

# New study on the grammar of subclauses in historical English

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When do English speakers say *whether that will happen is unknown* and when do they say *it is unknown whether that will happen*? Looking at, among other things, medieval homilies and early modern letter correspondence, a recently published dissertation at the University of Gothenburg shows how clausal arguments, and in particular clausal subjects, have been expressed at different points in time in the history of English.

In all languages, there are different ways of expressing the same content, varying modes of describing one and the same situation. These alternative expressions, whose grammatical structure varies, turn out to be used in different communicative contexts.

Rickard Ramhøj has studied the alternative expressions used for predicates taking a clausal subject, i.e. a subordinate clause acting as a subject in a superordinate clause, in the history of English.

'The dissertation concerns both the analysis of the structure of the alternative expressions and the analysis of the communicative contexts in which they occur,' says Rickard Ramhøj.

He shows among other things that sentences of the type *it is unknown whether that will happen* must be given two different syntactic analyses depending on the type of predicate. Furthermore, all alternative expressions do not occur during all historical periods.

Sentences of the type whether that will happen is unknown, where the subordinate clause occurs in initial position, do not seem to form part of the earliest stage of the English language, Old English. A more frequent sentence type at this stage was instead the one where the subordinate clause occurs in a clause-final position, i.e. now is unknown whether that will happen, often in conjunction with an initial adverbial.

As for the communicative contexts in which the alternative expressions occur, the dissertation gives a greater emphasis to the influence of contrast than what has been done in previous research.

'It turns out that whether the subordinate clause stands in a contrastive relation to a proposition expressed in the preceding discourse is decisive in the choice between the alternative expressions,' says Rickard Ramhöj.

Based on a substantial corpus of historical texts, from Old English to Present-day English, the dissertation provides new analyses with respect to a number of disputed points in the research on clausal arguments.

'The hope is that these analyses will provide new insight into the workings of the relevant sentence types, and give new ideas on how they can be described within modern generative grammar,' says Rickard Ramhöj.

**More information:** Thesis title: On Clausal Subjects and Extraposition in the History of English - [hdl.handle.net/2077/41583](https://hdl.handle.net/2077/41583)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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