Preposition Pied Piping and Stranding in British English: An Experimental- and Corpus-based Construction Grammar Analysis

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Preposition placement in English has attracted a great deal of attention in the linguistic literature (cf., e.g., Gries 2002; Hoffmann 2007; Trotta 2000) since many syntactic contexts license two competing structural variants (cf. Pullum and Huddleston 2002: 627): in preposed, interrogative, exclamative and wh-relative clauses the preposition can either be "stranded", i.e. appear without an adjacent NP complement (3.1), or occur "pied piped", i.e. in clause-initial position (3.2):

(3.1) a. [Stranding], I've heard of. [preposing]
b. [What], is he talking about? [interrogative]
c. [What a great topic], he talked about! [exclamative]
d. the structure [[which], he talked about]. [wh-relative]

(3.2) a. [Of stranding], I've heard. [preposing]
b. [About what], is he talking? [interrogative]
c. [About what a great topic], he talked! [exclamative]
d. the structure [[about which], he talked]. [wh-relative]

Non-wh-relative clauses (3.3a), comparative (3.3b), hollow (3.3c) and passive clauses (3.3d), however, only permit stranding:

(3.3) a. the structure [[that], he talked about]. [non-wh-relative]
b. the same stuff, as I talked about. [comparative]
c. His thesis, was easy [to find fault with]. [hollow]
d. Stranding, has been talked about, enough. [passive]

While all earlier accounts of preposition placement only focussed on specific clause types, the present talk investigates the distribution of preposition pied piping and stranding in all of the clause types in (3.1) to (3.3). For this I will draw on empirical corpus data (the British English components of the International Corpus of English ICE project) and experimental data (using the Magnitude Estimation method), which have been subjected to various statistical analyses. (The corpus data were analysed employing the Coll.analysis 3. and HCFA 3.2 scripts for R for Windows [Gries 2004a/b] and Goldvarb; the experimental data were subjected to a repeated measures ANOVA analysis).

As I will argue in my talk, a usage-based construction grammar account (Croft 2001; Goldberg 2006) which incorporates an interaction of processing constraints with type and token frequency effects can best explain the effects uncovered by the statistical analyses (such as, e.g., the categorical stranding effect of the preposition like, the fact that interrogatives strongly favour stranding or that the factor formality only affects relative clauses).

References