1. INTRODUCTION

Ross's (1968) thesis pointed out a number of poorly understood phenomena which have plagued the study of island constraints ever since. Specifically, certain non-structural factors are known to affect the grammaticality of island violations in subtle ways. These have traditionally been factored out of syntactic analyses with a view to providing an account of the core cases. Here I propose that these seemingly peripheral factors are in fact more central to an account of unbounded dependencies, and of island constraints in particular, than is commonly assumed.

This is not the first time that this position has been taken, of course. Over the years, various researchers have directly addressed the semantic and pragmatic aspects of unbounded dependencies in systematic fashion. Erteschik-Shir (1977, 1981) and Erteschik-Shir and Lappin (1979) introduced the Dominance Hypothesis: an NP can only be extracted out of clauses which may be interpreted as dominant or out of phrases in which the NP may itself be regarded as dominant, where a constituent is considered dominant if the speaker's purpose is to direct the hearer's attention to its semantic content. Kuno (1976) introduced a thematic constraint on relativization which simply stated that a relative clause must be a statement about its head noun; this constraint was later developed into the Topichood Condition of Kuno (1987), which states that only those constituents in a sentence that qualify as the topic of the sentence can undergo extraction processes. What I will suggest here is that these independently derived principles are actually part of a larger picture: namely, if unbounded dependencies are viewed as
instances of predication, then all the poorly understood phenomena associated with them fall out for free. I will also argue that these facts are ultimately tied to processing considerations based on general cognitive principles.

The discussion will proceed as follows. In section 2 I will provide an overview of certain properties that are known to hold of predication structure; in section 3 I will derive two principles of predication from these properties and relate each to a particular class of lexical items. I will then show in section 4 that the same principles of predication hold of unbounded dependencies, and can in fact be reduced to one general principle of predication. I will further demonstrate that the traditionally ‘poorly understood’ phenomena surrounding unbounded dependencies are a natural consequence of this principle. Section 5 will show that violations of the predication principle produce cumulative effects of unacceptability in unbounded dependencies, ultimately resulting in fully ungrammatical, ‘core case’ island violations. I conclude with a discussion of some relevant experimental data in Section 6.

2. PREDICATION STRUCTURE

The theory of predication has a long history going back at least as far as Aristotle, possibly to the Sanskrit grammarians. In the past decade there have been several syntactic proposals in this area (Williams, 1980; Rothstein, 1985; Napoli, 1988, 1989), but here I will confine the discussion to only those properties of predication structure which are generally agreed upon, namely the nature of possible argument expressions, and the types of predicates that can be associated with them. These are the two issues which Keenan (1974) addresses in his Functional Principle, for which he cites evidence from restrictive relative clauses and other predicative structures.

(1) (i) The reference of the argument expression must be determinable independently of the meaning or reference of the function symbol.

(ii) Functions which apply to the argument however may vary with the choice of argument (and so need not be independent of it).

(Keenan, 1974: 298)