The role of argument structure in relative clause extraposition

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The extraposition of a relative clause creates a discontinuous dependency between the relative clause and its antecedent, as in "*A man just entered the bank who claimed to have a gun*". Since discontinuous dependencies are known to increase processing effort, a key question is why speakers produce them in the first place. Some factors known to affect extraposition—for example, the length of the relative clause and the main verb phrase—have received processing-based explanations, but others haven't. I focus on two grammatical factors attested in previous research: verb type and the grammatical function of the noun phrase hosting the RC. Specifically, extraposition from subjects is more common with unaccusative and passive verbs in English; further, extraposition is more common from objects than subjects in Dutch and German. I replicate these findings using corpus data from Persian. Further, I propose that verb type and grammatical function can be linked to a single underlying notion: argument structure. I demonstrate that argument structure modulates the likelihood of extraposition in Persian and suggest that this occurs because speakers choose to extrapose relative clauses in order to keep the main clause verb close to its internal arguments. This explanation extends previous psycholinguistic findings on the role of argument structure in speech planning during language production. Furthermore, I test whether argument structure modulates comprehension as well, as it is often expected to find more frequent structures to be more acceptable in comprehension. Using a series of acceptability judgment and speeded-forced choice tasks in Persian and German, I look at extraposition from subject nouns when the main clause verb is either unaccusative or unergative, hence the the RC host is either an internal or external argument of the main clause verb. These data suggest that, consistently in both Persian and German, offline comprehension of extraposition is not affected by argument structure. To further explore online comprehension, I am currently running a self-paced reading experiment in German to see whether there is a local processing effort with extraposition when the main verb is unergative compared to unaccusative. I hope that the data collection will be finished before the workshop, so that I can present fresh data in my talk!