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Esteban, Avelino. "An account of the use of fronting and clefting in Cornish English". English Historical Linguistics: Historical English in Contact. Ed. Bettelou Los, Chris Cummins, Lisa Gotthard, Alpo Honkapohja and Benjamin Molineaux. Amsterdam / Filadelfia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2022. 36-56

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.359.03cor>

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An account of the use of fronting and clefting in Cornish English

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Abstract

Unlike Standard English, Celtic English varieties generally use word order shifts or special syntactic devices to give emphasis to a specific clausal constituent. This study analyses the frequency of use of focusing devices in a number of Cornish English stories and compares the results with those obtained in other studies for other Celtic English varieties. Likewise, this paper attempts to provide an explanation for why Cornish English shows a preference for fronting over clefting by referring to the structure of focal constructions in Cornish. Finally, this paper offers an account of the discourse-pragmatic functions of fronting and clefting in Cornish English and compares them with those found in Standard English to provide evidence in support of its Celtic substratum.

Keywords: Cornish English, fronting, clefting, Celtic substratum influence

Introduction

In recent decades, the hypothesis that Celtic languages influenced some varieties of English is gaining ground. The present study approaches this topic from the perspective of the grammatical mechanisms employed by Cornish English to give prominence to a syntactic constituent within the sentence. This study is, firstly, diachronic, since it sets out to describe some of the most distinctive features of Cornish English grammar and explain them on the basis of their historical and contact-linguistic background. Secondly, it is also comparative in the sense that it aims to capture patterns of differentiation between Cornish English and other Celtic English varieties, on the one hand, and between different Cornish English dialects, on the other.

The organization of this paper is as follows: Section 1 gives a brief overview of the introduction and spread of English in Cornwall. Section 2 describes the main grammatical features of Cornish English that make it different from Standard English. Section 3 gives an account of the main focusing devices used to assign prominence or salience to a specific element in a clause in Cornish English. Section 4 describes the corpus and methodology used for the research, which consists of a number of traditional short stories written in the Cornish dialect by the most representative authors over a period of almost a century and a half. Section 5 presents and discusses the results obtained from the analysis of the

frequency with which fronting and clefting are used in the Cornish English stories. Section 6 attempts to shed some light on the source of the frequent use of fronting and ‘it’-clefting in Cornish English, by comparing their structure with that of the focusing devices displayed in the Celtic languages, examining their discourse-pragmatic properties in Standard English and Cornish English, and exploring the connection between the use of focusing devices and the place of birth or length of residence of the writers and the time when their stories were written. Finally, the concluding section contains the study’s main findings and offers a brief summary of the discussion on their relevance to the Celtic substratum hypothesis. The main aim of this paper is therefore to explore a possible correlation between the use of fronting and clefting, and the influence of the Cornish language, taking into account the fact that this language was spoken in the region for a long time and could have left its mark in terms of substrate effects.

1. The introduction and spread of English in Cornwall

Before the slow but gradual introduction of the English language in the north eastern part of Cornwall around the 10th century, Cornish – a Brytonic Celtic language – was the predominant language in Cornwall for most of its history. From the time of the Norman Conquest onwards, English and

Norman French gradually displaced Cornish from its position of hegemony in the region, although Cornish continued to be spoken thanks to the continued communication between Cornwall and Brittany, where Breton – a closely related Celtic language – was spoken (George 1993). This led to a triglossic situation: while Norman French was the mother tongue of the aristocracy, Cornish served as the *lingua franca* among the middle and lower classes, and English was initially only the mother tongue of the English people living in north eastern Cornwall, but, later, it started to expand progressively throughout the rest of Cornwall (Tanner 2006).

Later, in the 15th century, thanks to the Anglicanism brought by the Reformation, there was an increased use of the English language in Cornwall and, gradually, the Cornish people adopted English as their common language of communication (George 1993). The situation worsened in the 17th century thanks to the important support shown by Cornwall for the Royalist cause in the English Civil War (Price 2000), which brought about a process of English acculturation in the region (Hechter 1999). With the passage of time, a variety of English commonly referred to as Cornish English was developed in Cornwall. Towards the end of the 19th century, a difference was observed between the form of Cornish English spoken in west Cornwall and that found in areas further east. According to Wakelin (1975), while the eastern part of Cornwall borrowed the form of English spoken in South West England through continued

communication and commerce, in the western area of Cornwall the clergy and rich landowners introduced a more educated form of English.

By the mid-17th century Cornish had retreated to the south west (Price 2000), finally becoming extinct by the end of the 18th century (Jago 1882; Jenner 1904; George 1993; Spriggs 2003; Kent 2005).¹ Since then, the Cornish language revival movement, begun by Jenner in late 19th century, has attempted to kindle interest in the language and foster its revitalization, as revivalists thought that the ancient Cornish language reflected Celtic Cornwall linguistically and was, therefore, the symbol of Cornish identity (Payton 1997; Ferdinand 2013). This interest in the Celtic language coincided with a marginalization of the Cornish English variety, which was perceived to be a corrupted form of English. It is only during the last decades that Cornish English has regained prominence and is considered by some scholars (Gendall 1991; Phillips 1993) as a repository of words and expressions for the revitalization of the Cornish language, as it is assumed to show traces of its influence.

¹ There is considerable controversy concerning the exact date when the Cornish language became extinct. Thus, while Dolly Pentreath (1692-1777) has been traditionally considered as the last person to speak Cornish, according to Kent (p.c.) many scholars are beginning to think that there could also have been Cornish speakers in the 19th (Ann Wallis, John Davey, etc.) and even in the 20th century (Elizabeth Vingoe and John Mann) in both the south western and south eastern parts of Cornwall.

2. Cornish English

Owing to the difficulty involved in trying to define the concept *Cornish English* as a variety, especially due to the myriad of dialectal forms spoken throughout the region and the problem of knowing the source of its distinctiveness, it would seem necessary to include a section describing its main grammatical features (Wakelin 1975; Jago 1882; Phillips 1993; Merton 2003; Kent 2005). Firstly, Cornish English makes an anomalous use of personal pronouns, so it is possible to observe the presence of subject personal pronouns in situations where the pronoun functions syntactically as an object and the other way around:

(1) *And then **us** had soome heavy caake and scaal cream and fogans.*
(Sandys 1889: 39)

(2) *Billum was behind **I*** (J. T. Tregellas 1865: 10)

Secondly, Cornish English has a fair number of archaisms: for example, a distinction is still made between the second person singular forms *thou* / *thee* and the plural counterparts *you* / *ye*. Also, it normally refers to an inanimate third person singular participant by means of the third person masculine pronoun *un* or *en* (a possible descendant of OE *hine*):

- (3) *I love **thee**, Mal, and thee shust be ma wife.* (Lean 1951: 7)
- (4) *Stand by me and I'll be with **ye** soon.* (Bottrell 1873: 57)
- (5) *I do want tha teckut, so hand **un** over tha counter to-waance no!*
(Bennett 1903: 4)

We can also observe an irregular use of prepositions because they are used very differently from the way they are used in Standard English:

- (6) *All **to** once we heered a hoss an 'carriage cummin' up th 'lane.*
(Bartlett 1970: 13)

Furthermore, examples of sentences including double negation are fairly common in Cornish English:

- (7) *I **caan't** do **nawthin** for ee.* (Bennett 1903: 69)

Additionally, the adverb *up* may be far more commonly used in Cornish English than in Standard English and, curiously, it loses its original meaning and simply accompanies or reinforces the meaning conveyed by the main verb:

- (8) *To tell **up** all they things, we thoft wud be carr'd by.* (Sandys 1889: 14)

It is also very frequent to see examples of a lack of concord between subject and verb:

- (9) *Then, you '**m** a ruined man.* (Collier 1903: 87)

(10) *We **be** like one big vam¹ly.* (Bartlett 1970: 40)

The attempt that the Cornish dialect makes to regularize irregular verbal forms such as *heered*, *comed*, *seed*, *gived*, *runned*, *feeled*, *knowed*, etc. is also very interesting:

(11) *An' she **heerd** them theere hawful sounds an' **seed** them there hawful sights.* (Pearse 1884: 86)

(12) *She **runned** fore* (Clemo 1939: 9)

This dialect also makes a wide use of anomalous negative contracted forms such as *dunno*, *ded(d)en*, *wad(d)en*, or *cuden*:

(13) *She **wadden** no ordineery nurse.* (Bartlett 1970: 11)

(14) *Doctor Price **cuden** do nawthen fer the saailor.* (James 1979: 11)

The use of the third person plural pronoun *they*, accompanied by the adverb *theere*, functioning as a demonstrative, is particularly interesting:

(15) *And **they theere** places es all I've ben to.* (J. T. Tregellas 1865: 125)

Finally, the fact that Cornish English makes a wider use of a non-emphatic auxiliary verb *do* in declarative affirmative sentences than in Standard English is particularly striking:

(16) *She **do** seem bad this time, sure 'nough.* (Lee 1911: 122)

In summary, Cornish English contains a number of distinctive grammatical properties that reveal important differences between this dialect and

Standard English, but many also occur in other varieties of English and, consequently, it is very hard to trace their origin.² For example, the unemphatic auxiliary ‘do’ forms remind us of the Celtic periphrastic construction involving ‘do’ + lexical verb, but the question remains as to whether this feature may be attributed to the influence of the Cornish language (Tristram 1997; McWhorter 2009; Hickey 2012; among others).

3. Focusing devices

Another grammatical property that could reflect the influence of the Celtic languages is the use of focusing devices, that is to say mechanisms that serve to assign thematic prominence or salience to some element(s) of an utterance or a clause (Filppula 1999: 242). Such prominence can be obtained either by structural means (i.e. through special syntactic constructions such as fronting or clefting) or prosodic means (i.e. by varying the position of the sentence stress), or even, as is often the case in Standard English for instance, through a combination of both. Thus, while Standard

² See Brancaleoni (2018) for a detailed explanation about the possible origin of these grammatical features.

English has an unmarked surface SVO word order (Denison 1993: 30), it also displays other word orders to highlight some constituent of the sentence:

(17) *An interesting book* she read last week.

(18) It is *this young man* that broke the window.

(19) The *lion* is the king of the jungle.

Example (17) shows an instance of fronting: the object of the verb – *an interesting book* – appears in clause-initial position rather than in post-verbal position, as would be expected. Example (18) illustrates an instance of clefting: the syntax of the sentence adapts itself to the pragmatics of the utterance by fronting the element with focal properties – *this young man* –, but in post-verbal position, thanks to the presence of the cleft pronoun and the copula, helping thereby to preserve the canonical SVO word order.

Finally, in example (19), the sentence exhibits the unmarked word order, but the element functioning as the subject – *the lion* – is highlighted, as it receives a special intonation in the form of a special focal pitch accent.

Unlike Standard English, Celtic languages are believed to use only structural means – but not prosodic means – as a focusing device (Filppula 1999: 243). The following examples show that the Cornish language uses both word order arrangements, that is to say, fronting (20) and the so-called copula construction (21) for the purpose of assigning pragmatic prominence:

(20) *Ihesu, arlud nef* *han* *bys,* *zys*

Jesus Lord heaven and.the world to.the

y raf ov peyadow

AFF do.1SG.PRES my prayer

‘Jesus, Lord of Heaven and the world, I make my prayer to you.’

(Stokes 1872: 10)

(21) *Yth yw my a dheber bara*

AFF be.PRES.3SG I PART eat.PRES.3SG bread

‘It is I who eat bread.’ (Brown 1993: 196)

As we can see, the only difference between the fronting constructions used in English and Cornish lies in the presence of a particle in the Celtic construction. On the other hand, the copula construction could be considered an equivalent of the English *it*-cleft construction if it were not for the fact that it begins with a particle expressing Illocutionary Force – in this example, declarative affirmative – rather than with a dummy pronoun equivalent to *it*.

In view of the important presence of fronting and clefting in Cornish, the aim of the next section is to analyse the frequency with which these two focusing devices are used in Cornish English.

4. Corpus and methodology

This section describes the corpus used for the research, which encompasses 134,209 words included in 47 Cornish stories written by the most representative Cornish English³ authors covering the period from 1846 to 1979. Table 1 in Appendix 1 includes the list of the 16 authors whose works make up the corpus for my analysis of focusing devices in this variety of English. The list of authors is arranged chronologically according to the year in which their works were published, and information about their birthplace and the region where they spent most of their lives is also provided. The authors of the stories included in the analysis lived throughout the region of Cornwall and, consequently, belong to the three main dialect areas, namely West Cornwall, Mid Cornwall and East Cornwall.

The method for attesting instances of fronting and clefting consisted in a close reading of the texts, which were chosen as published prose works

³ All the authors under examination exhibit – some more than others and to a greater or lesser extent – the distinctive grammatical properties mentioned in section 2, which, along with other lexical, phonological, and spelling characteristics, form the criterion by which the stories constituting my corpus can be considered to be written in Cornish English.

belonging to the same text type⁴, namely traditional Cornish short stories. In view of the predominantly oral character of Cornish English, the analysis focused on a number of stories with examples of direct speech – natural and spontaneous –, which could consequently reflect real and spontaneous language usage.

As the paper concerns a possible Celtic influence, the analysis focuses on cases of strong fronting (i.e. the clause-initial placement of objects, complements or even whole VPs) (22), which are rare and considered as marked word order in present-day Standard English, and *it*-clefts (23), since, although examples of all types of cleft constructions can be found in the Cornish stories, the Cornish system of clefting has no equivalent to the English *wh*-cleft or *all*-cleft constructions, hence only instances of the *it*-clefts merit consideration:

(22) *Hardly a lemb to move I haven't.* (J. T. Tregellas 1865: 99)

(23) *'Twas **thee** axed me!* (Bartlett 1970: 44)

⁴ *Tales and sayings of Hicks of Bodmin*, written by Hicks in the 1860s and collected together by Collier in 1903, is not separated into sections or chapters, so I randomly chose pages 30 to 75 for analysis. Forfar's *Kynance Cove* (1865) and Quiller-Couch's *Dead Man's Road* (1887) are two novels, so I chose to analyse pages 39 to 70 in the first part and pages 1 to 35 in the second. Lee's *Little Town* (1911) is a very long story too, so I chose pages 1 to 38 and pages 101 to 135 for analysis.

5. Analysis

The results of the analysis show that strong fronting therefore plays a relevant role in Cornish English and is, very strikingly, free from the type of syntactic constraint that appears to characterize Standard English, where fronting is practically reduced to scene-setting adjuncts (Biber et al. 1997: 772; Birner & Ward 1998: 31). Thus, in Cornish English any element can be fronted:

(24) ***Your dutyous prayers** God hass heard.* (W.H. Tregellas 1884: 120)

(25) ***Good-lookin' maid** she allus wuz.* (Bartlett 1970: 31)

(26) ***Got a new car** 'ave 'ee, Charlie?* (James 1979: 12)

Apart from the very common positioning of subjects in preverbal position in Cornish English, the most common constituents that undergo fronting are adjuncts, but there are also a fair number of examples involving objects (24), complements (25), or whole VPs (26) in clause-initial position.

While clefting is not so frequent as fronting in Cornish English, it does display the same syntactic flexibility as fronting, as different constituents (e.g. subjects (27), objects (28), complements (29), or adjuncts (30)) can become the fronted element in an it-cleft construction:

- (27) 'Twas **the coast-guard** that found me. (Pearse 1884: 101)
- (28) 'Twas **nawtheng** thai cud do about et. (James 1979: 34)
- (29) 'Twas **books** 'e was so mazed 'bout. (Bartlett 1970: 60)
- (30) It is not **until dark** that the place becomes crowded. (Lee 1911: 17)

Subjects and adjuncts are the constituents that are most commonly clefted in Cornish English, which may be due to the fact that these constituents do not generally carry intonational prominence in initial position in ordinary declaratives – unless they receive a special sentence stress –, so they can only receive thematic and additional discourse salience through the clefting strategy.

Our analysis of focusing devices in Cornish English shows a total of 145 examples of strong fronting and 49 examples of *it*-clefts in a corpus of 134,209 words, which equates to a proportion of 1.08 and 0.36 instances of strong fronting and *it*-clefts per 1,000 words respectively. These values are not very high when compared with other Celtic English varieties such as Welsh English (Williams 1998) and Irish English (Filppula 1999). However, fronting in Cornish English shows a considerably higher frequency when compared with Welsh English (Roller 2016), British English (Filppula 1986) or Hebridean English (Filppula 1999):

Variety	Frequency of fronting/1,000
Welsh English	16.74 (Williams 1998)
Irish English	1.25 (Filppula 1999)
Cornish English	1.08
Welsh English	0.45 (Roller 2016)
Standard British English	0.40 (Filppula 1986)
Hebridean English	0.10 (Filppula 1999)

Table 2. Frequency of use of fronting

The number of ‘it’-clefts does not appear to be important, given the existence of higher figures in similar studies for other Celtic Englishes:

Variety	Frequency of clefting/1,000
Irish English	2.13 (Filppula 1999)
Standard British English	0.70 (Filppula 1986)
Welsh English	0.58 (Roller 2016)

Standard British English	0.57 (Collins 1991)
Standard British English	0.43 (Collins 1991)
Cornish English	0.36
Standard British English	0.30 (Patten 2012)
Standard British English	0.24 (Hasselgard 2014)

Table 3: Frequency of use of clefting

While these frequencies may not be strictly comparable, as these studies may not have examined the same type of text or included the same range of constructions in their analysis⁵, the figures obtained in Cornish English, especially in terms of fronting, appear to be significant enough to assume a greater similarity to the other Celtic Englishes than to Standard English.

6. A possible source for Cornish English fronting and the Celtic hypothesis

⁵ For example, Roller (2016) analyses *it*-clefts and pseudo-clefts together and uses the Radio Welsh Corpus.

A possible influence of the Celtic languages on the development of certain morphosyntactic properties in early English, known as the Celtic hypothesis, has been considered during the last decades (Filppula et al. 2008; Ahlqvist 2010; Hickey 2012; among others). More specifically, authors such as Filppula (1986 & 1999) and Ahlqvist (2002) attribute the more substantial presence of fronting and clefting in Celtic Englishes than in other varieties of English to the influence of the Celtic languages.

Like these studies, this paper also seems to suggest a possible influence of the Cornish language on Cornish English, considering the very high proportion of fronting (Table 2) in comparison with Standard English.⁶ This influence, however, does not appear to be supported by the use that the Cornish English dialect makes of clefting (Table 3). This difference could indeed relate to the use of focusing devices in Celtic languages. Cornish⁷

⁶ The opposite direction of transfer could also be considered given that fronting was common in Old English and not infrequent in Middle English until the loss of the V2 property (Denison 1993).

⁷ I would like to express my gratitude, on the one hand, to Paul Phillips and Alan M. Kent, and, on the other hand, to Ken George, Daniel Prohaska, and Janice Lobb for their invaluable help with Cornish English and Cornish respectively. Of course, any errors are entirely my own responsibility.

and the other Celtic languages use fronting or a cleft-like construction to front a topicalized or focalized nominal constituent (31a', b', c', and d'):

(31) a. *Irish*

Tháinig an bhean

come.PAST.3SG the woman

‘The woman came.’

a'. *Is é an bhean a thainig*

be.PRES.3SG it the woman PART come.PAST.3SG

‘It is the woman who came.’

b. *Scottish Gaelic*

Thàinig a' bhean

come.PAST.3SG the.woman

‘The woman came.’

b'. *‘S e a' bhean a thàinig*

be.PRES.3SG it the.woman PART come.PAST.3SG

‘The woman came.’ / ‘It is the woman who came.’

c. *Welsh*

Daeth y fenyw

come.PAST.3SG the woman

‘The woman came.’

c'. *Y fenyw a ddaedh*

the woman PART come.PAST.3SG

‘It is the woman who came.’

d. *Cornish*

Y teuth an venyn

AFF come.PAST.3SG the woman

‘The woman came.’⁸

d'. *An venyn a dheuth*

the woman PART come.PAST.3SG

‘It is the woman who came.’

As these examples show that, while in Irish and Scottish Gaelic the copula heads a cleft-like construction, in Welsh and Cornish there is no copula, and the sentence always starts directly with the fronted item. The copula that

⁸ The main verb in Middle Cornish generally occurs after a particle *y* preceding all other obligatory nominal constituents when there is a highlighted clause-initial element (e.g. *De y teuth an venyn Cornish* ‘Yesterday the woman came.’).

originally preceded the highlighted element disappeared very early in Welsh (Watkins 1993) and, similarly, it gradually dropped out of use in Cornish, hence the cleft-like construction in these two languages resembles fronting,⁹ as only the presence of the relative particle in these constructions reveals their cleft-like structure.

This difference in the formation of cleft-like constructions in Celtic languages could therefore be linked to the predilection of the corresponding Celtic Englishes for the use of either fronting or clefting. Thus, while Welsh English has the highest frequency of fronting (Williams 1998), Irish English shows the highest incidence of clefting (Filppula 1999), which might be related to the absence or presence of copula in Welsh and Irish cleft-like constructions respectively. Likewise, both Shuken (1984) and Filppula et al. (2008) claim that clefting abounds in Highland and Island English and consider this grammatical feature to be a reflection of Gaelic influence.¹⁰ Finally, Cornish English has a strong preference for fronting, which parallels the situation found in Cornish. The similarity between the Celtic languages and the corresponding varieties of Celtic English is interesting, since, depending on whether the Celtic language in question employed a

⁹ As evidenced by (21), it seems that, actually, the copula never disappeared in Cornish.

¹⁰ Broderick (1997) states that Manx English commonly uses clefting for expressing emphasis and attributes this preference to the influence of Manx Gaelic.

copula or not, the corresponding variety of Celtic English makes a wider use of either fronting or clefting.

Further evidence for the influence of Cornish on Cornish English comes from a comparison between Standard English, on the one hand, and Cornish English and Cornish, on the other, in terms of the discourse-pragmatic properties of strong fronting and *it*-clefts. Fronting core elements such as objects or complements is relatively rare in Standard English and typically involves demonstrative pronouns or complement clauses (Biber et al. 1999: 900-9), which serve a discourse-connective function, or to emphasize or contrast a clausal element (Prince 1981; Birner & Ward 1998; Gregory & Michaelis 2001). Unlike Standard English, object fronting in Cornish English can also involve noun phrases and expresses both a contrastive focus (32) and a presentational focus (33):

(32) *Me an' Joe'unted 'igh an' low th' nex' day for Uncle 'Lias's will, or 'is money [...], but **not a skerrick** did us find.* (Bartlett 1970: 57)

(33) *"I 'erd my missus say Mrs James gawt new curtains," remarked Fether. Uncle Enny shook 'is 'ead. **The old skeat** she 'ad wadden much good.* (Lean 1951: 4)

In example (32), the fronted object – *not a skerrick* – expresses a contrast with what is expected to be found – *Uncle 'Lias's will or 'is money* – and, in example (33), the fronted element – *the old skeat* – is not inferable from the

context and has focal, not topical, properties, as it does not make reference to any participant in the discourse and carries a tonic stress.

Albeit rarely, Cornish English also shows examples of object fronting where the unstressed fronted element is very strongly implicit in the context, conveying the idea of reassertion, clarification or reformulation:

(34) *“I lost me haid, an’ vorgot to put th’ brakes on”. “**Good job** you did, Liza”. (Bartlett 1970: 46)*

(35) *“‘Ee nivver tawld me nawthen’”, sed Feerther clunken ‘ard.
“**Brebham close** you wuz”, sed Feerther to a sweatin’ leadin’ Oncle Paiter! (James 1979: 25)*

(36) *Squire’s lady got a passell o’ we wimmin-fo’kes to go up to village hall every Friday aivmen for to have ‘leckshers on nursin’ th’ sick.
“‘**Ome nursin’** they caaled it”. (Bartlett 1970: 11)*

In Standard English the fronting of complements generally occurs with an inversion between subject and verb and responds to a communicative need to establish a cohesive link with the preceding context, ending the sentence with the introduction of new information (Biber et al. 1999: 902-3). By contrast, in Cornish English the fronted complement does not involve inversion and tends to express either a contrast or new information:

(37) *Old as th' 'ills they must be, but still **as true as ever** they was.*

(Bartlett 1970: 11)

(38) *I could zee right away she was a diff'rent kiddie o' vish to 't'other one! **Tall wumman**, she was.* (Bartlett 1970: 71)

In (37) the comparative constituent *as true as ever* establishes a contrast with the previous *old as th' 'ills* and in (38) the NP *tall wumman* provides new information.¹¹

Finally, unlike Standard English, Cornish English also tends to front a verb phrase or a whole clause. These elements generally express a contrast with the preceding discourse or provide information that is pragmatically salient:

(39) *Only lived two days 'e did.* (Bartlett 1970: 52)

(40) *How senever she give me six pence she did.* (Lean 1951: 4)

¹¹ Fronting in Standard English can occasionally involve the placement of new information. This occurs when the focusing device has an intensifying effect, which is illustrated by the presence of some emphatic words and the use of exclamation marks (Biber et al. 1999: 904).

The fact that, in Cornish English, the element representing the new information tends to occupy the first position in the clause appears to be reminiscent of Cornish information structure. Although Celtic languages have been traditionally considered to be, at least at some point in their evolution, typologically verb-subject-object (VSO) languages (Tallerman 1998; Borsley & Roberts 2005; Russell 2013), some of them, namely Cornish and Breton, rarely exhibit that pattern, especially in main clauses – embedded clauses are more conservative, mainly due to changes in word order brought about by focalization and topicalization, which are particularly prevalent in Celtic.¹²

Cornish, for example, even appears to have developed a general constraint against sentence-initial finite main verbs in main clauses, reserving the preverbal position for any clausal constituent expressing contrast or conveying new information.¹³ Given that the information provided by a contrastive focus and a completive focus is important to the hearer, it would perhaps be more accurate to use the term "newsworthy" (Mithun 1992) to characterize the preverbal element in Cornish. This rule can be observed in copular identificational sentences, in which the copula serves to link two constituents, each referring to the same entity:

¹² George (p.c.) states that very possibly by the time of later Middle Cornish the SVO pattern was dominant, especially in main clauses, probably influenced by English.

¹³ See footnote 8.

(41) a. *Pyth* *yw* *Jori?* (Welsh)

what be.PRES.3SG George

‘What is George?’

b. *Dyskador* *yw* *Jori*

teacher be.PRES.3SG George

‘George is a teacher.’ (lit. ‘Teacher is George.’) (George,
p.c.)

The Cornish speaker seems to have no choice regarding the use of a different word order, as, in a response to a content question like (41a), this language tends to place the element referring to new information – *dyskador* ‘teacher’ –, which is generally considered newsworthy, in clause-initial position, and any other word order would not just be pragmatically awkward but syntactically incorrect.

Nowadays, it would be very unlikely to find a word order pattern like that illustrated by the response to the question in (41) in Cornish English:

(42) a. *Wass George then?*

b. *George es a teacher*

However, in the past, Cornish English also appears to have had a tendency to place the element corresponding to new information in response to a

content question initially. Thus, an answer such as *A teacher George es* would be reminiscent of the way that Cornish English was formerly spoken.

In summary, both Standard English and Cornish English make use of clefting and fronting, but the pragmatic triggers in each language are different. Thus, unlike Standard English, in Cornish and Cornish English, the element conveying newsworthy information tends to occupy the more prominent clause-initial position.¹⁴ This might imply that, while fronting in Standard English is strictly used to topicalize or emphasize a specific constituent, or to express contrast, in Cornish and Cornish English, fronting – a frequently employed device – is an epiphenomenon brought about by a rule whereby what is presented as new, or being of special interest by the speaker, must be readily put in clause-initial position. This similarity between Cornish and Cornish English appears also to support the influence of the Celtic substratum.

Standard English and Cornish English also differ in terms of the discourse-pragmatic properties of *it*-clefts. Thus, while in Standard English *it*-clefts are typically contrastive (Biber et al. 1999: 959-62), this focusing device serves to express emphasis, exhaustive identification, or contrast in Cornish English:

¹⁴ In English this word order would also be possible, but it would not represent the unmarked situation (Biber et al. 1999: 896-9).

- (43) *'Twas **on such an occaishun as thes** that my oonly brawther,
Mathey, maide the biggest misttaike o' es life.* (James 1997: 18)
- (44) *I reckon 'twas **Faather** who got things movin' in th' end.* (Bartlett 1970: 41)
- (45) *But 'twas **that theer Maggie Will-Naw** 'oo venshully tawld Oncle
Paiter wat to do!* (James 1997: 39)

Owing to the fact that strong fronting can also serve to express contrast, in Cornish English the two focusing devices appear to be functionally equivalent, perhaps owing to the common origin of the two constructions.

An interesting finding coming from an individual analysis of the frequencies of fronting and clefting for each author is also worthy of note, showing that their use does not manifest itself in the same way in all Cornish English writers. The authors who make a wider use of strong fronting, and even *it*-clefts, in their prose were born in West Cornwall, like Lean for example, or spent a large part of their lives there, such as Bartlett. It is therefore conceivable that the frequent use of focusing devices could be due to a Celtic heritage that is felt very strongly in an area that was historically the

closest to Cornish-speaking Cornwall.¹⁵ We should also highlight the fact that neither fronting nor clefting appears to be frequent in the earliest texts, as only the stories written by more recent authors, such as Lean (1951), Bartlett (1970) and James (1971), show a particularly high frequency in the use of both focusing devices. This appears to coincide with the heyday of the Cornish language revival movement, which was especially noticeable in the middle of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, the scarce information we have on the sociolinguistic history of Cornish English speakers (e.g. number of speakers, the degree of bilingualism, etc.), which is considered to determine the direction and amount of language transfer (Thomasson & Kaufmann 1988), hinders the examination of the principles of contact-induced change and the processes behind the language shift in Cornish English. On the one hand, the term substratum influence appears to be fully applicable to this context – as it also seems to be with regard to Welsh English (Paulasto 2006) and Hiberno English (Filppula 1990) –, as it concerns the influence of the ancient Celtic language on the variety of English that was gradually acquired in the region.

¹⁵ The challenge, however, is how to account for the fact that other authors from West Cornwall such as James, Forfar or Bottrell do not usually make use of fronting. Given the lack of information on the knowledge that the different writers had of the Cornish language, the most logical explanation would be to assume that they had a high social status and had received a formal education, so their writing style is more anglicized.

The high frequency of focusing devices, and the *do*-periphrasis or the presence of a fair number of Cornish words in the dialect (Wakelin 1975; Phillips 1993; Stalmaszczyk 1997), could well illustrate this influence. On the other hand, Cornish English shows some features originating from Southwest England, such as the rhotic accent, the archaic pronominal forms, the anomalous use of cases, or the use of masculine pronouns with inanimate referents that can also be considered typical examples of superstratum influence. The question of which type of transfer is more significant in the development of Cornish English is of considerable interest, but deciphering the precise source of influence is not a straightforward matter; the language shift in this region was far from a uniform process, since the western part of Cornwall had become historically less strongly anglicised, giving more cause for a Cornish substratum and less for an English superstratum to arise, the opposite situation taking place in the eastern part of the region.

Likewise, it is also difficult to gauge the prevalent type of language transfer in Van Coetsem (2000)'s more linguistic view, namely borrowing under RL agentivity or imposition under SL agentivity, owing to the long coexistence of the two languages in the region, which enabled them to intermingle to such an extent that they may have influenced each other. The language shift whereby Cornish speakers gradually lost the ability to speak their ancestral language and became linguistically dominant in a language they acquired later means that the same agents employed both kinds of agentivity and,

hence, different change mechanisms, in the same contact situation. Despite this, while our analysis has shown a wider use of fronting in Cornish English in recent times, possibly coinciding with the Cornish-Celtic revival, we should probably not assume that this interference is an instance of borrowing, taking into account the fact that the agents of change have a greater knowledge of the RL, English, than of the SL, Cornish. Rather, although it is true that the Cornish language is again being revived, and this revival has brought with it a strengthening of the Cornish identity,¹⁶ it seems more plausible that the historical situation, which reflects a shift from Cornish to English, could have led to syntactic substrate effects. Thus, an assumption that a frequent use of fronting has been present in Cornish English for a much longer period would reverse the correspondence between agentivity and linguistic dominance and, consequently, the direction of change, leading to an instance of imposition, which underlies the substrate hypothesis.

7. Conclusion

¹⁶ Around a third of the population of Cornwall identifies with being Cornish rather than English or British (Husk & Williams 2012: 257).

The evidence for the influence of Cornish substratum appears to be persuasive enough and is paralleled by similar transfer effects in several other Celtic-influenced varieties. Firstly, Cornish English, like Celtic languages and other Celtic Englishes, and unlike Standard English, appears to make a wider use of word order shifts or special syntactic devices than of prosodic means to highlight a particular clausal constituent. Furthermore, the use of fronting in the Cornish English dialect is so active and versatile that it emulates the corresponding usage in Cornish, where any clausal constituent could occur in preverbal position, and its use is triggered by a different pragmatic motivation, that is to say, placing newsworthy information in a clause-initial position, which is, indeed, a common practice in Cornish.

The substratal influence on Celtic Englishes is further enhanced by the presumed relationship between the presence or absence of copula in the focusing devices used by the different Celtic languages and a more predominant use of clefting or fronting in their corresponding Celtic English. Thus, while the reason why fronting, rather than clefting, is the principal means of expressing prominence in Cornish English is not clear, a plausible explanation could be found in the structure of the Cornish cleft constructions, which gradually lost the copula.

Finally, the presence of fronting – and even clefting – appears to be common in writers related to West Cornwall, a region with a historically

stronger attachment to the Celtic heritage that still displays relatively high levels of a Cornish identity and could somehow be influenced by the Cornish language revival that took place from the mid-20th century onwards.

Despite all this evidence, the question of the origin of fronting is particularly intriguing because the distinction between a substratal versus a superstratal origin is far from being clear. While the existence of parallel findings in other Celtic-influenced English varieties appears to support the substrate hypothesis, tracing the source of fronting is particularly complex and perhaps necessarily rather speculative, and its frequent presence may be explained by multiple causes, as the placement of constituents in clause-initial position is widely used among other world languages. Consequently, it is obvious that more evidence is needed for us to ascertain the exact source, and even the direction and degree, of this influence of each variety of Celtic English. The major significance of this study comes from the fact that, to my knowledge, no other study of this kind has ever been carried out on the Cornish English dialect, and its findings could therefore have a certain relevance to the issue of the Celtic influence on some varieties of English, in particular to the use of fronting.

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@ @INSERT APPENDIX 1 @ @

Appendix 2: Corpus

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