Contextual dimensions of clefts

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The present work investigates the rise of clefts in the history of English (Jespersen 1937, Ball 1991, Los & Komen 2012, Trips & Stein 2018) primarily on the basis of the Penn parsed corpora of historical English focusing on the four centuries of Early and Late Modern English (16th to 19th c.; cf. Kroch et al. 2004, Kroch et al. 2016). The reason for concentrating on theses periods lies in the prolific use of clefts in Modern English (as opposed to earlier stages of the language), a fact that is needed in the quantitative part of our investigation.

Our main driving point is that information packaging strategies played a role in the spurt of clefts and the question is what impact information structure had on the frequencies of types of clefts. We study the presuppositional and givenness behavior of the pivot or clefted constituent together with its contextual environment over time. Having developed corresponding annotation guidelines which have been designed for clefts but also other presuppositional markers – such as additives (*too*, *even* etc.), we proceeded in assigning the interpretation of clefts to one of four categories: new, inferred, based on world-knowledge, or given. We focus on what is usually considered to be the existential presupposition of clefts. For example, if *It was Sally that solved the problem,* then somebody must have solved the problem. What we observe on the basis of our results thus far is that at least clearly given clefts are a proportionally smaller pattern (unlike e.g. in the case of a parallel study on additives, where givenness is the rule and accommodation infrequent). What we clearly observe is the development of so-called informative presuppositional clefts (Prince 1978, Tonhauser 2015) in which apparent accommodation frequently has to take place. While our current results indicate that an even further rise can be observed at the transition towards Present-day English, the incidence of new clefts is already surprisingly high from the Early Modern English period onwards. We explore to what extent the clefts that have developed in English are a particular rhetorical device (cf. Prince's 1978 initial remarks) and a rather manipulating information-structural means to direct the question-under-discussion into a particular direction.

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