Frozen by Context: Focus effects on syntactic freezing
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Introduction: Freezing is an island effect according to which a constituent becomes an island for extraction when that constituent has been moved (displaced), this is illustrated in the examples below (see 1).

(1) a. I think that John never reads [reviews of his books]
    b. Whose books$_i$ do you think that John never reads [reviews of t$_i$]?
    c. I think that [reviews of his books]$_i$ John never reads t$_i$
    d. *Whose books$_i$ do you think that [reviews of t$_i$]$_j$ John never reads t$_j$

(Corver, 2006, p. 1)

As becomes clear from Examples (1a) and (1b), it is perfectly acceptable to extract an wh-phrase out of a DP in its base position. However, whenever that DP has been moved or topicalized (1c), extraction of the wh-phrase is no longer possible (1d). So far, this phenomenon has mainly been approached from a syntactic point of view and the grammaticality judgments have been taken for granted.

Current Research: The current research approaches these sentences from a pragmatic point of view and poses two questions, first of all, to what extent are these freezing sentences ungrammatical, i.e. how much are these judgments influenced by the pragmatic context rather than being a syntactic constraint. The hypothesis is that whenever the noun that is being moved is focused, freezing should become more acceptable, whereas whenever the verb is focused, extraction of the wh-phrase should be bad (see Examples 2a and 2b). Presumably, the freezing sentences without any context will have a verb focus pattern by default which would make them ungrammatical by means of the focus pattern rather than a strong syntactic constraint.

    The second research question is, how good/bad is fronting in embedded clauses in general, in English? The hypothesis is that fronting in embedded clauses is worse in English in general. As a baseline, sentences like (2c) and (2d) will be tested, these are sentences without extraction. If (2b) and (2d) are perceived to be equally bad, then it might just be fronting that causes the ungrammaticality in (1d) rather than freezing itself. If that is not the case, it would still be interesting to see how much the different focus pattern influence these judgments and whether they influence the extracted and non-extracted stimuli in a similar way.

(2) a. I know which students my mom always forgets the FACES of, but...which students do you think the NAMES of, she always forgets.
    b. I know which students my mom always REMEMBERS the names of, but...which students do you think the names of, she always FORGETS.
    c. It's not that my mom always forgets the FACES of Asian students,...I think she always forgets the NAMES of Asian students.
    d. It's not that my mom always REMEMBERS the names of Asian students,...I think she always FORGETS the names of Asian students.

To get the acceptability judgments, an online survey will be run using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The participants will be presented with auditory stimuli, to make sure they will perceive the intended focus structure.

References

Corver, N. (2006). Freezing effects. *The Blackwell companion to syntax*, 2:383–406.