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Discourse functions of the cleft construction in English and Norwegian

The aim of the paper is to compare the use of the cleft construction in English and Norwegian from the point of view their discourse functions. Previous comparative studies of this kind analysed either direct translations between the two languages (Gundel 2002) or combined direct translations with the analysis of original texts (English-Swedish clefts, Johansson 2001). However, as these methods have some drawbacks (interference in the case of translation from a close language, or difficult comparability of two original texts), it seems fruitful to use the intermediary of another language which is typologically and genetically more distant. This study is hence based on a corpus of English and Norwegian texts translated from the Czech original. Czech, unlike English and Norwegian, is an inflectional language with a relatively free word order and it employs primarily other focusing devices than the cleft construction (focusing adverbs, word order etc.)

The study is confined to IT-clefts and focuses on their discourse functions. The classification of discourse functions analysed is based on Hasselgård (2004) and it is complemented by an account of additional irretrievable information based on Firbas (1995). The typology of discourse functions presented in this paper includes: contrast, selection, identification, summarizing function, topic launching and topic linking. All of the analysed discourse functions are closely connected with the functional sentence perspective (FSP). There are two main types of the cleft construction from the FSP point of view: the first type carries only one focus (in the main clause), the second type carries two foci (one in the main clause and one in the TH-clause). All discourse functions include clefts of both FSP types, but some functions are more likely to be represented by one of these types (e.g. the topic linking function is more likely to be attached to a two-foci cleft). The results show that all the identified discourse functions operate in both English and Norwegian and that the most frequent function in both languages is the contrastive function. However, there are also differences: the summarizing function and the identification (i.e. functions which are directed backwards in the text) are more common in Norwegian. The Norwegian cleft sentences of this type often correspond to English reversed WH-clefts. The topic launching and topic linking functions (directed forwards in the text), on the other hand, are more common among the English examples.

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