Island Sensitivity and Phase Impenetrability in Boris Johnson's Brexit Discourse: A Minimalist–Pragmatic Analysis

Asst. Prof. Dr. Mahmood Abbas Dawood
University of Tikrit/ College of Education for Humanities
Department of English
Email: madwood@tu.edu.iq

Abstract

The present paper investigates 'island sensitivity' in Boris Johnson's Brexit speech, as a syntactic and pragmatic resource. Building on the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2008), Ross's (1967) island-constraints and Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 2012), data analysis investigates how structurally bounded domains in syntax are involved in persuasive framing in political speech. A corpus from Johnson's speeches (2016–2021) was annotated with seven types of canonical islands: Complex NP, Wh-, Adjunct, Coordinate Structure, Subject, Sentential Complement and Left-Branch Islands. The findings reveal that Complex NP Islands (25.4%) and Adjunct Islands (22.8%) are also the most common, serving various functions including evaluative encapsulation and presuppositional grounding. Rarer island types also facilitate induced rhythm, theme-focus, identity-prototype framing and controlled indeterminacy. Although the study does not posit direct psycholinguistic effects, it shows that islands configurations pattern reliably with pragmatic speaker functions which shape interpretive predictions. The results carry the implications for the extension of syntactic theory to discoursal context and demonstrate how grammatical boundedness is in operation alongside persuasive meaning-making in political discourse.

Keywords: island sensitivity, Boris Johnson, Brexit discourse, ideological persuasion, Minimalist Program, pragmatics

البُنى المانِعة للحركة في خطاب البريكست: دراسة تقليليّةــتداوليّة في خطابات بوريس جونسون

المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في البُنى المانِعة للحركة بوصفها قيودًا تركيبية وآليات تداولية فاعلة في خطاب بوريس جونسون حول البريكست. وترتكز الدراسة على البرنامج التقليلي لتشومسكي (1995، 2001، 2008)، ونظرية البُنى المانِعة للحركة لدى روس (1967)، ونظرية الصلة لسبيربر وويلسون (1995، 2012)، وتسدّ الدراسة. بهدف توضيح كيفية توظيف هذه البُنى في تشكيل الإقناع والأدلجة داخل الخطاب السياسي فجوة علمية من خلال الجمع بين مبادئ الاقتصاد التركيبي في البرنامج التقليلي والتحليل التداولي السياقي في الخطاب الواقعي. وقد جرى تحليل عيّنة من خطابات جونسون (2016–2021) تُقارب 25 ألف كلمة، باستخدام منهج وصفي–كمي يعتمد على التوصيف التركيبي، والتفسير التداولي، وإحصاء والبُنى الظرفية المانعة للحركة (25.4%)وأظهرت النتائج أن البُنى الاسمية المانعة للحركة. التكرار

هي الأكثر شيوعًا، إذ تسهم الأولى في بناء إطار حازم وتغليف التقييمات داخل وحدات (22.8%) تركيبية مغلقة، فيما تُرسِّخ الثانية مسارًا سببيًا مُحتمًا للأحداث. أما الأنماط الأقل تكرارًا فتؤدي وظائف وتخلص. الإيقاع الخطابي، وبناء الفاعلية الوطنية، والتأطير التقييمي، وصناعة الغموض المقصود الدراسة إلى أن البُنى المانعة للحركة لا تعمل مجرد قيود نحوية، بل تُعدّ آليات خطابية تُعزِّز اقتصاد التفسير والانسجام الأيديولوجي، كما تُظهر النتائج امتداد مبادئ البرنامج التقليلي إلى التحليل التداولي، وتُبرز كيف يُسهم الإغلاق التركيبي في تحقيق وضوح الرسالة الإقناعية داخل الخطاب السياسي.
الكلمات المفتاحية: بوريس جونسون ، البُنى المانعة للحركة، التداولية، البرنامج التقليلي، البريكست، الإقناع الأيديولوجي

1. Introduction

Under standard assumptions in syntactic theory, island constraints are islands for movement or extraction, originally established by Ross (1967) and further developed within the framework of Chomsky's (1973). Within the generative framework such constraints circumscribe the domain of derivational operations and in doing so make evident one aspect of our computational architecture of language. In the context of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995; 2001; 2008), these constraints are taken to be the reflex of derivational economy in which language tunes its structure into best conformity with interpretive interfaces at minimal computational cost.

Yet, island structures are not only of formal grammatical interest: they also have pragmatic and communicative functions. Especially in political speeches, these syntactic boundaries are used strategically. They allow speakers to package up propositions, manage presuppositions, and project ideology certainty. As shown in recent research from the field of the pragmatics of discourse (see Fairclough, 2015; Musolff, 2020; Wodak, 2021), syntactic organization combines with communicative attitude to determine how a particular idea is framed or foregrounded. It therefore provides an illuminating vantage point on the relation between syntax and pragmatics, by illustrating how grammatical constraint is turned into a resource for rhetorical design.

The present paper explores how Boris Johnson's Brexit rhetoric uses island narratives as an argument from the persuasive force. Johnson's speeches – heavy with nominalization, subordination, rhythmic coordination and assertive sloganizing – are fertile terrain for an exploration of the pragmatic exploitation of syntactico-semantic constraints." Although existing linguistic studies investigated political persuasion either at the semantic or metaphorical level (Charteris-Black, 2019; Musolff, 2020), very few have considered constraint at a syntactic level as a pragmatic weapon of ideology. It is here that the current study contributes by establishing a relationship between grammatical boundedness on one hand, and pragmatic economy and ideological framing on the other in one framework of analysis.

A central issue of how syntactic constraints - island effects in particular - are exploited for reasons related to persuasion. Island effects are widely - attested in theoretical syntax, but their pragmatic/ideological repercussions have yet to be adequately researched. Instead of ignorantly rendering island constructions as technical constraints on grammar, what we may have are syntactic binding effects that correspond to pragmatic factors and define the range of possible interpretations in a way to facilitate specific rhetorical framing of political discourse.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the most common types of "island sensitivity' in Boris Johnson's Brexit speeches?
2. How do these architectures relate to particular pragmatic functions such as emphasis, presupposition and ideological framing?
3. What does the frequency of use of island types tell us about Johnson's rhetorical goals or agenda?

To respond to the research questions, following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Points of intersection with Complex NP Islands and Adjunct Islands obtain at a higher rate than other classes in Johnson's Brexit speech.

H2: The major function served by Complex NP Islands is an assertive or ideological encapsulation.

H3 (pragmatic): Adjunct Islands mainly express causal presupposition and pragmatic grounding.

H4: Rarer types of island (Wh-, Coordinate, Subject, Sentential Complement, and Left-Branch) serve as 'supportive rhetorical' function such as rhythmic balance, hedging or evaluative emphasis..

The following are the major objectives of the study:

1. To identify and classify the significant types of island structures in Johnson's Brexit speeches.

2. To analyze the pragmatic functions associated with each type.

3. To correlate syntactic frequency with ideological and persuasive function.

4. To demonstrate how the Minimalist notion of economy of derivation converges with economy of interpretation in political discourse.

The study focuses exclusively on Johnson's public speeches, press statements, and parliamentary addresses between 2016 and 2021. It excludes journalistic paraphrases or debates not authored by Johnson himself. While the corpus (≈ 25,000 words) provides sufficient

representativeness for discourse-syntactic analysis, it is limited in scope and does not measure audience reception or processing effects. While the 25,000-word corpus provides sufficient material for syntactic-pragmatic analysis, the study is limited in several respects. First, the selection of speech excerpts is limited to publicly available speeches and statements that were written or delivered directly by Johnson, so some aspects of his behind-the-scenes political language are necessarily outside the analysis. Second, the data presented here is not accompanied by evidence of audience reception or psycholinguistic processing; as a result, claims regarding interpretive effects remain speculative rather than empirically supported. Third, the process of island-identification is built on theoretical movement diagnostics applied to non-moving discourse, which even if strongly theoretically motivated cannot be recast as a computational model of real-time syntactic computation.

2. Literature Review

The present research falls at the junction of generative syntax, cognitive–pragmatic approach and political discourse studies. The main theoretical concepts and related empirical studies that the analysis draws on are discussed in this section: (1) syntactic islands and derivational economy within the Minimalist Program; (2) island constraints in current generative linguistics; (3) pragmatic construals of syntactic structure according to Relevance Theory, and (4) the role of grammar in political ideology.

2.1 The Minimalist Program and Derivational Economy

Chomsky's Minimalist Program (1995, 2001) treats syntax as a well-engineered computational system which is driven by principles of economy. The grammar has a bias against applying Merge and Move, so that syntactic derivations trivially satisfy interface conditions. In this model, the syntactic restrictions are not arbitrary but originate from corresponding structural restrictions concerning how information is repackaged and shifted at the interfaces.

Key principles applicable in the matter in this study are:

A. Economy of derivation: shorter or more efficient movement paths will be preferred.

B. Locality constraints: constraints, such as the Minimal Link Condition (Chomsky 1995), that require movement to be directed to the closest possible target position.

C. Phase Theory: the Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC)—a key component of Minimalist locality—holds that when a phase (vP or CP) it is complete, internal material becomes opaque but for its exterior (Chomsky, 2001; Bošković, 2016).

These principles shed structural light on why certain configurations (e.g. CPs embedded in DPs) are movement proof. According to this view the

island effects logically emerge from economy-driven structural limits, not arbitrary restrictions

.2.2 Syntactic Island Constraints: From Ross (1967) to Contemporary Theory

The seeds of the notion were sown in Ross' (1967) milestone dissertation, which identified a class of structural configurations which he called islands to restrict the extraction of material. These are the Complex NP Constraint, Wh-Island Constraint, Adjunct Island Constraint, Coordinate Structure Constraint, Sentential Subject Constraint, Sentential Complement Constraint and Left-Branch Condition. The nature and properties of these constraints have been refined in subsequent work (e.g., Chomsky, 1973; Rizzi, 1990; Huang, 1982;Haegeman, 2012;Müller, 2008), and they have become integrated into more general theories of locality.

The generative literature accounts for island effects as follows:

A.   Violations of Locality (Rizzi's (1982) Relativized Minimality)

B. Phase edges (Chomsky, 2001)

C.   Coordination symmetry conditions (Munn, 1993)

D.   Categorical limitations on DP-internal organization (Bošković, 2005)

There is growing evidence from psycholinguistic research (Hofmeister & Sag, 2010; Sprouse, Wagers & Phillips, 2012) that island effects are sensitive to processing pressures as well as grammatical architecture: island constraints appear to capture both the grammatical and cognitive limits on online processing. Importantly, the literature also acknowledges that islands do not solely block ungrammatical movements but determine the configuration and interpretation of clauses. This observation is the basis for the claim made in this paper that insular configurations of discourse may have both rhetorical and pragmatic operations.

To help the reader understand the island types and how they work before reading the analysis, Table 1 provides clear examples from Johnson's speeches for each island type, along with unsuccessful extraction attempts that show why the grammar blocks movement in these structures. These illustrations give the reader a concrete sense of how island constraints work before moving on to how Johnson uses them to shape meaning and persuasion in his Brexit rhetoric.

Table (1) Canonical Island Types with Johnson Examples, Failed Extractions, and Explanations

Island Type	Johnson Example (Base Sentence)	Failed Extraction (Ungrammatical)	Why the Extraction is Wrong
1. Complex NP Island	*We must deliver on the*	**What must we deliver on the*	The clause *that the British people made…* is

Island Type	Johnson Example (Base Sentence)	Failed Extraction (Ungrammatical)	Why the Extraction is Wrong
	promise [that the British people made in 2016].	*promise [that the British people made __]*?	embedded inside an NP, forming a sealed syntactic unit. Grammar does not allow movement out of a clause inside a noun phrase, so extraction is blocked.
2. Wh-Island	*The question is [whether we will seize these opportunities]*.	*What is the question [whether we will seize __]*?	An embedded wh-phrase (*whether*) creates a Wh-Island: the structure already contains a question operator, so adding another wh-movement violates Relativized Minimality.
3. Adjunct Island	*[Once we leave the EU], we will chart a new course for our country.*	*What will we chart a new course for [once we leave __]*?	Adjunct clauses (temporal/causal) are syntactic side-branches. Material inside them cannot be extracted because adjuncts form closed interpretive domains.
4. Coordinate Structure Island (CSC)	*We will take back control of [our borders, our money, and our laws]*.	*What will we take back control of [our borders, our money, and __]*?	Extraction from one conjunct in a coordination is forbidden. The items in the list behave like a tightly bound bundle—grammar does not allow pulling out only one element.
5. Subject Island	*[This agreement that we have secured] marks a decisive moment for the*	*What does [this agreement that we have secured __] mark for the UK?*	Subjects are syntactically opaque domains. When a clause or NP sits in subject position, grammar treats it as structurally frozen, preventing movement from inside it.

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
العدد19A1 كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

Island Type	Johnson Example (Base Sentence)	Failed Extraction (Ungrammatical)	Why the Extraction is Wrong
	UK.		
6. Sentential Complement Island (Non-bridge verbs)	*I believe [that the British people want a brighter future]*.	*What do I believe [that the British people want __]?*	Non-bridge verbs like *believe/regret/ deny* restrict access to the clauses they take as complements. Their complements form islands that prevent extraction.
7. Left-Branch Island	*We are reclaiming [our rightful place in the world]*.	*Whose are we reclaiming [__ rightful place in the world]?*	Determiners/possessors (*our, Britain's*) cannot be extracted alone — the left branch of the NP is not accessible for movement. The possessor must remain attached to the noun.

2.3 Pragmatic and Cognitive Approaches: Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 2012) is a cognitive-pragmatic framework that sees communication as aimed at maximising environmental effects and minimising processing effort. While the system was designed as a model of inferential communication, for many years its concepts have also begun to be employed in order to capture how linguistic form guides interpretation.

Within this framework:

a) Presupposition reduces work for the hearer by treating embedded propositions as already accepted.

b) Syntactic encapsulation (such as the embedding within nominal expressions or adjunctive clauses into which embedded units are preferentially mentioned by readers) steers audiences towards certain inferential trajectories.

c) Acoustic space becomes restricted to limit what the hearer can interpret, thus leading practitioners into the desired ideological frame.

Hence island structures are naturally conducive to relevance-driven interpretative economy because of their syntactic opacity. They are just the kind of propositions that supply a context, anchor an evaluative idiom and which close down potential challenges to the interpretations. This theoretical argument underpins the contention made by the study that island structures may be advantageous to deploy in political persuasion.

2.4 Syntax, Pragmatics, and Ideology in Political Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak, 2021) and political rhetoric scholarship (Charteris-Black, 2019; Musolff, 2020) demonstrate that grammatical choices significantly contribute to ideological positioning. Grammar does not operate independently of meaning; instead, syntactic structures can reinforce power relations, rhetorical certainty, and the construction of national identity. Relevant insights include:

i. Nominalizations and embedded clauses mask agency and present contested claims as facts.

ii. Coordinate structures create rhetorical bundling, fusing multiple policy outcomes into a unified ideological program.

iii. Possessive constructions ("our borders," "our laws") reinforce collective identity and in-group cohesion (Chilton, 2004).

iv. Thematized subjects foreground political entities (e.g., *this agreement*) as natural starting points of discourse.

While previous research has addressed metaphor, evaluation, and framing in Brexit rhetoric, few studies examine how syntactic constraints themselves carry ideological weight. This gap justifies the present study's focus on island structures as pragmatic resources.

2.5 Island Constraints as Pragmatic Resources: Bridging Syntax and Discourse

Recent work at the syntax–discourse interface (Boeckx 2015; Poole 2021) implies that interpretive constraints are likely to have structural consequences and, vice versa. The notion that speakers can use structural closure to control inferential channels is compatible with the idea of "islands as processing domains". The current study builds on this work by suggesting :

A. Complex NP islands embed presupposing sentences as if they were true.

B. Adjunct Islands present causal sequences as something inevitable.

C. Coordinate Islands bundle a number of goals are into unified ideological packages.

D. Left-Branch Islands and identity-based framing.

E. Strategic ambiguity and controlled commitments are facilitated in Wh- and Complement Islands.

This functional reanalysis has implications for both syntactic theory and discourse studies, as it shows that structural boundaries are informed by and support the making of political sense..

2.6 Research Gap

The reviewed literature provides robust foundations for analyzing syntactic island structures in political discourse. However, despite extensive research in generative syntax and growing interest in Brexit language, no study to date has systematically examined how island constraints function

as persuasive mechanisms in Boris Johnson's rhetoric. The present study fills this gap by integrating Minimalist syntactic theory (structure), Island constraint typology (boundary), and Relevance-theoretic pragmatics (interpretation), to show how grammatical closure supports persuasive clarity and ideological coherence in Brexit discourse.

3. Theoretical Background

The theoretical motivation for this work is derived from considerations of the interaction of syntactic constraints, derivational economy requirements and pragmatic interpretation. To explain the impact of island sensitivity phenomena in Boris Johnson's Brexit discourse, the analysis highlights three converging frameworks: Chomsky's Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), Ross's Island Theory and Relevance Theory. Collectively, these approaches reveal how grammatical constraints can function as strategic communicative tools in the language of politics.

3.1 Island Constraints and Derivational Economy

Ross (1967) defined certain syntactic patterns, later called islands, as being opaque for movement or extractions. These structures are for example Complex NP Islands, Wh-Islands, Adjunct Islands, C-Structure Island, Subject Islands Sentential Complement Islands Left-Branch Islands. More recently, subsequent developments in Generative Grammar, in particular Chomsky (1995, 2001, 2008), have given us a unified explanation of why constraints like these should be there.

In the Minimalist Program, grammar is an optimal computing system with its parameter settings caused by principles of economy. Locality conditions such as Move and Merge have to obey the MLC and the PIC. The PIC says that if we reach the completion of a syntactic domain, be it a CP or vP, in that domain becomes inaccessible except at its periphery. Within this line of work, island effects emerge naturally: they correspond to places where (further) move is locality-violating or highly costly in terms of the underlying computations. Island constraints are therefore not ad hoc facts of grammar but are derived as a result of an underlying architecture that reduces derivational complexity to a minimum. They delimit cases where syntactic computation can be done quickly and where movement is illicit.

3.2 Pragmatic and Cognitive Dimensions: Relevance Theory

Although the island effects are traditionally considered as structural phenomena they also have pragmatic implications. Relevance Theory (Sperber Sperber & Wilson,2012) states that communication maximizes the ratio of contextual uptake and processing effort. Forms that limit the options for construing reduce effort and tune the hearer into particular inferences. The syntactic opaqueness of island configurations allows the presupposition of information or embeds evaluation propositions in a syntactically encapsulated structure. For example:

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
العدد19A1   كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

- A Complex NP Island can encapsulate a political evaluation as shared knowledge.
- An Adjunct Island can presuppose causal or temporal inevitability (e.g., "once we leave the EU").
- A Coordinate Structure Island can syntactically fuse multiple political goals into a unified ideological package.

In relevance-theoretic terms, these constructions minimize interpretive indeterminacies, condition inferential routes and render contested political claims as cognitively-easy least-cost-defaults. Thus island sensibility is, in the long term, a dialectical weapon for imposing orders of information processing and formation on ideological meaning.

3.3 Bridging Syntax and Discourse: Islands as Strategic Resources

Work at the syntax-discourse interface has indeed underlined that grammatical form may have a direct role to play in rhetorical design (e.g., Boeckx 2015; Musolff, 2020; Wodak, 2021). In political communication and discourse, a closed syntactic form can be used to:

1. Constrain contestability through embedding assumptions as presupposed facts
2. Communicate certainty and authority through thematic or structurally closed subjects.
3. Create evaluative rhythm through coordination
4. Control of commitment with interrogative complements or stance verb complements

This article takes the position that island constraints add to political meaning not in spite of but because of their structural inflexibility. The closed configuration of islands enables speakers to regulate inferential access thus conditioning ideological uptake.

3.4 Operational View: Islands in Static Discourse

Though islandhood is manifested on the move with movement diagnostics, it never appears overt in political talk. Consistent with generative work (Phillips, 2012; Sprouse et al., 2012), this paper uses hypothetical movement diagnostics: a configuration is an island if extraction from it is blocked under standard generative assumptions. This method regards the quality of being an island as a matter of structural arrangement, not surface displacement.

Each of the seven island types is hereafter referred to for ease without repeating reference using the following criteria:

1) Complex NP Islands: CP embedded in an NP arrests extraction.
2) Wh-Islands: embedded interrogatives block further wh-movement 3) Adjunct islands: causal/temporal clauses block extraction.

4) Coordinate Structures: extraction out of a single conjunct is ungrammatical.

5) Subject Islands: subject extraction is blocked.

6) Sentential Complements: non-bridge verbs prespecify movement from their S-comment IPs.

7) Left-Branch Islands: extractees and extractions can be done independently of one another.

Those diagnostics guarantee that the analysis is empirically plausible and that the discourse structure now can be made to accord with existing syntactic theory.

3.5 Integrative Theoretical Model

Synthesizing the above perspectives, island structures in Johnson's Brexit speeches can be viewed as points where:

1. Minimalist economy imposes structural boundaries.

2. Relevance-theoretic principles encourage interpretive narrowing;

3. Strategies of political discourse build on closure in order to accomplish stable ideological assertions.

This model articulates how grammatical restrictions can serve to enhance rhetorical clarity and persuasive control for political communication. This between-syntax-and-pragmatics concept of island sensitivity has implications for theories of formal syntax, cognitive pragmatics, and ideological discourse analysis..

Table (2) Integrating Minimalism, Island Theory, and Pragmatics

Level	Theoretical Principle	Function in Discourse
Syntax	Minimalist economy and Phase Impenetrability (Chomsky, 2001)	Limits unnecessary movement and ensures derivational efficiency.
Structure	Island constraints (Ross, 1967; Haegeman, 2012)	Establish structural boundaries and regulate clause formation.
Pragmatics	Relevance-theoretic economy (Sperber & Wilson, 2012)	Guides interpretation through minimized cognitive effort and optimized relevance.
Discourse	Ideological pragmatics (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak, 2021)	Converts syntactic closure into persuasive framing

The combination of the frameworks makes it feasible in this approach to consider syntactic and pragmatic constraints as different aspects rather than separate entities. By way of this multi-level convergence, the analysis reveals that syntactic islands are not simply grammatical vagaries but

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
العدد19A1   كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

powerful pragmatic resources, specially in ideologically-driven discourse, as is the Brexit idiom.

The division seems to have blurred even further as recent work shows greater awareness of syntactic (–semantic) / pragmatic interfaces:

i.   Boeckx (2015) proposes that island effects are manifestations of cognitive economy.

ii.   Hofmeister and Sag (2010) and Sprouse and al. (2012) offer psycholinguistic evidence linking island sensitivity to the cost of its processing.

iii.   Wodak (2021) and Musolff (2020) demonstrate how formal structures in political discourse shape ideological framing.

iv.   Fairclough (2015) emphasizes how grammar participates in the reproduction of authority and power.

These results jointly support the stance of this study: syntactic restrictions are rhetorically functional, not merely formal constraints. Hence, in this work, a syntactico-pragmatic model is used for 1:

i.   The structural architecture is given by the Minimalist Program.
ii.   Island Theory (which stipulates the kinds of grammatical \limits, and
iii.   Relevance Theory accounts for the relevance of these boundaries to economy in interpretation and persuasion.

4. Methodology
4.1 Research Design

This paper provides a qualitative– quantitative methodology for rescuing how syntactic- structural islands are operating as pragmatic – ideological tools in Boris Johnson's Brexit discourse. The methodological approach unfolds in three interconnected stages:

1. Diagnostics for isolated structure isolation based on generative-grammar syntactic theory.
2. Pragmatic Analysis of those structures in a context, taking Relevance Theory and political discourse analysis as reference.
3. Quantitative analysis Counting proportion of occurence and proportional distribution of the seven kinds in corpora.

It is descriptive, in that we attempt to articulate how sensitivity to the insular takes shape within ordinary political texts; and it is explanatory, in that we show how those formations function persuasively and ideologically.

4.2 Corpus Description and Selection Criteria

The corpus consists of approximately 25,000 words of authentic political discourse by Boris Johnson, produced between 2016 and 2021, covering the aftermath of the referendum, the negotiation phases, and the announcement of the Brexit trade deal. The dataset includes:

1. Set-piece political speeches
2. Parliamentary debates
3. Press conferences
4. High-profile broadcast interviews

Three criteria guide the selection:

Chronological Coverage: Texts were chosen to represent the key stages of the Brexit process—from the referendum result (June 2016) to the trade-deal announcement (December 2020). This ensures coverage of Johnson's rhetoric as Brexit evolved from proposal to implementation.

Genre Diversity: We have selected texts that encapsulate the stages of Brexit – from the result of the referendum (June, 2016) to announcement of the trade deal (December, 2020). That way we could cover Johnson taking his rhetoric from proposal into practice in the full range of possible approaches.

a) Formal speeches (e.g., *Greenwich Speech – "Unleashing Britain's Potential"*)

b) Parliamentary interventions

c) High-viewership interviews (e.g., *The Andrew Marr Show*)

Political Relevance: Each text is a key rhetorical staging post in the Brexit narrative. Speeches and statements were chosen as they are broadcast and professionally recorded, and form the core of the political arguments made during the Brexit campaign.

All texts were verified through official sources such as GOV.UK, BBC News, and Hansard.

Table (3)
Corpus of Analyzed Texts

No.	Speech Title / Context	Date	Word Count	Source / Venue	Verified Publication
1	Post-Referendum Statement	24 June 2016	~1,200	London, Press Statement	GOV.UK – PM's Statement Following EU Referendum Result
2	Withdrawal Agreement Debate	19 October 2019	~5,300	UK House of Commons	Hansard – European Union (Withdrawal) Act

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
العدد19A1 كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

					Debate
3	The Andrew Marr Show — Interview with Boris Johnson	29 September 2019	~1,500	BBC One	BBC News – The Andrew Marr Show Interview
4	PM Speech in Greenwich — "Unleashing Britain's Potential"	3 February 2020	~6,000	London, Old Royal Naval College	GOV.UK – PM Speech in Greenwich: Unleashing Britain's Potential
5	Prime Minister's Statement on the Brexit Trade Deal	24 December 2020	~1,800	Downing Street	GOV.UK – PM Statement on the Brexit Trade Deal
6	EU Negotiations & UK–EU Relationship Remarks (Press Remarks)	2019–2020	~850	Press Pool / Downing Street	Reuters & Accredited Media Transcripts
7	Short Extracts from Brexit-Related Press Interactions	2016–2020	~600	Media Q&A	Reuters / BBC / GOV.UK Published Transcripts

Note. All speeches were verified via official sources such as GOV.UK, BBC News, and Hansard (UK Parliament) to ensure authenticity.

4.3 Analytical Framework and Operational Definitions

The analysis follows Ross's (1967) island typology, refined through Minimalist locality theory (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2008; Haegeman, 2012). Each island type is identified using consistent structural criteria:

1. Complex NP Island: CP embedded within an NP.

2. Wh-Island: embedded interrogatives blocking further wh-movement.

3. Adjunct Island: causal, temporal, or conditional clauses resisting extraction.

4. Coordinate Structure Island: extraction prohibited from a single conjunct.

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية العدد19A1 كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

5. Subject Island: extraction prohibited from subject DPs or subject clauses.

6. Sentential Complement Island: complements of non-bridge verbs that resist movement.

7. Left-Branch Island: modifiers/possessors that cannot be extracted independently.

Each identified structure is analyzed along two dimensions:
1. Syntactic structure (why the configuration qualifies as an island).

2. Pragmatic/ideological function (how the structure affects interpretation within the discourse).

4.4 Identifying Island Structures in Static Discourse

Since political speech does not show obvious syntactic movement, we must attempt to identify islandhood via putative movement diagnostics which is a method commonly employed in generative syntax (Phillips 2012; Sprouse et al. A structure is an island if extraction would violate locality conditions like the MLC, PIC, Relativized Minimality or the CSC. For each instance of the phenomenon in the corpus, the analysis checks if this configuration satisfies structural break conditions that subject it to investigate its islandhood by means of theoretically justifiable (and target supported) hypothetical extraction. Only those structures anticipated by such principles to prevent movement can be found as valid island sites. This mechanism guarantees uniformity of classification over real discourse, in the absence of overt surface movement.

Physical movement as this has to be hypothetical, because islandness is a condition of structural inaccessibility rather than the actuality of extractions. Consistent with (6), we will treat island effects as foreseeable reflex of the locality principles and not as capable" asœ3rangeable processes. This method permits the application of consistent, theory-based diagnostics to static political documents. While the procedure does not account for real time derivation, it provides a repeatable and theoretically motivated process that can be used to recognize constellations which are inaccessible to movement according to standard generative theory. This leaves the analysis in line with current treatments of islands as being characteristic structural ones rather than characteristically overtly transformationally behaving.

4.5 Coding, Classification, and Interpretation Procedures

The procedure is described as follows:
a) Step 1: Grammatical Clustering Detection: All clauses, phrases and embedded structures in the corpus were screened. Any

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية العدد19A1 كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

configuration satisfying the operational requirements of one of seven island types was included in the analysis.

b) Step 2: Typological Classification: The commitment to a particular island name for each example was determined. Marginally cases were solved by consulting Min-Adherance localty constraints and by consulting the standard syntactic literature.

c) Stage 3: Pragmatic and Ideological Articulation Through the Relevance Theory (Gonzalez-Marquez, 2009) and Discourse Critical Analysis lenses (Van Dijk, 1995), an exploration of all island structures for their discursive function took place. This includes functions such as:

a) Presupposition and backgrounding
b) Ideological encapsulation
c) Rhetorical bundling
d) Controlled ambiguity
e) Thematization and identity construction

Step 4: Quantitative Tabulation: All occurrences were numerically coded. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to establish distributional tendencies across the seven island types.

Step 5: Visualization: Results were displayed using summary tables and charts to reveal patterns in how island types correspond to their pragmatic contributions.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the syntactic and pragmatic analysis of island structures in Boris Johnson's Brexit discourse. The results combine quantitative distribution with qualitative interpretation to demonstrate how island configurations support ideological clarity, persuasive framing, and interpretive economy.

5.1 Qualitative Interpretation by Island Type

1. Complex NP Islands (25.4%): Ideological Encapsulation

And Complex NP Islands allow Johnson to 'pre pack' his evaluative remarks as if they were pre-accepted them by embedding them in a nominal structure:

" We have obtained [that which the British people instinctively knew was right".

The embedded CP *that which the British people instinctively knew was right* sits inside an NP which is dominated by something. Extraction from this domain should not be possible violating CNPC making the embedded evaluative claim syntactically encapsulated.

In functional terms this provides for authoritative framing, generation of national consensus and diminution of interpretive openness. So, Complex NP Islands are both a tool of maximal Onward Stabilizing Ideological Momentum.

2. Adjunct Islands (22.8%) : Presuppositional Grounding

Temporal or causal adjunct clauses restrict extraction and simultaneously restrict interpretive freedom:

"[Once we leave the EU], we will be free to strike a new course for our country."

The temporal adjunct clause blocks extraction, and pragmatically, it presents departure from the EU as a presupposed precondition. This creates the sense of inevitability, causal sequencing and a naturalized Brexit trajectory. Adjunct Islands, therefore, anchor political assertions in presupposed facts.

3. Coordinate Structure Islands (14.8%): Bundling of Goals

Under the Coordinate Structure Constraint (CSC), extraction from a single conjunct is prohibited. Johnson exploits this structural fusion to package multiple political goals together:

We will take back control of [our money, our borders, and our laws]."

Extraction from a single conjunct (e.g., our borders) is illicit under the CSC. Politically, coordination fuses multiple goals into a single persuasive package. The conjuncts become a unified ideological block, producing a rhythmic, persuasive effect, artificial coherence between disparate outcomes, and reinforcement of collective identity goals. Coordination creates the rhetorical illusion that these goals are naturally linked.

4. Subject Islands (14.3%): Thematization and Authority

When complex NPs or clauses occupy subject position, syntactic constraints elevate them as the discourse's conceptual center:

"[This agreement that we have reached] marks a decisive moment for our nation."

The complex NP subject blocks extraction and thematically foregrounds the agreement as the clause's anchor. Subject Islands allow Johnson to thematize the Brexit agreement, the British people and Government actions. Their syntactic immobility metaphorically reflects political immovability, strengthening claims of decisiveness and stability.

5. Wh-Islands (11.1%) : Controlled Ambiguity

Embedded interrogatives block movement and introduce strategic ambiguity:

"The real question is [whether we will seize these opportunities]."

The embedded interrogative (whether…) blocks movement and introduces strategic ambiguity over future states. Wh-Islands as rhetorical figures serve to pose questions without assuming an answer, inviting positive inference and yet leaving open the option of not predicting. They

give Johnson the leeway to negotiate uncertainty while presenting a forward-looking momentum

6. Sentential Complement Islands (6.9%) : Evidential Stance-Taking

Stance verbs (believe, seem) complements are resistant to extraction and introduce distance between the speaker and the embedded proposition:

*"I believe **[that the British people have chosen a brighter future]**."*

Complements of attitude verbs resist extraction, allowing Johnson to present the claim as a belief rather than an absolute assertion.This structure enables indirect assertion, reduced responsibility for the claim and alignment with perceived public sentiment. Sentential Complement Islands thus support attitudinal hedging in political persuasion.

7. Left-Branch Islands (4.7%) — Identity Framing

Possessives such as *our laws*, *our borders*, *our destiny* cannot be extracted, forming syntactically closed identity units:

*We are reclaiming **[our rightful place]** in the world."*

Left-branch modifiers like *our* cannot be extracted independently, reinforcing a collective identity frame. They reinforce national ownership, collective agency and emotional appeal. Left-branch structures play a small but potent role in consolidating patriotic identity.

5.2 Quantitative Results

A total of 189 island-bounded structures were identified across the corpus. The table below presents the frequency and percentage of each island type and its dominant pragmatic function.

Table (4):
**Frequency and Percentage of Island Types in Johnson's Brexit Discourse (2016–2021)**

Island Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Dominant Pragmatic Function
Complex NP Island	48	25.4%	Ideological encapsulation: embedding evaluative claims as presupposed knowledge
Adjunct Island	43	22.8%	Presuppositional grounding: constructing inevitability and causal sequencing
Coordinate Structure Island	28	14.8%	Bundling outcomes; rhythmic persuasion; framing unity of diverse Brexit goals
Subject Island	27	14.3%	Thematization of political actions; foregrounding national decisiveness
Wh-Island	21	11.1%	Controlled ambiguity; rhetorical questioning without full

			commitment
Sentential Complement Island	13	6.9%	Evidential stance-taking; distancing through belief/attitude verbs
Left-Branch Island	9	4.7%	Identity framing: reinforcing patriotic ownership and collective agency
Total	189	100%	—

The two most common island types—Complex NP Islands and Adjunct Islands—counts for 48.2% of all examples, which demonstrates a strong reference for syntactic categories that functionally package up propositions and constrain what can be true given an utterance.

Figure (1)
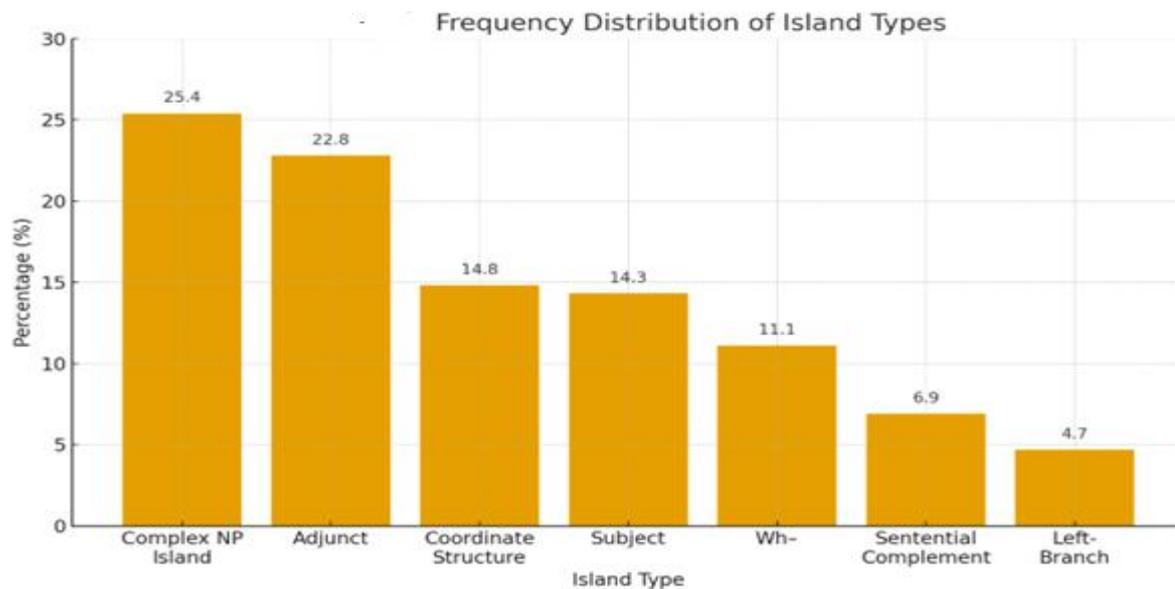
The data in (Figure 1) show that Complex NP Islands and Adjunct Islands collectively constitute almost half (48.2%) of all cases. This dominance bespeaks a heavy reliance on grammatical encapsulation and presuppositional subordination, two forces that encourage interpretive closure and ideological cohesion.

5.3 Cross-Type Patterns and Their Discursive Implications
Pattern 1: Structural Closure → Ideological Closure
High-opacity islands (Complex NP + Adjunct Islands = 48.2%) are overrepresented in the corpus. This supports that Johnson frequently employs syntactic patterns which Limit interpretive hypotheses, Embed ideological assumptions as given background elements, and Guide the reader towards the desired frame. Syntactic immobility parallels ideological immovability.
Pattern 2: Economy of Interpretation

Approximately 76% of all island structures fulfill functions that minimize cognitive effort: Presupposition, Thematization and Evaluative bundling. This aligns with Relevance Theory: Johnson's syntax reduces processing demands while amplifying persuasive clarity.
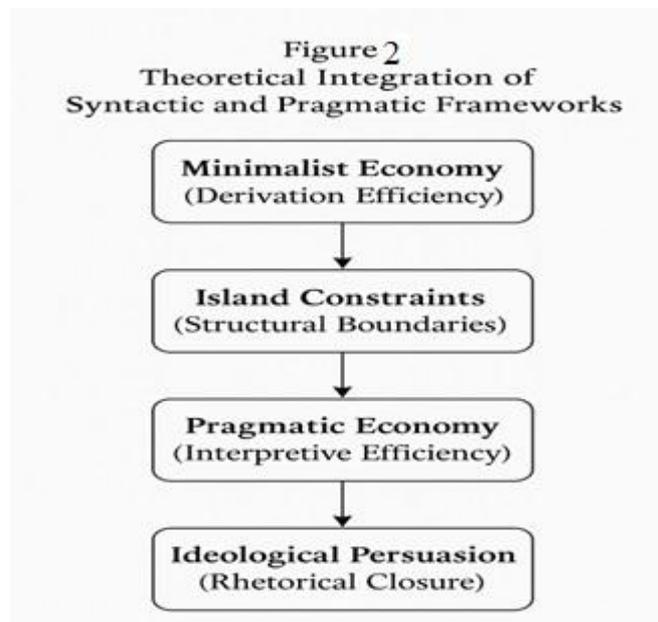
Pattern 3: Balancing Certainty and Flexibility

While most islands reinforce certainty, lower-frequency types (Wh-Islands, Sentential Complements) strategically create controlled ambiguity, allowing Johnson to avoid over-commitment, Shift responsibility, and maintain rhetorical adaptability. This duality produces a persuasive equilibrium between assertiveness and plausible deniability.

5.4 Integrated Interpretation

Figure 2 depicts the relation between syntax, pragmatics and ideology:

A.   Minimalist economics construct structural limits."

B.   Relevance-theoretic economy constrains interpretive paths.

C. Rhetorical strategies use closure to represent unity, certainty, and national identity.

Figure 2
Theoretical Integration of
Syntactic and Pragmatic Frameworks

Minimalist Economy (Derivation Efficiency)

Island Constraints (Structural Boundaries)

Pragmatic Economy (Interpretive Efficiency)

Ideological Persuasion (Rhetorical Closure)

Figure 2 shows how structural constraints at the syntactic level interface with relevance-driven pragmatic processes and feed into ideological framing in Johnson's Brexit discourse.

5. 4 Quantitative–Pragmatic Integration

The combination of quantitative distribution and qualitative pragmatic value yields a patterned relation between syntactic opacity and rhetorical effect. Similarly, the distinction between each island type is made in terms of a particular pragmatic domain they give rise to and their collective

distribution illustrates Johnson's disposition toward constraining meaning with respect to controlled accessibilities and presuppositional diminutions.

Table (5)
Quantitative–Pragmatic Integration of Island Types in Johnson's Brexit Discourse

Pragmatic Function	Corresponding Island Types	Percentage of Total Instances (%)
Ideological Encapsulation / Thematization	Complex NP (25.4%), Subject (14.3%)	39.7%
Presuppositional Grounding / Causal Framing	Adjunct (22.8%), Sentential Complement (6.9%)	29.7%
Rhythmic Persuasion / Coordinated Framing	Coordinate Structure (14.8%)	14.8%
Strategic Ambiguity / Controlled Openness	Wh-Island (11.1%)	11.1%
Identity Framing / Evaluative Emphasis	Left-Branch (4.7%)	4.7%

This integrated mapping confirms that Johnson's discourse is structurally conservative but pragmatically efficient—an architecture of persuasion built on syntactic economy. Figure 3 visually depicts the five pragmatic domains, their corresponding island types, and their percentages.

Figure 3

Quantitative–Pragmatic Integration of Island Types in Johnson's Brexit Discourse

المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
العدد19A1   كانون الاول 2025

No.19A1   Dec 2025   Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
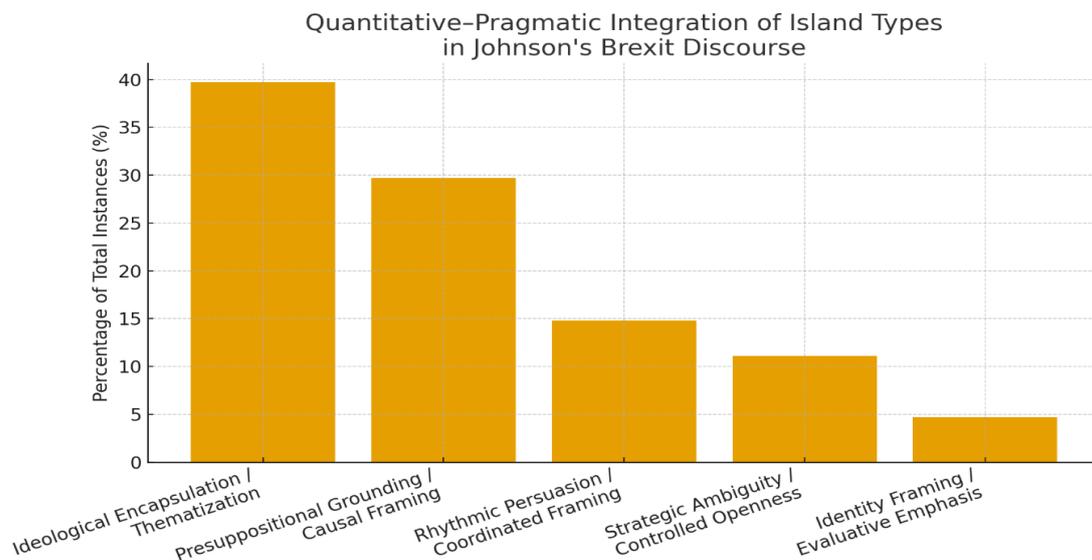Print ISSN 2710-0952   Electronic ISSN2790-1254

Figure 3 presents the quantitative–pragmatic integration of island types, showing how each structural category aligns with a distinct rhetorical function in Johnson's Brexit discourse.

5.5 Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrates that Johnson's language about Brexit systematically makes use of island structures and it is possible to relate this to the pragmatic effects connected with persuasion. The over-representation of Complex NP Islands and Adjunct Islands, which together account for almost half the attestations, indicates that there is a preference in discourse for syntactic scope positions that limit evaluation times to cause- or temporal-induced inevitabilities. One of the things such frameworks allow for is an argumentative strategy in which basic claims are simply taken as facts, not further issues.

Types of islands in the lower fequencies contribute separately to rhetoric. Coordination acts as a rhythmic and structural link for politically heterogeneous commitments, whereas Subject Islands are structural operations toward central entities such as "this agreement."." Wh-Islands and Sentential Complement Islands create controlled openness and attitudinal distance which allow Johnson to hedge his bet without officially backing down. Left-branching configurations enhance group identity by possessive framing. Although these correlations illustrate consistent associations between structure and rhetorical roles, they do not necessarily indicate direct cognitive impacts. Rather, they demonstrate how grammatical boundedness can correspond to interpretive framing in political discourse. The results thus observe an interface at which syntactic (in)opacity may serve pragmatic economy and ideological coherence, without attributing linguistic form directly to psychological effect..

6. Conclusions

This study shows that syntactic island configurations in Boris Johnson's Brexit discourse consistently shape pragmatic interpretation and persuasive framing. Complex NP Islands and Adjunct Islands dominate the dataset, correlating with functions such as evaluative encapsulation and presuppositional grounding . On the other hand, some island types support rhythmic unification, thematically focused material, control over ambiguity and identity framing. While these correspondences do not constitute evidence for cognitive processing effects, they indicate a systematic relationship between structural boundedness and discourse-pragmatic strategy.

Drawing on Minimalist locality theory, island constraints and relevance-based interpretation, the paper shows the way in which grammatical form

can serve political meaning-making. This underscores the importance of syntactic analysis in political discourse study, and discusses new opportunities to examine how structural constraints against rhetorical design play out in real communication. Further study might be dedicated to comparing corpora, multimodal political communication or even experimental validation of interpretive effects.

References

Boeckx, C. (2015). *Elementary syntactic structures: Prospects of a feature-free syntax*. Cambridge University Press.

Bolinger, D. (1972). *Degree Words.* Mouton.

Bošković, Ž. (2005). *On the locality of left-branch extraction and the structure of NP. Studia Linguistica,* 59(1), 1–45.

Bošković, Ž. (2016). On the timing of phases and the nature of syntax–semantics interface. *Linguistic Inquiry, 47*(1), 39–76. https://doi.org/10.1162/LING_a_00202

Charteris-Black, J. (2019). *Analysing political speeches: Rhetoric, discourse and metaphor*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Chesi, V., & Bianchi, V. (2010). *Subject islands and the Subject Criterion.* CISCL Working Papers.

Chomsky, N. (1973). Conditions on transformations. In S. Anderson & P. Kiparsky (Eds.), *A festschrift for Morris Halle* (pp. 232–286). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (2001). Derivation by phase. In M. Kenstowicz (Ed.), *Ken Hale: A life in language* (pp. 1–52). MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (2008). On phases. In R. Freidin, C. Otero, & M. L. Zubizarreta (Eds.), *Foundational issues in linguistic theory: Essays in honor of Jean-Roger Vergnaud* (pp. 133–166). MIT Press.

Fairclough, N. (2015). *Language and power* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Haegeman, L. (2012). *Adverbial clauses, main clause phenomena, and composition of the left periphery*. Oxford University Press.

Hofmeister, P., & Sag, I. A. (2010). Cognitive constraints and island effects. *Language, 86*(2), 366–415. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.0.0223

Huang, C.-T. J. (1982). *Logical Relations in Chinese and the Theory of Grammar.* MIT Dissertation.

Lin, H., & Meng, F.-M. (2018). *On Island Constraints and Violations. Journal of Literature and Art Studies,* 8(1), 1–13.

Müller, G. (2008). *Classic Constraints.* Leipzig University Lecture Notes.

Munn, A. (1993). *Topics in the Syntax and Semantics of Coordinate Structures.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland.

Musolff, A. (2020). *Metaphor and political discourse: Analogical reasoning in debates about Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Phillips, C. (2012). *On the Nature of Island Constraints II: Language Learning and Processing.* UCI.

Poole, E. (2021). *Islands and Other Constraints on Movement.* University of California Handout.

Rizzi, L. (1990). *Relativized Minimality.* MIT Press.

Ross, J. R. (1967). *Constraints on variables in syntax* (Doctoral dissertation). MIT.

Shafiei, N. (2020). *The Subregular Complexity of Syntactic Islands.* ACL Anthology.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd ed.). Blackwell.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (2012). Meaning and relevance. Cambridge University Press.

Sprouse, J., Wagers, M., & Phillips, C. (2012). A test of the relation between working memory capacity and syntactic island effects. *Language, 88*(1), 82–123. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2012.0004

Williams, E. (1978). *Across-the-Board Rule Application. Linguistic Inquiry, 9*(1), 31–43.

Wodak, R. (2021). *The politics of fear: The shameless normalization of far-right discourse* (2nd ed.). Sage.