In Akan, violation of island constraints cannot be reduced to sentence processing

Akan is a Kwa language spoken in Ghana. It has highly similar word order to English, and questions can be formed by placing the question word at the left periphery (as well as in situ). The language uses resumptive pronouns in the questioned position, which are overt for animate referents, but null in most cases for inanimates. The language does not obey the syntactic constraints on questioning exemplified by English and similar languages. Saah and Goodluck (1995) show that Akan allows question words to refer to a position inside complex NPs, temporal clauses and embedded questions, all of which are inadmissible in English. For example, in Saah and Goodluck’s study of Akan questioning into an adjunct clause was judged over 4 on a scale on 0-5 (with 5 being fully grammatical). The same sentences in English were rated less than 1. Saah and Goodluck analyse Akan as using a pronominal binding mechanism (i.e. the null/overt resumptive pronoun is an A-bar bound pronominal variable). This contrasts with the movement analysis that has been standardly assumed for English-type languages.

Hofmeister and Sag (2010) take issue with this type of analysis. They suggest that the criterion of resumptive pronoun use is circular: if a language permits island violations then it uses resumptive pronouns and resumptive pronoun use permits island violations. They suggest that island constraints can in many cases be reduced to sentence processing effects, supporting their argument with experiments that show that acceptability is increased when a question word refers to a position inside an indefinite (as opposed to a definite) head NP, and when the question phrase is D(iscourse)-linked (which NP), as opposed to who or what.

We argue that Hofmeister and Sag’s analysis is flawed, based on the following facts: First, in Akan, it is possible to use question words in situ without an echo interpretation. This provides an independent criterion for a non-movement analysis, voiding the circularity argument. Second, rating studies (Saah and Goodluck 1995 and new data we will present) have shown a consistently large difference between Akan and English with respect to the acceptability of reference to positions inside complex NPs, adjunct clauses and embedded questions. Moreover, this result derives from a small number of subjects (six for each language in each study). For example, in our new data coreference between a wh-word and a position inside a relative clause is rated 2.73 in Akan, compared with .79 in English (p <.02). By contrast, in the new data, we find smaller and less consistent differences between D-linked and non-D-linked phrases for both languages, and in the case of indefinite vs. definite NP as heads, we find an opposite trend to that for English (Akan speakers more readily accept reference for a question word across a definite NP). Overall, we conclude that the difference between the two languages cannot be reduced to sentence processing effects, but rather results from two different grammatical mechanisms.
