

The ordering of matrix clauses and subordinate causal clauses in the Old Bailey Corpus 1720–1913

The paper investigates changes in the order of finite adverbial causal clauses and matrix clauses in Late Modern English. Such clauses most frequently follow their main clause, as in (1), but they can also precede it, as in (2).

(1) *I did not much wonder at it, because she had attempted to cut her Throat before* [...] (OBC-1726)

(2) [...] *because it was to be my place to take them, I kept company with them all four for two hours* (OBC-1755)

Diessel (2005:465) argues that main clauses containing final adverbial clauses are cognitively privileged because they are easier to parse (Diessel 2005: 465–9); initial positioning is only possible for short subordinate clauses. Likewise, discourse pragmatic function plays a role, with initial position more likely if the reason presented is given rather than new. Therefore, *because* clauses, usually providing new causes, are less likely to be initial than clauses introduced by *as* and *since*, which tend to introduce known causes (Diessel 2005: 465--6; Chafe 1984: 442–4). Studies of adverbial clauses in earlier stages of English have broadly confirmed many of these results: Given-/newness plays a role for the positioning of causal clauses in Early Modern English (cf. Claridge & Walker 2001: 46–8; Pentrel 2017: 278 for temporal clauses in the 17th century), and Eitelmann (2016: 409), e.g., stresses the general validity of end-weight in Late Modern English.

The present paper analyses 1055 causal subordinate clauses from the 24-million word Old Bailey Corpus 2.0, which contains transcripts of trials from London's Central Criminal Court from 1720–1913 (Huber, Nissel and Puga 2016). Using multiple logistic regression, it explores the historical development of the influence of clause length and the given-/newness of the cause on the ordering of causal and matrix clause in a formative phase of English syntax, which saw the demise of *for* and the establishment of both *as* and *because* as causal conjunctions (Rissanen 1998). It is hypothesised that, under the uniformitarian hypothesis, these well-known factors had similar effects on clause position as in present-day English. The results feed into a diachronic constructional analysis which models the historical changes in the network of English causal clauses (Kanetani 2019).

References

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