One Very Slow Change: the decline of relative clause extraposition

This study describes a change in which relative clause extraposition is in the process of being lost in English, Icelandic, French, and Portuguese. This current change in progress has never been observed before, probably because it is so slow that it is undetectable without the aid of multiple diachronic parsed corpora (treebanks) with time-depths of over 500 years each. This new type of tool, allowing the advent of a field of comparative quantitative diachronic syntax, is helping make "the best use of bad data" (Labov 1994: 11) by helping us to observe patterns in language change that were unobservable just a few years ago. The study also shows that the unusually slow speed of the change is due to partial specialization of the construction along the dimension of prosodic weight, another kind of usage data extracted from parsed corpora. Additionally, building on insights from Kiparsky (1995), this change may date as far back as the innovation of Proto-Germanic and Proto-Romance relative clauses, when these varieties differentiated from Proto-Indo-European. The change is also shown to have important consequences for the syntax of extraposition, potentially supporting the adjunction analysis of Culicover and Rochemont (1990), and Sauerland’s (2003) two-structure analysis of relatives. However, these last two points are speculative, and begin to show where the data runs out. My talk will not gloss over this fact, but will rather try to show exactly which predictions can be tested by these new and powerful ways of manipulating the bad data of the historical record, and which hypotheses in language change are just a little beyond the current state of our experimental tools.