

English and Czech *it*-clefts in translation: A study in *Jerome*

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a part of a research that has investigated the forms and functions of the *it*-cleft construction in contemporary written English and Czech, with specific focus on its FSP aspects. The research presents a contrastive study of the construction in translation, using InterCorp, a parallel translation corpus. The English *it*-cleft construction has been described in much detail in various publications. Rather less attention has been given to the construction in Czech; in general, *it*-clefts seem to be less frequent in Czech than in English, which is due to the fact that Czech, as an inflectional language, has a greater range of primary means of expressing FSP (such as word-order, focalizers, etc.). One of the goals of the present study is to compare the forms and frequencies of *it*-clefts in Czech translated and non-translated written texts in the comparable corpus *Jerome* in order to determine whether the English source sentence structure tends to influence the syntax of the resulting Czech translation.

KEYWORDS

it-cleft, *Jerome*, translated and non-translated Czech

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a part of a wider study focused on translation and FSP aspects of English and Czech *it*-clefts. Previous parts of the study concentrated primarily on English *it*-clefts and their FSP aspects, while their Czech counterparts were used mainly for interpretation purposes; specifically to see how the construction was perceived by the translators from an FSP point of view. A translation perspective often works as a useful tool, especially between two languages that are typologically different and use different means to express what has been referred to as functional sentence perspective or information structure.

In particular, this sub-study focuses on *it*-clefts with a focused subject, such as *It was she who opened the window*. This is mainly due to the fact that the previous strands of my research (Kudrnová 2013) were based on the study of rhematic subjects in English, and specifically on the comparison of pre-verbal rhematic subjects (which tend to be one of the realisation forms of what has been referred to as “presentation scale”) and *it*-clefts (which also focus the subject, but were found to rarely overlap with presentation scales; i.e. they usually do not introduce new, context-independent elements).

2. THEORY

The cleft construction in English is a fairly common syntactical means, one of whose primary functions is to highlight the element that carries the information focus. Since English word order is for the most part fixed, which limits the operational scope of the FSP factor of linearity, information structure must sometimes be made explicit by this secondary construction, which puts the most dynamic element in focus. Nevertheless, the *it*-cleft, like many other linguistic means, is not restrained to a single function; it often has a textual role, such as introducing a new topic, summarizing etc. (cf. Dušková 2010: 42). In order to determine the information structure of a given *it*-cleft, it is always necessary to consider other FSP factors, too, most importantly the context (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990: 412)

Czech as an inflectional language with free word order relies heavily on linearity to indicate FSP structure, much more so than English. It follows that the occurrence of cleft constructions will be markedly lower in Czech.¹ However, the difference is not absolute and cleft constructions are indeed used in Czech as well, although they are less frequent and likely to be perceived as more marked. Their status in the language system seems to be slightly peripheral, as they have been seen by some linguists as a syntactical borrowing from other languages, such as English or French, and their excessive and unjustified use has been frowned upon as a mark of stylistic awkwardness (Filipec 1955). What is interesting is that in spite of the lower frequency of Czech *it*-clefts, both the types identified by Prince (1978), stressed-focus and informative presupposition clefts, occur; the latter type serves mainly as a stylistic device expressing attitude or involvement, or is used to emphasize a repeated structure, even though the rheme is in the dependent clause (Filipec 1955).

To illustrate the perceived stylistic clumsiness of the overuse of cleft constructions in Czech, here is an example from a review of the Czech translation anti-award *Skřípeček* from 2008, which among other things comments on an inappropriate use of *it*-clefts in a translation from French (Stárková, Novotný and Piskoř 2007): “Stejně tak imituje vytykáací konstrukci věty, která je běžná ve francouzštině, ale v češtině vytváří nesmyslné věty vedlejší (*nakonec je to trhlina ve zdi, kterou vojska vpadnou do města*).” (In the same way it [the Czech translation] imitates the construction of a sentence which is common in French, but in Czech produces ludicrous subordinate clauses, such as *in the end it is a gap in the wall through which the troops invade the city*.) Elsewhere, Milan Kundera was similarly criticised for a translation of one of his own books, which, according to the author of the article, illustrates all the banal mistakes habitually made by bad translators, commenting thus on cleft constructions: “Vytykáací konstrukce jako „Kdo mě zajímá, je romanopisec“ (s. 9) či „To, co charakterizuje životopisy slavných lidí, je, že chtěli být slavní“ (s. 16) jsou klopotné a hlavně zbytečné, protože čeština elegantně řeší takové situace pomocí slovosledu: Mě zajímá romanopisec. Životopisy slavných lidí charakterizuje to, že chtěli být slavní.“ (Novotný 2008) (Cleft sentences like “[The person] who interests me is the

¹ In Czech, the construction is usually referred to as „*důrazově vytykáací konstrukce*“ (emphatically focusing construction) (Karlík 2016).

novelist” [p. 9] or “That which characterizes the biographies of famous people is that they wanted to be famous” [p. 16] are laborious and essentially unnecessary because Czech elegantly resolves such situations by means of word order: *Me_{acc.} interests the novelist_{nom.}, The biographies_{acc.} of famous people characterizes that they wanted to be famous.*) In sum, it is probably safe to say that Czech clefts — or at least some of their types — are significantly more marked than their English equivalents, and their frequent use tends to be perceived as a sign of an overly literal or clumsy translation.

3. SOURCE MATERIAL

The study is based on the comparable corpus Jerome (Chlumská 2013): a monolingual corpus of translated and non-translated Czech, designed for the study of Czech from the translation point of view. The corpus includes both fiction and professional literature, original and translated from various languages, and is comprised of more than 85 million tokens. For this particular study, however, it was necessary to use a subcorpus of 54 million tokens, which included only translations from English together with an equal amount of original Czech text.

4. METHOD

As was suggested in the previous section, a subcorpus was created for the purposes of the study. Using the query described below, which yielded 4473 results, I made a sample of manually sorted 200 *it*-clefts.

4.1 QUERY

After creating the comparable subcorpus of non-translated Czech texts and translations from English, a query was formulated to search it. As well as covering the essential elements (“*být*” and “*to*” in either order, subject realised by a noun or a pronoun and a relative pronoun “*kdo/který/co*”, I tried to allow for a reasonable amount of facultative elements in the construction: an adverb, a focalizing particle (which seems to occur relatively often in Czech *it*-clefts), a pronoun and an adjective. Below is the pattern of the query and the query itself:

Být to / to být + o-1 adverb + o-1 focalizing particle (*právě, zrovna*) + o-1 pronoun + o-1 adjective + pronoun / noun + comma + *kdo/který/co*

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([] [] containing [lemma="být"] containing [word="(i?)to"])[tag="D.*"]?
[word="právě|zrovna"]? ([tag="P.*"]? [tag="A.*"])? [tag="P.*"|tag="N.*"]
[lemma="," ] [lemma="kdo"|lemma="který"| lemma="co"]
```

4.2 SORTING

The concordances found using the query were manually sorted. Like its English counterpart, the Czech *it*-cleft is overtly identical to a corresponding relative sentence, as in:

- (1) Je to chromý pes, který nikdy docela nedokáže předvést ty kousky, jež po něm chceme. [It is a lame dog that can never do the tricks that we ask from it.]

There were also cases of other structures which coincidentally had an identical surface structure, as an extraposed subject clause in (2):

- (2) Třeba se nakonec ukáže, že je to prima holka, co já vím.
[Maybe in the end it will appear that she is a top-notch girl, for all I know.]

In several cases, the lack of context does not allow an unambiguous interpretation:

- (3) Jsou to ženy, které se ve chvíli, kdy si jejich partneři najdou jinou lásku, promění v dračice.

Example (3) could be interpreted in two ways: either as an *it*-cleft, or as a sentence with a relative clause. In the former case, the interpretation would be “It is women (rather than men or girls etc.) who turn into dragonesses when their partners find another love.” In the latter, the sentence would mean “These are women who turn into dragonesses when their partners find another love.” Without sufficient context, it is impossible to determine which of these interpretations is correct.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 FREQUENCY

One of the most obvious goals of the study was to compare the frequency of the *it*-cleft with focused subject in translated and non-translated Czech. Figure 1 shows the basic distribution across all text types, authors etc.

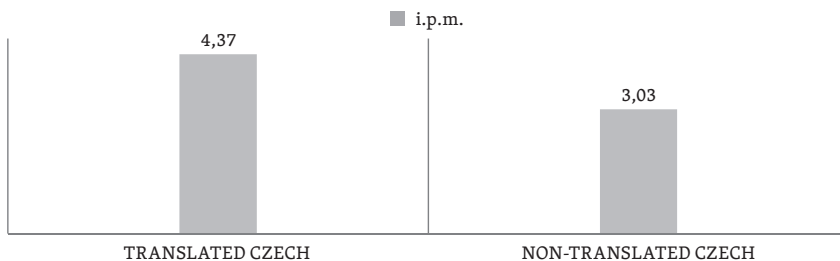


FIGURE 1. Frequency of *it*-clefts in translated and non-translated Czech

In my subcorpus, *it*-clefts were more frequent in translated Czech than in original Czech texts (4.37 versus 3.03 instances per million). Given that the subcorpus is comparable, this suggests a possible influence of source language sentence structure. However, it is more informative to look more closely at the distribution in fiction versus professional literature and in different text types.

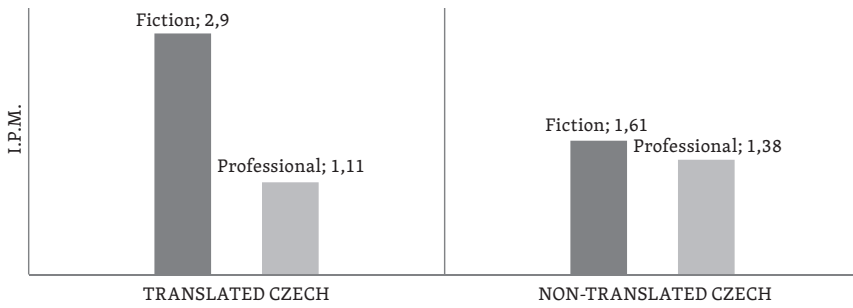


FIGURE 2. Frequency of *it*-clefts in fiction and professional literature

Figure 2 illustrates the tendency in fiction versus professional literature: it is immediately apparent that the higher proportion of *it*-clefts in translated Czech is mainly due to the construction's occurrence in fiction. On the other hand, the frequency of *it*-clefts in professional literature is slightly higher in non-translations (1.38 instances per million versus 1.11 in translations from English). It seems, therefore, that translators of English fiction tend to be more influenced by the source language sentence structure; or alternatively, that translators find *it*-clefts of this kind to be more acceptable in fiction.

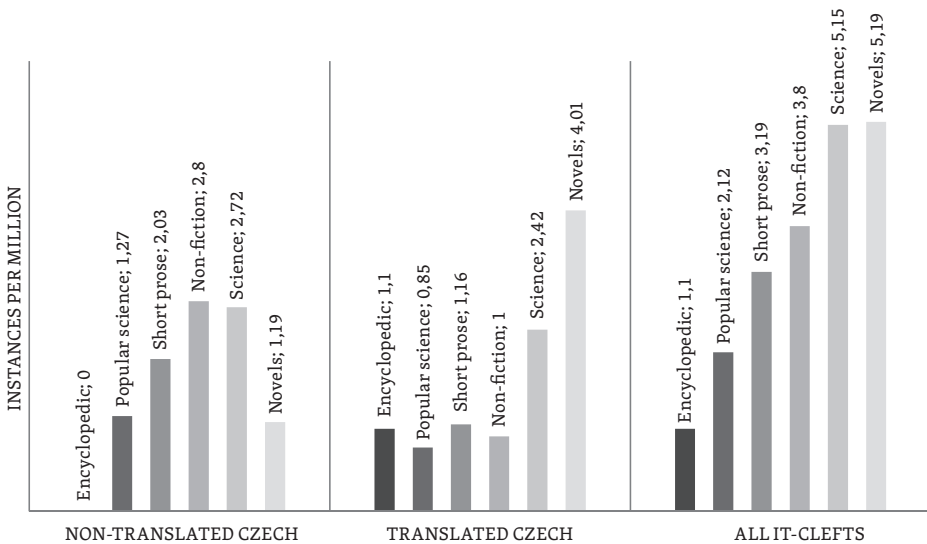


FIGURE 3. Frequency according to text types

A more detailed frequency analysis of text types, as shown in Figure 3, shows that — rather surprisingly — the high frequency of *it*-clefts recorded in fiction comes mainly from novels (4.01 i.p.m. in translations versus 1.19 i.p.m. in non-translations), whereas in short prose, the studied construction is actually used more frequently in non-translations (2.03 i.p.m. versus 1.16 i.p.m. in translations from English). As for

other differences: *it*-clefts are more frequent in translated encyclopaedic texts than in original Czech ones; in all other text types, the cleft construction with focused subject proved to be more frequent in non-translations.

5.2 REALIZATION FORMS

Realization form is another important aspect of *it*-clefts: considering the previously mentioned typological differences between Czech and English, it follows that Czech is more likely to use its other means (word-order, focalizers, pronouns, etc.) where this is more efficient than an *it*-cleft. Cleft constructions, on the other hand, seem quite convenient for the focusing of inherently context-dependent elements, which would otherwise be likely to be perceived as thematic. The *it*-cleft thus becomes a useful means of clarifying information structure. Below are five most frequent realisation forms of *it*-clefts with focused subject in translated and non-translated Czech, respectively:

Translated Czech

1. *jsem to já (I), kdo*
2. *to byla ona (she), kdo*
3. *byl to on (he), kdo*
4. *Byl to on, kdo*
5. *to byl ty (you), kdo*

Non-translated Czech

1. *to byl on (he), kdo*
2. *jsem to já (I), kdo*
3. *bude to on, kdo*
4. *to byli oni (they), kdo*
5. *je to on, kdo*

The prevalence of subjects realised by personal pronouns in both groups is partly due to their overall high frequency; but I also believe that their high proportion is caused by the fact that as inherently context-dependent elements, they are the most likely candidates to appear in a stylistically acceptable Czech *it*-cleft, whereas elements that are not automatically context-dependent tend to be focused by other means.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study suggest that in the case of *it*-clefts in translation from English to Czech, there seems to be some interference from the source language; however, that interference is almost exclusively limited to fiction, and in particular to novels (as opposed to short prose and most types of non-fiction).

This paper is meant to be purely descriptive, rather than evaluative. However, it is interesting to note that the perceived stylistic clumsiness that is criticized in Czech *it*-clefts translated from English does appear in original, non-translated Czech texts as well, as in:

- (4) Je to poněkud chatrná bouda, co na ni chceš ušít.
[It is a rather poor trick that on her you wish to play.]

Objections to constructions like this are not unfounded. The *it*-cleft in the above example sentence is likely to be perceived as overly complicated; given the objections of various language professionals cited above, an alternative expression such as *To na ni chceš ušít poněkud chatrnou boudu* (*Particle on her you want to play rather poor trick*) would seem more natural in the sense that it achieves the desired effect with the help of means that are more frequent in Czech (word order + a particle, initial *to* in this case). Unlike the pronoun-centered realisation forms cited in 5.2, “*chatrná bouda*” is not inherently context-dependent; moreover, what is really meant to be emphasised is the modifier, ie. “*chatrná*”, not the head noun, ie. “*bouda*”; there is no contrastive focus as described for example in NESČ (Karlík 2016).

Whether or not such use is an influence of English — or another language that uses clefts more frequently than Czech — is debatable. It is out of scope of this paper to attempt any qualitative analysis; a further study would be needed to determine the influence of individual styles of both authors and translators, as well as other factors that possibly come into play.

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