

**“A diachronic constructional analysis of English registers:
grammar and style hand in hand”**

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic analysis of genres and/or registers in a language has always been controversial, possibly because of the intangible status of the key concepts ‘genre’ and ‘register’, and this has led to multi-faceted studies, adopting a number of different theoretical frameworks. In this paper the study of genres has been addressed through focusing on empirically-observable “internal linguistic features of texts” (Taavitsainen 2001: 141). Following Biber and Conrad (2009: 6), such linguistic features are “well suited to the purposes and situational context of the register”. This study adheres to this two-fold view of text varieties, that is, both linguistic and situational, and focuses on the study of a number of texts in an attempt to explore register variation over the course of the history of English. It also aims to consider the application of some of the assumptions of Biber’s (1988, 1995) model to syntactic strategies at a supra-phrasal level, specifically word-order phenomena which cannot be determined by focusing on the occurrence ratios of specific lexical elements. In particular, we will focus on three syntactic strategies which, first, lead to marked designs as far as word order is concerned and, second, involve elements other than the subjects in sentence-initial position: topicalisation, left dislocation and other ‘subject-last’ strategies, illustrated, respectively, in (1) to (3):

- (1) [That I had received such from Edward]_i; also I need not mention Δ_i (Austen-180X,187.621)
- (2) [Simon, beinge a child of six yers old,]_i; his_i father loved him_(i) above all the reste, (FORMAN-E2-H,3.28)
- (3) and very great was [my pleasure in going over the house and grounds]_{Subject}. (Austen-180X,168.182)

The data have been retrieved from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (1150-1500), the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (1500-1710) and the Penn Parsed Corpus of Modern British English (1700-1914). The periods covered are those following the process of word-order syntacticisation or fixation in English.

Following the premise that a set of linguistic constructions can be taken as markers of the functional, textual, stylistic characterization of registers, the empirical study of topicalisation, left dislocation and subject-last strategies has led to the following conclusions. First, left dislocation is a linguistic strategy which has been associated with literate registers from Middle to Late Modern English, which is not in keeping with the conversational character which is attributed in the literature to left dislocation in Present-Day English (Biber et al. 1999: 957-958). Second, topicalisation has been described as a literacy strategy in Middle English which has become progressively more textually unmarked in Modern English. Finally, the so-called subject-last constructions have been claimed to feature subject-hearer involvement. We have also suggested that the data serve to illustrate the link between linguistic markedness and situational definition. In this vein, it is proposed that those constructions which are syntactically most marked as far as word order is concerned constitute hallmarks of well-defined situational interpretations of the registers in which they occur at an appropriate frequency. The study has thus concluded that word-order strategies can be added to the list of linguistic features, units or variables on which register analysis can rely.

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