

The Puzzle of Subject Islands

Are there different types of subject islands?

- Hiramatsu (1999) shows that subject islands undergo satiation. However, she only looked at extraction out of unaccusative subjects.
- Are some subjects more permeable than others: subjects of unaccusatives vs. subjects of unergatives vs. subjects of transitives?

What is it that makes extraction out of a subject difficult? Three possibilities are:

- Base position of the argument (external vs. internal) (Merchant 2001)
- Topicality of the argument (topics = islands) (Gundel 1974, Erteschik-Shir 2007)
- Complexity of argument structure (number of arguments)

In the following studies, we test these possibilities, using English and Russian data.

Subject Island Extraction in English

English allows us to manipulate the number of arguments, and the base position of the subject (internal or external argument).

Design:

- 3x2 design
 - Ungrammatical items and grammatical controls
 - Verb conditions: unaccusative, transitive, and unergative
- Self-paced reading task (n=35) and 1-5 rating task (n=37); 36 items

Example stimuli:

- Extraction
 - Janet wonders what the conference on ___ lasted for a week (unaccusative)
 - Janet wonders what the conference on ___ succeeded for a week (unergative)
 - Janet wonders what the conference on ___ ignored the proposals for a week (transitive)
- Control (grammatical)
 - Janet wonders what kind of conference lasted for a week (unaccusative)
 - Janet wonders what kind of conference succeeded for a week (unergative)
 - Janet wonders what kind of conference ignored the proposals for a week (transitive)

Subject Island Extraction in Russian

Russian allows us to vary more parameters: number of arguments, base position (internal/external argument), and word order (pre- and post-verbal subjects, which differ in topicality – Bailyn 2004, Sturgeon 2005).

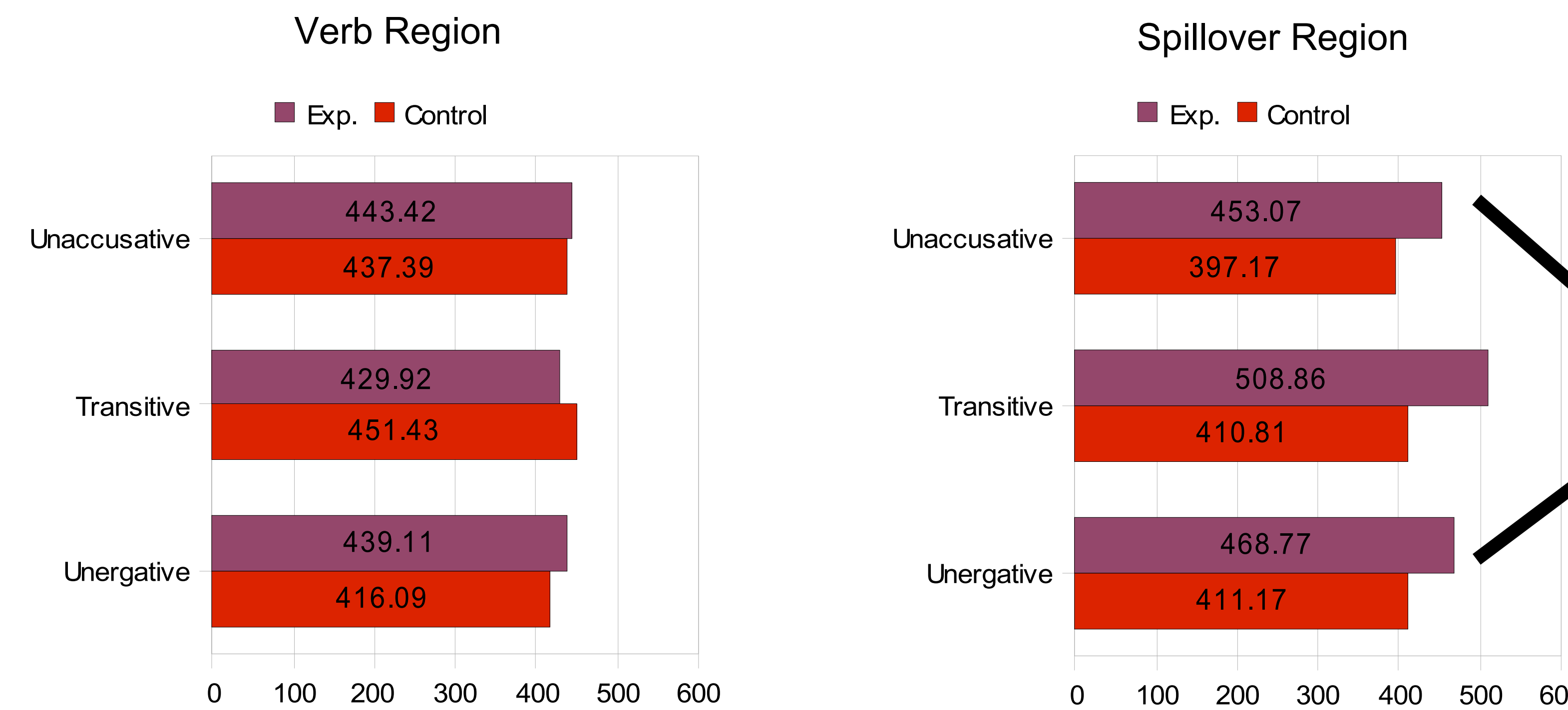
Design:

- 4x2 design
 - SV/VS word order
 - Verb conditions: passive, transitive, unaccusative, and unergative subject extraction
- Self-paced reading and acceptability rating task (n=16); 40 items

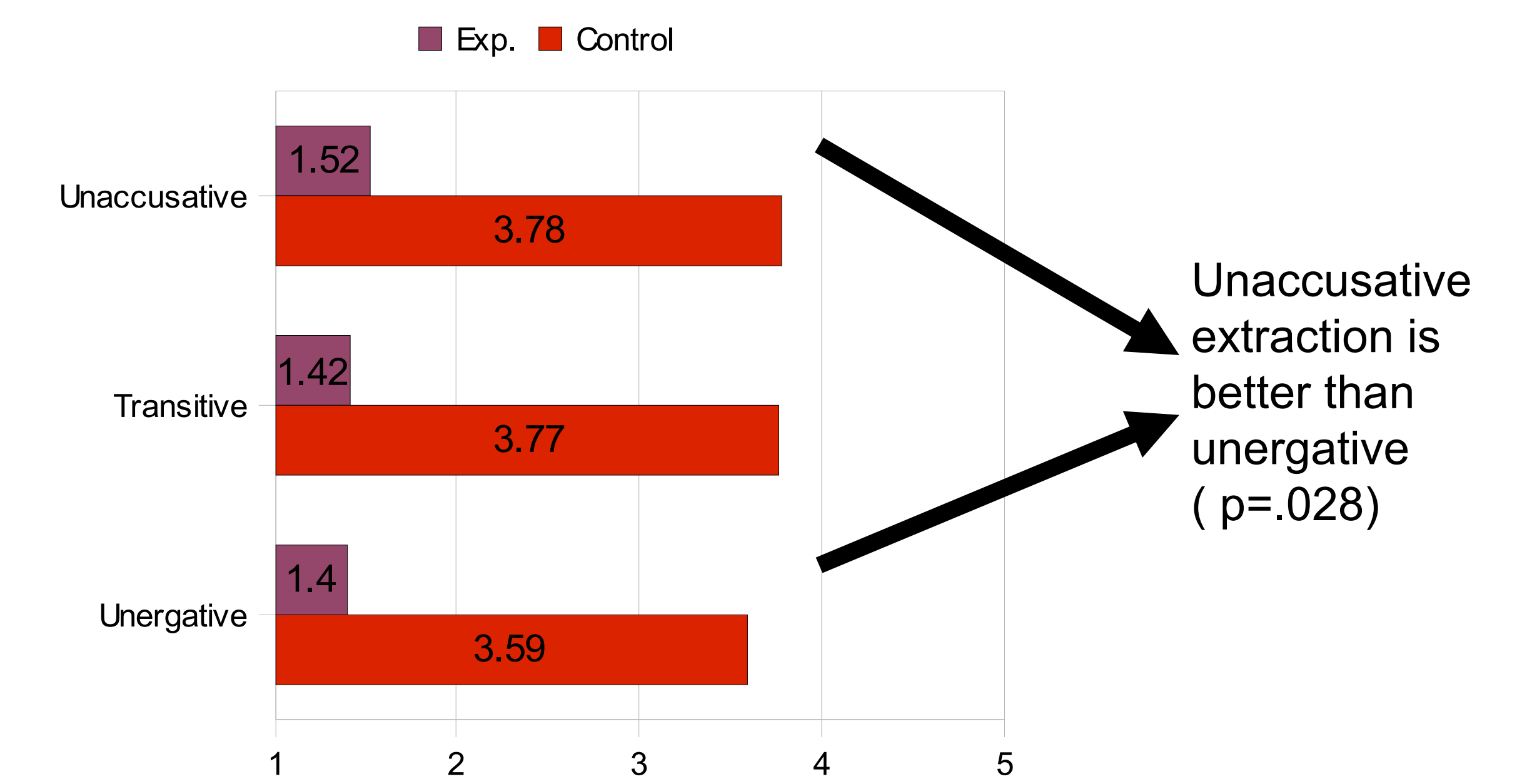
Example stimuli:

- Passive:
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby ___ komnaty byli ubrany s utra? (SV)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that ___ rooms were cleaned in morning?
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby s utra byli ubrany ___ komnaty? (VS)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that in morning were cleaned ___ rooms?
"what kind of rooms is he asking to be cleaned in the morning?"
- Transitive:
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby sosedka prinesla ___ stul'ja? (SV)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that neighbor brought ___ chairs?
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby ___ stul'ja prinesla sosedka? (VS)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that ___ chairs brought neighbor?
"what kind of chairs is he asking for the neighbor to bring?"
- Unaccusative:
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby ___ kolokola zvonili večerom? (SV)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that ___ bells rang in-evening?
 - kakie on prosit, čtoby večerom zvonili ___ kolokola? (VS)
what-kind.pl he is-asking, that in-evening rang ___ bells?
"what kind of bells is he asking to ring (be rung) in the evening?"
- Unergative:
 - kakie ona prosit, čtoby ___ vrači dezhurili zavtra? (SV)
what-kind.pl she is-asking, that ___ doctors be-on-call tomorrow?
 - kakie ona prosit, čtoby zavtra dezhurili ___ vrači? (VS)
what-kind.pl she is-asking, that tomorrow be-on-call ___ doctors?
"what kind of doctors is she asking to be on call tomorrow?"

English Reading Times (msec)

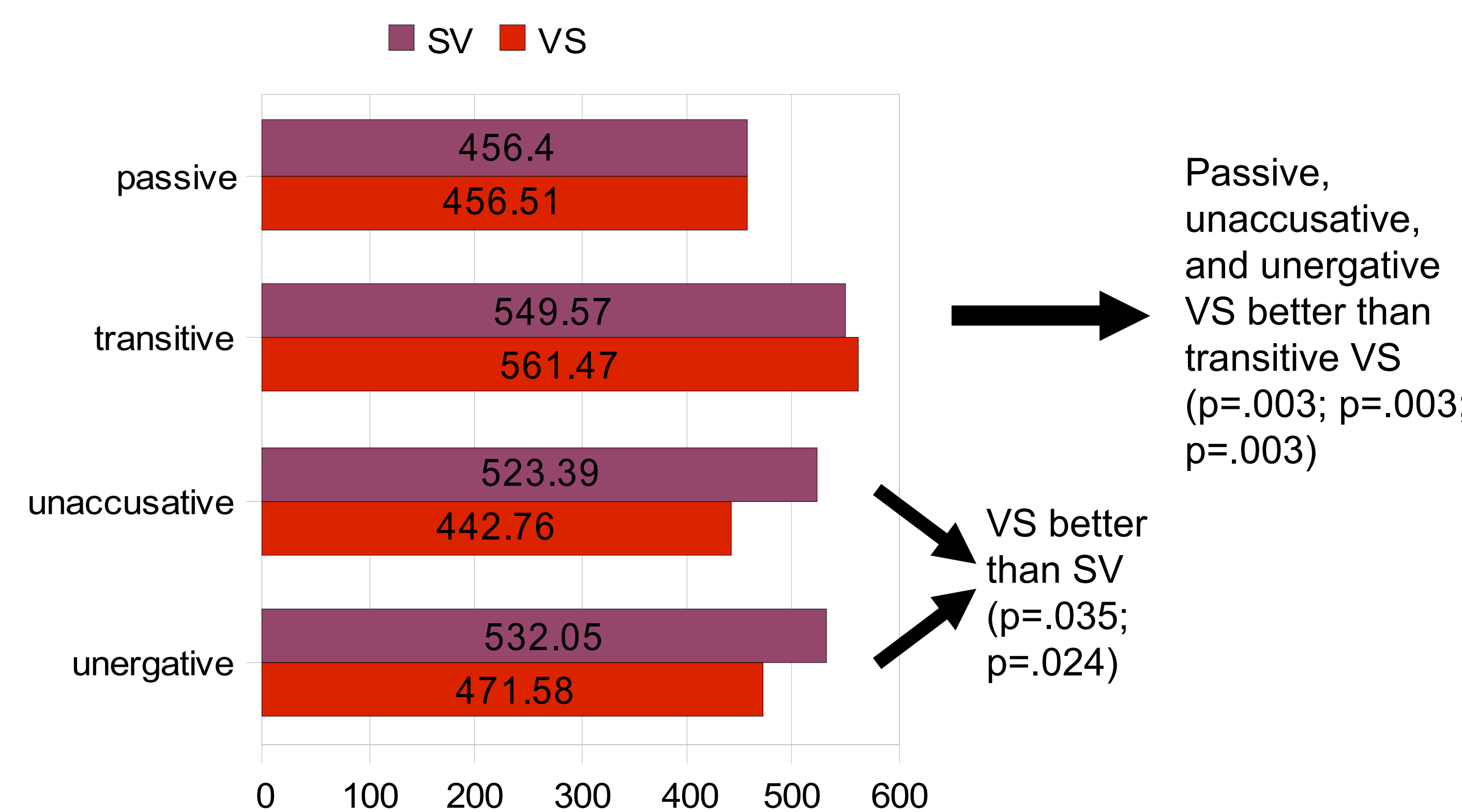


English Judgment Task (1-5)

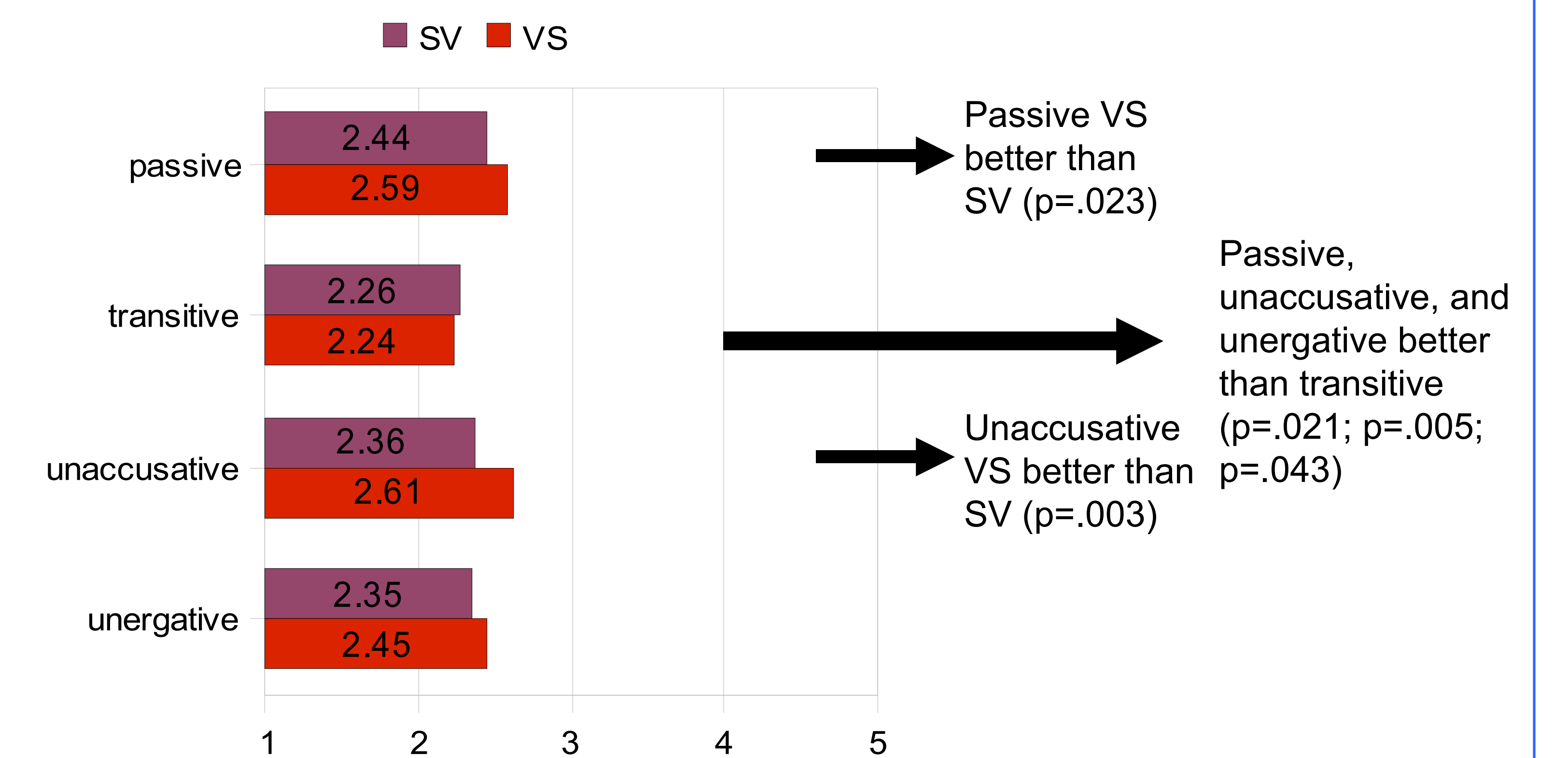


- Unaccusative advantage:** the unaccusative extraction is easier than the unergative (the transitive condition cannot be directly compared to other conditions in the spillover region of the reading task, due to the object vs. preposition contrast)
- Two possible explanations:
 - Base position: the base position of the subject argument has more effect on its permeability than the derived position.
 - Topicality: unaccusative subjects are commonly interpreted as non-topics (Kuroda 1972, Kiss 1995, Kluender 2004). Extraction out of topics may be more difficult.

Russian Reading Times (msec)



Russian Judgment Task (1-5)



- No evidence of the unaccusative advantage seen in the English experiments.
- Word order matters: preverbal subjects are stronger islands, which suggests that topicality, rather than the base position, has a greater effect on subject islandhood.
- Complexity of argument structure: transitive islands are strong, regardless of word order.

Conclusions

Are there different types of subject islands?

- Yes: unaccusative subjects in English, and postverbal intransitive subjects in Russian, are weaker islands.
- Transitive subjects are invariably strong islands.

What makes extraction out of a subject difficult?

- Topicality:
 - The topicality of the subject appears to be the most important factor, but only for intransitive subjects.
 - Further support for this conclusion comes from Japanese and Korean, where topic-marked DPs (DP-*wa*, DP-*nun*) cannot host a non-contrastive wh-word.
- Argument complexity: transitivity may impose an additional processing cost.

References

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