New paper in Cognition about why subject islands are bad:

[link to article](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010027719306136)

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e.g. what's wrong with:
*Who did [stories about _] terrify John?

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sciencedirect.com
Extraction from subjects: Differences in acceptability dep...
In order to explain the unacceptability of certain long-distance dependencies – termed syntactic islands by Ros...
Some long-distance dependencies are bad:

1a. Who did John hear [stories about _]?
1b. * Who did [stories about _] terrify John?

Unlike complements (1a), subjects (1b) were claimed to block extraction (Chomsky, 1973, 1977); so-called “subject islands”:

The puzzle has been WHY?

In gen grammar, ‘island’ syntactic configs (Ross, 1967) block filler-gap deps, indep of meaning, and so are not learnable: part of UG (Schütze et al. 2015)

"that something like island effects fall under the purview of FL/UG is virtually uncontestable."

But extraction from subj is OK in relative clauses, not in wh-qs in Eng and French:

Eng RC, subj: OK: The dealer had a sportscar, of which [the color _] delighted the football player.
English Wh-Q, subject: Bad: Which sportscar did [the color of _] delight the baseball player?
A discourse theory: The Focus-background conflict constraint:

A focused element should not be part of an unfocused / backgrounded constituent

(cf. Erteschik-Shir, 1973; van Valin, 1995; Goldberg, 2006; Ambridge & Goldberg, 2008)

a wh-q seeks (new) information about an element, which is part of focus; a relative clause adds a property to an element (old or new) (Kuno, 1976).

The subject is (by default) the topic of the utterance and thus usually part of background (old or given).

so it’s bad to extract from a backgrounded constituent (subject) in wh-questions, because wh-questions seek new information (a focus): a conflict in information structure

but it's ok for relative clauses: no conflict

this work is closely related to and builds on:

Erteschik-Shir, 1973; van Valin, 1995; Goldberg, 2006; Ambridge & Goldberg, 2008

The learning puzzles associated with the syntax-only hypothesis do not apply to the discourse hypothesis: no poverty of stimulus problems.
Here is a freely accessible link:

tedlab.mit.edu/tedlab_website...