Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT
@LanguageMIT

Follow

New paper in Cognition about why subject islands are bad:

sciencedirect.com/science/articl...

By Abeillé, Hemforth, Winckel & @LanguageMIT

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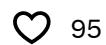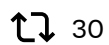*Who did [stories about _] terrify John?

Thread 1/8

9:51 PM · Jul 30, 2020

3   30   95   20

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020

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?

💬 1   🔁   ♡ 4   ᴵₗᵢ   ⬆

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020

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)

facultyoflanguage.blogspot.com/2018/04/the-mo…
"that something like island effects fall under the purview of FL/UG is virtually uncontestable."

💬 1   🔁   ♡ 3   ᴵₗᵢ   ⬆

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020

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?

💬 1   🔁   ♡ 4   ᴵₗᵢ   ⬆

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020 · · ·
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)

💬 1   🔁 1   ♡ 7   ilı   ⬆️

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020 · · ·
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).

💬 1   🔁 1   ♡ 5   ilı   ⬆️

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020 · · ·
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

💬 5   🔁 4   ♡ 9   ilı   ⬆️

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 30, 2020 · · ·
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.

💬 1   🔁 1   ♡ 17   ilı   ⬆️

Ted Gibson, Language Lab MIT @LanguageMIT · Jul 31, 2020

Here is a freely accessible link:

tedlab.mit.edu/tedlab_website…

8