Informational aspects of the extraposition of relative clauses

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One reason why intertwined clauses are harder to perceive than their counterparts might be information structure (IS). The current idea is that speakers choose extraposition of new information to help the audience perceive their text and to distribute information evenly across a discourse (Levy and Jaeger 2007). The purpose of this paper is to verify the relation between IS and extraposition or adjacency of relative clauses (RC).

(1) Adjacent RC: *Er hat ein Kind, das spielte, gesehen*.
          he has a child, who played, seen.

(2) Extraposed RC: *Er hat ein Kind gesehen, das spielte*.
          he has a child seen, who played.
     'He has seen a child, who played.

In order to assess the connection between IS and extraposition of RC across the history of German, a corpus study was conducted covering the periods 1530-1600, 1630-1700 (Early ENHG) and 1830-1850 (Late ENHG). The corpus consists of letters due to their conceptional closeness to conceptional orality (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2007). For every RC variant, I quantified the cognitive status of the referents in RC and matrix clause, which were categorized following Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski (1993) and Prince (1981).

A significant correlation between extraposition and IS in the 16th and 17th century parts of the corpus can be shown. In adjacent RC, there is a higher proportion of given referents than new referents. These results can be explained by the position of the adjacent RC in the middle field of the matrix clauses. Literacy in 16th and 17th century was not as widespread as in the 19th century, therefore the letters might have been read out aloud, meaning that processing conditions for oral communication applied. By the end of the matrix clause, the listener has new capacities to understand the content of the RC (cf. Gibson 1998). In the 19th-century letters, no connection between IS and extraposition could be detected. This suggests a decreasing influence of the IS on extraposition.

The results of the present study clearly show an influence of IS on the syntactic surface of complex sentences and offer an explanation for syntactic variants to improve the comprehensibility of texts.

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