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### **The Use of the It-Cleft Construction in 19th-century English**

The paper analyses the use and development of the *it*-cleft construction in English, focusing on the 19th century. According to previous research this is when *it*-clefts started being used with some frequency. The data are drawn from historical corpora (the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts and A Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English), but modern corpora and modern studies of cleft constructions are also considered (see e.g. Collins 1991). In Present-day English, the *it*-cleft construction is frequent in both spoken and written language, and conveys *divided focus*, i.e. focus is both on *callousness* and *ignore* in *It is his callousness that I shall ignore*. The context decides which item is the dominant one, i.e. new information (Quirk et al. 1985: 1372, 1383).

Previous studies (see e.g. Ball 1991; Pérez-Guerra 1999) and preliminary results from the present study show that *it*-clefts are rare before the Late Modern English period (one of the few Early Modern English examples is: *Bicause thy head is broken, was it I that it broke?*). In Science, Trials, Letters, and Drama, the *it*-cleft is more than twice as frequent in the 19th-century material as in the Early Modern English material. *It*-clefts occur particularly often in the speech-related 19th-century trials: *Sir, it was the Cook that was trying the salt*. In such examples, the special function of the *it*-cleft, expressing divided focus, is clear; not only the person but also the activity is focussed on.

Scholars have commented on the status of the second part of the *it*-cleft, that is, whether it is a 'true' relative clause or not, since variation with *which* hardly occurs in modern English. In 19th-century English, a few examples of *which* are found, and in the Drama texts, *what* occurs (*it's 'unger what makes you feel conscientious*), but the predominant pattern is with *that*. The construction with a proper noun and a relative clause with *that*, which is frequent in the 19th-century trials (*surely it is not Jonathan Martin that has done it?*), may be explained as a 'condensed' version of *Jonathan Martin, the one that has done it* (see Jacobsson 1994). The paper will also discuss how important the special structure of the *it*-cleft and its thematic organisation are for its increased frequency in 19th-century English.

#### References

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