Finding Focus

a study of the historical development of focus in English

This study reveals how two important focus articulations change over time in written English. Constituent focus, often accompanied by contrast, makes use of the clause-initial position in the oldest stages of English, but as this position comes to be used for the grammatical subject over time, the it-cleft construction is increasingly used for the expression of contrastive focus. There is no one-to-one mapping between contrastive focus and the it-cleft: the Old English it-cleft, on a par with modern Scandinavian counterparts, mostly functions as a text-organization device, and a synchronic study of Chechen shows that it uses the it-cleft exclusively for text-organization, while focus is indicated by word order and wh-clefts.

Presentational focus, which is used where the main objective of a sentence is the introduction of a new participant, prefers to have this participant after the finite verb, but the strategy to achieve this goal changes over time: the word order flexibility of Old English allows new major participants to appear as subjects after the finite verb, but the growing demand of having grammatical subjects appear before the finite verb results in the use of an expletive strategy in late Modern English: the expletive is before the finite verb, while the logical subject follows it.

The study on the change in focus realizations makes heavy use of texts that are enriched with referential information: the referential status of each noun phrase, and a pointer to an antecedent if a noun phrase is anaphoric. The success in using this information in order to determine focus domains leads to an important hypothesis, which says that focus is compositional in nature: focus articulations can be derived by combining syntactic and referential information. Further work should explore this claim in more detail.