunct's (in)transitivity may be because it is easier to process LDDs when there is less interference: i.e., questions beginning with *what* or *who* are unlikely to involve interference from clearly intransitive verbs such as *go* or *come*, which would require *where* (Hofmeister & Sag, 2010; Kluender, 2004). It has also been argued that more transitive phrases tend to be more at-issue, pushing the narrative forward (Hopper & Thompson 1980; Thompson & Hopper 2008). The latter idea is consistent with the significant negative correlation between transitivity of the first conjunct and whether the second conjunct was deemed more important ($r = -.54$, $t(44) = -4.30$, $p < .0001$): Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations among factors

	Base - Question	1 or 2 events (explicit)	1 or 2 events (implicit)	2nd conjunct is main idea
1 or 2 events (explicit)	.62***	1		
1 or 2 events (implicit)	.58***	.77***	1	
2nd conj. is main idea	-.52***	-.66***	-.63***	1
1st conjunct intransitive	.73***	.42**	.43**	-.54***

As illustrated in Table 1, results of each task described so far significantly predict judgments on *wh-Q*s more than judgments on base sentences, as predicted by the semantic and information structure factors proposed. Each measure also correlates with each of the others. Exploratory analyses demonstrate that models fail to converge when more than a single factor is included.

The correlations among the three factors considered here lead us to Exp. #4, which manipulates single event status and the prominence of the 2nd conjunct separately, while holding constant the transitivity of the first conjunct.

Manipulating Backgroundedness and Single-event Construal

Each of the measures used so far correlates with judgments on *wh-Q*s more than base sentences. A final experiment *manipulates* the Backgroundedness of base sentences and collects new acceptability ratings on *wh-Q*s. We adopt the methodology of Lu, Pan, and Degen (2024): Before each acceptability rating, a negated base sentence appears as a context sentence. In half of trials, the to-be-queried constituent is made more prominent by appearing in all

capital letters; the other half of trials include the same context sentences but presented neutrally (no special capitalization to indicate prominence). Each participant judged a combination of trials with emphasized and non-emphasized constituents in context sentences, but no one saw both emphasized and non-emphasized versions of the same context sentence.

Figure 5: Stressed (right) and unstressed (left) context sentence trials along with *wh*-questions that were judged for acceptability.

As shown in Fig. 5, the *wh-Q* was identical in each pair of items; the only difference was whether the to-be-queried constituent was made prominent in the sentence preceding it. An ordinal model with Prominence (+/-) as a fixed factor and random intercepts and slopes on subjects and items confirms our prediction: acceptability of *wh-Q*s increases when the to-be-queried constituent was made more prominent in the preceding sentence ($\beta = 0.53$ $z = 3.48$ $p < .001$).

Astute readers may notice that Exp. 2 had collected acceptability ratings on the identical negated (unstressed) conjunctions used as context sentences in Exp. 4. Recall in Exp 2, ratings on negated conjunctions (in declarative statements) were compared to ratings on negated disjunctions. The difference scores measured in Exp. 2 were used as an index of construal as a single-complex event and were found to correlate highly with the explicit measure of single- event construal, in Exp. 1.

Therefore, in Exp. 4 the (neutral) negated context sentences serve a dual purpose. The negated conjunctions used as context sentences can be expected to coerce a construal of the conjunction as a single complex single event, to the extent possible (participants were not given any reason to expect the context sentences to be less than fully acceptable). We therefore predicted that ratings on the *wh-Qs* following a negated unstressed context sentence in Exp 4 should be higher than the judgments originally collected for the identical *wh-Qs* in Exp. 1, which did not include any context sentences. This is exactly what we find.

In fact, increased construal as a single event and increased prominence of the to-be-queried constituent in base sentences increased acceptability ratings of *wh-Q*s in an additive manner. This is revealed by a model that considered the mean acceptability ratings of *wh-Q* items in three conditions: a) ratings on *wh-Qs* collected without any context sentences; b) ratings on the same *wh-Qs* judged after reading the neutral negated conjunctions used as context sentences, and c) ratings on the same *wh-Qs* judged after reading negated context sentences that increased the prominence of the to-be-queried constituent via capitalization. We predicted (a) < (b) < (c), if both construal as a single event and prominence in discourse both play a role in the acceptability of single-conjunct *wh-Qs*. This prediction was confirmed with a linear mixed model in which mean acceptability judgments were the outcome, with condition [(a)-(c)] as a fixed factor. The reference level used was (b), and random intercepts were included on items. Results show significant additive effects of increasing the construal as a single event (a) *vs.* (b) (β = -0.50, t = -4.54, p < .00001); and as already observed, increasing the prominence of the constituent to be queried increased ratings as well (b) *vs.* (c) (β = 0.44, t = 4.01, p < .00001).

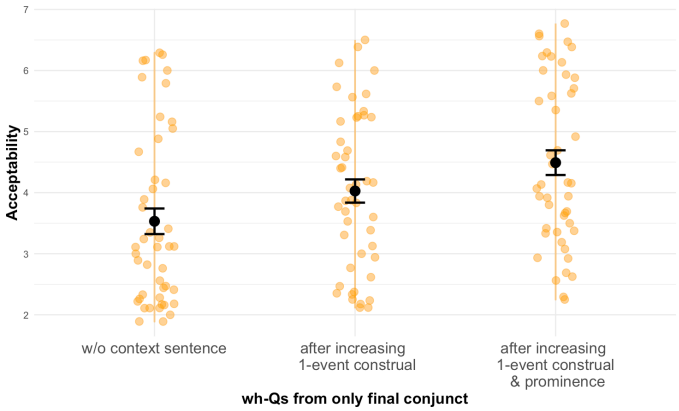

Figure 6: Acceptability of *wh-Q*s from a single conjunct without a context sentence (left); after increasing construal as single event (via negated conjunction) (middle)

General Discussion

The current work clarifies and establishes the idea that the coordinate-structure constraint arises from a clash of functions between logical conjunction, which describes more multiple equally prominent things, states or events, and *wh-Q*s, which make the queried content particularly prominent. Theoretical suggestions in the literature had foreshadowed that LDDs from a single verb phrase conjunct are more acceptable when the conjunction depicts a single complex event (Goldberg 1998); an asymmetric event (Atshuler and Truswell 2022); or a coherent predication (Lakoff 1986).

Exp. 1 asked participants explicitly whether each base sentence, which included a conjoined VP, expressed one complex event or two distinct events. As predicted, results on this explicit task involving base sentences predicted judgments on *wh-Q*s, collected separately, more than they predicted judgments on the base sentences themselves. This explicit measure also correlated strongly with results on the implicit task of Exp. 2, which aimed to operationalize the notion of construal as a single complex event in a different

way. For Exp. 2, we collected acceptability ratings on negated base sentences with conjunction (*not* A *and* B) and compared them to acceptability ratings on negated disjunction (*not* A *or* B). This was motivated by the fact that negated logical conjunction is expressed with disjunction, but single events or states can be negated while including the conjunct *and*. The two ways of operationalizing the likelihood of construal as a single complex event, one explicit, one implicit, each predicted the acceptability of single conjunct *wh-Q*s. As expected, since the two measures were both intended to index the extent to which verb-phrase conjunctions were construed as a single complex event, the measures were highly correlated with one another ($r = .77$).

While conjunctions have always been treated as a unique case when it comes to acceptability of long-distance dependencies, Exp. 3 demonstrates that the factor established relevant to a wide range of other base constructions and several types of LDDs is also operative in the case of conjunctions. First, results showed that the *wh-Q*s, which all queried the second conjunct, were rated as more acceptable to the extent that the second conjunct was deemed more important than the first. This indicates that *wh-Q*s from a single conjunct are judged more acceptable when the queried conjunct is more prominent (less Backgrounded) than the other conjunct.

We additionally demonstrated that intransitive 1st-conjuncts predict more acceptable *wh-Q*s from the 2nd conjunct. This finding on its own is open to various interpretations: there may be relatively higher prominence on the only transitive conjunct; intransitive conjuncts may increase the likelihood of construal as a single event; and/or potential interference may be reduced since *what* or *who* are unlikely arguments of intransitive verbs. We consider each of these explanations plausible and non-mutually exclusive. It may alternatively be possible to formulate a syntactic account of this particular effect.

Yet Exp. 4 confirms that the semantic and information structure factors reported here are irreducible to a syntactic factor nor are they epiphenomenal. Exp. 4 manipulates both construal as a single complex event, and prominence in discourse, while controlling for (in)transitivity. Results confirm that both increasing the tendency to construe a conjunction as a single event and increasing the prominence of the to-be-queried constituent in a context sentence each increase the acceptability of the *wh-Q* that follows in an additive way (recall Figure 6).

The current work establishes experimentally for the first time that construal as a single complex event increases the acceptability of *wh-Q*s from a single conjunct. It is also the first work to demonstrate experimentally that increasing the prominence of the conjunct to-be-queried increases the acceptability of *wh-Q*s.

Limitations

The current experiment is limited in two important ways. First, the only LDD tested was information questions (*wh-Q*s). Future work is needed to test the same or similar stimuli with other LDD constructions including relative clauses, which have been predicted to behave differently (e.g., Abeillé et al., 2020). Our intuitions are that the same constraints apply, as e.g., (11) appears to be more acceptable than (12), but systematic judgments need to be collected.

11. Alex found the apple that she ran to the store and bought.
12. Alex found the gin that he likes to eat steak and drink.

A second limitation is that we collected acceptability ratings from *wh-Q*s only when the second of two conjuncts was queried. This limits the interpretation of our results, particularly since it has been argued that *wh-Q*s from non-final conjuncts are subject to different semantic constraints (Lakoff 1986; for discussion see Altshuler & Truswell, 2022). Lakoff (1986) observed that LDDs from initial conjuncts tend to involve violations of expectations rather than a single event. Yet Goldberg (2008) suggested a unified treatment of LDDs from VP conjunctions noting that individual verbal predicates can encode violations of typical expectations as well (e.g., *stiff, renege, escape*), suggesting that these cases may also be a type of coherent single event.

A final limitation is that we have only tested VP conjunction and have not discussed *wh-Q*s of elements within clausal conjunction, for instance. This suggests potential extensions of the current proposal. For instance, it is well known that clausal conjunctions are far more strict about allowing LDDs to target a single conjunct (e.g., *? What did she say that he went to the store and bought?*) (e.g., Altshuler & Truswell, 2022). This is predicted on the current account insofar as full clauses are highly likely to describe separate events or states; therefore, construal as a single complex event may be unavailable.

Conclusion

When we speak or sign, we need to combine constructions that express our communicative intent. We have argued that it is infelicitous for a speaker to choose a symmetric construction (such as logical conjunction) if their intended focus is on a single conjunct. On the other hand, if the conjunction is used to combine subevents into a single complex event, particularly with one subevent being more prominent, then it is reasonable to query only an aspect of the prominent subevent. The larger lesson drawn from the current work is that each construction in a language requires careful analysis of its function(s) in order to understand its interactions with other constructions such as long-distance dependencies.

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