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How writers begin their sentences

Complex beginnings in native and learner English

How come a sentence such as Nowadays, frequently preservatives, aromatic substances, colourings and flavourings are used to prolong the storage life and to improve the tastiness strikes the native speaker of English as funny? And why is it, for instance, in Britain, people don’t think lightly of this matter in some contexts more effective than in, for instance, people don’t think lightly of this matter?

This doctoral thesis sets out to investigate these questions. More specifically, it sets out to investigate form and use of complex beginnings (i.e. clusters of sentence-initial adverbials) in native and learner English. Based on a contrastive corpus analysis and the results of an exploratory psycholinguistic experiment, this study proposes a functional typology for complex beginnings, it investigates the effectiveness of specific types of complex beginnings in particular contexts, it hypothesizes reasons for differences between native and learner complex beginnings, and finally it attempts to discover how complex beginnings are produced and to what extent the form and use of complex beginnings are influenced by different production processes. Throughout the discussions there is reference to topics such as discourse competence, the functions of sentence openings (both Functional Grammar and Systemic Functional Grammar) and writing processes.