ALBEIT A CONJUNCTION, YET IT IS A CLAUSE: A COUNTER-EXAMPLE TO UNIDIRECTIONALITY HYPOTHESIS?[1]

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1. Introduction

In this paper I discuss the expression *al be it* in the context of grammaticalization, as presented most fully in the book by Hopper – Traugott (1993). I will claim that this phrase, which arose in English in the 14th century, had its heyday in late Middle English and early Modern English when it was grammaticalized down the clause-to-conjunction cline, was later becoming more and more obsolescent to end up in the late 20th century as a more and more frequently used marker of concessivity, or better contradiction, albeit in a limited syntactic context. Modern data seem to suggest that the conventional spelling of *albeit* together only disguises its genuine character of a clausal phrase.

The origin of the idiom is usually attributed to the calque from the Old French expression *tout-soit-il (tut seit-il)* used in the same function (cf. Mustanoja 1968: 317, 468 or *OED* s.v.) and is first attested in the 14th century (*Cursor Mundi*, Chaucer, Gower):

(1)   *Al be it þai be theues all, þat þai war breþer elleuen*
        þat ham, þai neuend me þe yongeist nam

        (*Cursor Mundi 4978* a. 1340)[2]

[2] Interestingly in Morris's parallel edition of four manuscripts, for *Al be it* in Cotton and Fairfax we find *All-þou* and *Alþouʒe* in Göttingen and Trinity, respectively and there is a similar alternation with another instance of *al be it* in *Cursor Mundi* attested by Visser (1963-1973: §905).

However, there are some earlier native instances of the adverb *all*, which appears to have been grammaticalized as a conjunction introducing clauses of concession with inverted word order and the subjunctive copula, e.g.

(2)   *al were he ifulled of ðe [holi] goste 7 al were he þuruh*
        miracle of barain iboren ... ʒet ne dorste he wunien among men.
                                            (*Ancrene Riwle 70/10* 1225)

(3)   *Ne telle þu nawt eðelich, al beo þu meiden, to widewen ne to iweddede.*
                                    (*Hali Meidenhad 39/653* c. 1230)

The close relationship between concessivity and universal quantification was noticed by König (1985: 10) to be present in many languages and "a component which is also used as universal quantifier" is considered to have been one of the major sources for the development of concessive connectives (cf. English *for all*, *although*, *all the same*, *however*, French *toutefois*, *tout ... que*, Russian *vsë taki*, Polish *mimo wszystko*, *wszelako*, *wszakże*; König lists other examples, also from non-Indo-European languages such as Hungarian or Chinese). Also Mustanoja (1960: 316) and Visser (1963-1973: §883) point to the intensifying function of *all* in Middle English, which was easily combined with other connectives and yielded *if all*, *though all*, *although* (cf. also *also*, *already*, *always*, *algate(s)* etc., where *all* was further delexicalized as a mere prefix; thus *all* went down the adverb > conjunction > prefix cline). Tracing the origin of concessive conjunctions in Romance languages, Harris (1988: 80-83) notes the use of French adverbs such as *tout*, *bien* in this function. In his opinion "a situation depicted as being entirely at one end is clearly made to be used concessively, provided that the end specified is that least readily compatible with the main clause, which is nevertheless represented as true. We find for instance *tut seit-il mort* (literally 'entirely be he dead') in the sense 'though he is dead' ... English 'albeit' clearly has a similar origin."

2. *Al be it* in Middle English

In Chaucer's English *al-be-it* becomes very common, yet its syntactic status is unclear. It is difficult to determine whether we should treat it as a petrified expression equivalent to a conjunction or whether it is still a clausal phrase. In all the corpus of Chaucer's prose (cf. Molencki in press), out of 54 instances of *al be it* only four are spelt together (all of them in Book V of *Boece*), thus supporting the conjunction analysis (though, as we know, medieval spelling cannot be fully diagnostic in such cases), e. g.

(4)   *Also ymaginacioun, albeit so that it takith the bygynnynges*
        to seen and to formen the figures ...   (*Boece V p. 4, 205*)

Yet the other manuscripts which I have consulted have the separate spelling:

(4) a. *al be it so þat it taketh ...*

It is not until the early Modern English period that the word/phrase is consistently spelt together, e.g. Marlowe's (late 16th century)

(5)   *Albeit the world thinke Machevill is dead,*
        Yet was his soule but flowne beyond the Alpes
                                    (*The Jew of Malta, Prologue 1*)

Coming back to Chaucer, an argument favouring the conjunction interpretation is that out of 64 instances of the *al* + Verb + Pronoun sequence in the prose, in 49 we invariably find the expression *al be it so that* S (analogous to *though so be that* S/*if so be that* S commonly found in Chaucer) and in four *al be it that* S, without what Nagucka (1968: 79) calls the factive pronominal *so*, which cataphorically refers to the *that*-clause. In this case, however, *that* could also be interpreted as the optional pleonastic marker of subordination, frequently combined with other subordinators in late Middle English (*if that*, *when that*, *which that*, etc.). Except for one instance in *The Legend of Good Women*:

(6)   *Al be hit that he ne kan nat wel endite,*
        Yet hath he maked lewed folk delyte   (*F 414-415*)

it invariably appears in its weak form. But even in later texts one can find the strong form *hit*, even spelt together (*h* might have been mute anyway), e.g.

(7)   *Albehit that our enemys ... assembled nigh the same river.*
        (after *MED*)   (*Letters from War with France 71* 1418)

However, the transparency of the phrase for Chaucer's contemporaries is evidenced by several instances of a pronoun different from *it* in the frame *al* + Copula + Pronoun, e.g.

(8)   *He may nat fleen it, thogh he sholde be deed,*
        Al be she mayde, or wydwe, or elles wyf   (*CT Knight's 1170-1171*)

(9)   *al be thow fer froo thy cuntre, thou n'art put out of it.*
                                    (*Boece I p. 5,9*)

Kerkhof (1982: 49) lists several other examples from Chaucer's poetry with "the emphatic adverb <u>al</u> preceding the verbal form, which does not affect the inverted word order". Poutsma (1929: 712) discusses early Modern English conjunction *albe*, which "now quite obsolete, appears at all times to have been rare". He attests no instances in Shakespeare or the *Authorized Version* (which is confirmed by my search), but quotes one from contemporary Ben Jonson:

(10)   *Ay, but his fear Would he ne'er be mask'd,*
        allbe his vices were   (Ben Jonson *Sejanus IV.5.224*)

and another one from the romantic poet Southey (late 18th century):

(11)   *And in their hearts, albe the work was rude, It rais'd the thought of*
        all-commanding might, Combin'd with boundless love and mercy infinite.
                                                  (*Tale of Paraguay IV.XIX*)

There are several comparable examples in Chaucer's poetry, e.g.

(12)   *But, al be that he was a philosophre,*
        Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre   (*CT Prol A 297-298*)

In these sentences *al-be* appears to be a fully grammaticalized conjunction (perhaps with pleonastic *that* in (12)), as in all the examples there are other copulas in the *albe*-clause, which is not the case in other Chaucer's examples above or below with only one copula being part of the *al-be* phrase. The copula has a full range of inflectional forms, e.g. the plural *been*:

(13)   *al been they grevouse synne, I gesse that they ne been nat deedly.*
                                                  (*CT Parson's 449*)

On the other hand, the lack of plural agreement in examples like:

(14)   *This is to seyn, she may nat now han bothe*
        Al be ye never so jalouse ne so wrothe   (*CT Knight's 1839-1840*)
(15)   *and whom it wol do boote*
        Al be his woundes never so depe and wyde   (*CT Squire's 154-155*)

may be an indication of the fact that the grammaticalization of *al be* was well under way, though Chaucer is known to have used *-n* variably. The preterite subjunctive *were* is not uncommon, either:

(16)   *Al weere it so that a riche coveytous man hadde a ryver or*
        a gotter fletynge al of gold, yit sholde it nevere staunchen his covetise.
                                                  (*Boece III m.3,1*)

(17)   *with swich vigour and strengthe that ne myghte nat ben*
        emptid al were it so that sche was ful of so greet age.
                (Boece I p.1,9, which renders Latin *quamuis ita aeui plena foret*)

For (17) in another manuscript we find

(17) a. *alle were it so that ...*

Other manuscripts also have occasional instances of *alle* for the reduced *al*, which would support the clausal interpretation, as one of the features of grammaticalized items is their phonetic reduction. This would, however, presuppose original *alle*, which is found in none of the early manuscripts. In the examples with *al were it* tense agreement appears to be obligatory – whereas any Middle English tense may occur after *al be it (so) that*, only the preterite is used in the clause that follows *al were it so that*, even with present reference. Thus *were* appears to be the main verb for the following clause and the expression *al were it* is a clause:

(18)   *al were it so that she right now were deed, ye ne oughte nat,*
        as for hir deeth, yourself to distroye.   (*CT Melibee 982*)

Interestingly, we even find one instance of the indicative past *was* in *The House of Fame*:

(19)   *Al was the tymber of no strengthe,*
        Yet hit is founded to endure   (*House of Fame 1980-1981*)

Visser (1963-1973: §883) says that *al* is "almost exclusively combined with *be* and *were*". But in Gower we find a form with procliticized negation:

(20)   *Such a loss he cawhte, al nere it worth a stre.*
                                                  (*Confessio Amantis 5,997*)

The copula is also found as an auxiliary in passive clauses as in (2) or:

(21)   *al be he sodeynly caught with drynke, it is no deedly synne but venyal.*
                                                  (*CT Parson's 822*)

(22)   *I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,*
        Al were it yeven of the povereste page
        Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
        Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne
                                                  (*CT Pardoner's Prologue 448-451*)

In Chaucer's prose corpus there is only one instance of a verb different from the copula, viz. *do*, which, however is a special verb even as early as Middle English:

(23)   *Thanne cometh scornynge of hys neighebor, al do he never so weel*
                                                  (*CT Parson's 510*)

In the poetry *have* appears in this structure both as a lexical verb:

(24)   *I holde hym riche, al hadde he nat a sherte*
                                                  (*CT Wife of Bath's 1186*)

and as an auxiliary:

(25)   *Al hadde man seyn a thyng with bothe his yen,*
      Yit shul we wommen visage it hardily   (*CT Merchant's 2272-2273*)

There are occasional instances of modal verbs used in this syntactic frame, as can be seen in (22) and

(26)   *For thefte and riot, they been convertible,*
      Al konne he pleye on gyterne or ribible   (*CT Cook's 4395-4396*)
(27)   *They wolde hym folowe, al wolde he fle.*   (*Romaunt of Rose 6268*)

OED and Visser (1963-1973: §883) attest the fully lexical verb *speke* in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*:

(28)   *He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan*
      Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
      Al speke he never so rudeliche and large   (*CT GP 732-734*)

MED adds to this list two examples with *al telle I noght* (*Knight's Tale 2264*) and *al bledde I not a drope of blod* (*Romaunt of Rose 1754*). In *The Legend of Good Women* I also found verbs like *founde, made* and *swere*, which shows that the pattern was quite productive, e.g.

(29)   *And evere shal, til that myn herte dye*
      Al swere I nat, of this I wol not lye   (*LGW 57-58*)
(30)   *This was his wit, al made he to Jasoun*
      Gret chere of love and of affeccioun   (*LGW 1420-1421*)

As can be expected in concessive clauses, mostly personal pronouns are found in the frame *al* + Verb + NP, with few exceptions, as in (15), (19), (22), (25) or

(31)   *If in the hondes of som wrecche I falle,*
      I nam but lost, al be myn herte trewe   (*Troilus & Criseyde V, 705-706*)

Discussing the origin of *albeit*, *OED* (in the entry for *all*) states that "*all be it (that)*, in full *all though it be that*" is "only a particular instance of *all* with a verb in the subjunctive, in which the conjunctive phrase becomes a *quasi*-word" and that with the subjunctive mood "*though* or *if* being expressed by the reversed position of vb. and subject (as in *be they = if they be*) were omitted, leaving *all* apparently = *although*. Thus *al be I = although I be*". Such an interpretation is supported by the presence in Chaucer's corpus of the examples such as

(32)   *yit hath the moment som porcioun of it, although it litel be.*
                         (*Boece II p. 7,100*)[3]

Thus, in the 14th century *al* was losing its original meaning of an intensifying adverb and started sliding down the grammaticalization cline to become a prefix attached to the following copula. Its use, however, appears to have been optional, because the concessive relation could also be indicated by the inversion itself, as in earlier English (cf. Kerkhof 1982: 48-49):

(33)   *Thow most tellen it platly, be it never so foul ne so horrible.*
                                (*CT Parson's 1023*)

Compare (32) with the following two sentences, where there appears to be a free variation:

(34)   *It is ful perilous, al be it never so lite.*   (*CT Parson's 294*)
(35)   *thynkynge that oure Lord Jhesu Crist quiteth*
      every good dede, be it never so lite.   (*CT Parson's 688*)

Nevertheless, it appears that Chaucer's English was still the intermediate stage of the process by virtue of which the clausal expression *al be it* became a conjunction. In later English, however, its use was becoming more and more limited. In all Shakespeare's corpus the concordance program search has provided me with merely 14 occurrences of *albeit*, invariably spelt together and replaceable by *(al)though*, which proves that it had become a fully grammaticalized conjunction, e.g.

(36)   *Who are you? tell me for certainty,*
      Albeit Ile sweare that I doe know your tongue
                         (*Merchant of Venice II,vi.27*)
(37)   *I haue as much of my father in mee, as you, albeit I confesse*
      your comming before me is neerer to his reuerence
                         (*As You Like It I,i,41*)

Visser quotes some instances of *albeit it be*-clauses, which are evidence of full grammaticalization:

(38)   *albeit it be dayly vsit ... it sufferis na iniures.*
                (Kennedy *Litel Tracteit 129,2* (ed. Kuipers) c. 1560)

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[3] In different editions of Shakespeare we find variant versions, e.g. for

   Albeit I make a hazard for my head   (*Henry IV. Part One I,iii,128*)

in Wells and Taylor's (1986) original spelling edition we find

   Although it be with hazard for my head

If the late Middle English or early Modern English pronunciation of *albeit* were available to us, we could be even more certain that the phrase was grammaticalized, as often the phonetic reduction may be one of the manifestations of the process. But this is an obvious limitation of any historical study of the language. However, some instances of the idiom from the late 15th century (*alle bette, albut, all bote*) quoted by *MED* show that the *be-it* part had merged and the vowel had an undetermined value, most likely /ə/. There might also have occurred contamination with *but*, e.g.

(39) *He had gret fere, Albut þaw hit nere no nede.*   (*St. Editha 2124* 1460)
(40) *Bod alle bette þaw he had ben quene ... mekeliche he wolde*
       abyde in þe quere at euery tyde.   (*St. Ethelreda 285* a. 1450)

Very interesting here is the combination of the two concessives *albut* and *þaw(=though)*.

To sum up, in early Middle English concessive *al* appeared in various constructions:

Pattern One   *al* + V + NP

with various verbs, including *be*. The most common noun phrase is the pronoun *(h)it*. In the mid-14th century one can find the first instances of

Pattern Two   *al be it (so) (that)* + S

i.e. the clause *al be it* is followed by another full clause. Towards the end of the fourteenth century a complex reanalysis appears to have occurred. The clause *al be it* is reinterpreted as a conjunction introducing the concessive clause

Pattern Three   *albeit* S

All the three patterns coexist in Chaucer's English, but Pattern One is recessive and becomes obsolete by the end of the Middle English period.

3. Howbeit

Dictionaries also attest a synonymous form *how-be-it* such as in Shakespeare's

(41) *So doe the Kings of France vnto this day,*
       Howbeit they would hold vp this Salique Law
       To barre your Highnesse clayming from the Female   (*Henry V I,ii.91*)

How in many languages appears to have been another source for concessive connectives (English *however*, Dutch *hoewel*, French *combien que*, Polish *jakkolwiek*, etc.). *OED* (s.v.) and Mustanoja (1960: 429) quote some instances of *how-be-it* from the Middle English period:

(42) *How be it that this dyuyne essence ... maye not be perfyghtly knowen ...*
       yet there is not any mortall persone but that he woll confesse there is a
       god.   (Trevisa *Barth. De P. R.* 1398)[4]

In Chaucer's prose there are no instances of *how-be-it*, but there are a few examples of *how (so) that*. Kerkhof (1982: 458) quotes an instance of *how so it be that* (= *although it be, al be it*) from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*:

(43) *How so it be that som men hem delite*
       With subtyl art hire tales for to endite,
       Yet for al that, in hire entencioun,
       Hire tale is for som conclusioun   (*T&C II, 256-259*)

Some dictionaries list the form *how were it*, but no clear examples of the idiom equivalent to *al be/were it* are given. I have not come across it used as conjunction either in the Helsinki corpus or *OED*. Thus, parallel with *al-be-it*, *how-be-it* seems to have undergone the same process from the clause (with the meanings of all its elements fully preserved) down to the conjunction status. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, however, there is an example of *howbeit* followed by *that*, which is either a late reflex of the pleonastic subordinating *that*, characteristic of late Middle English or, as the original punctuation seems to suggest, a complementizer following the clause *how-be-it*, similarly to Chaucer's *al be it that*, as in (4a).[5] On the other hand, the elision *be it > be 't* is the evidence to the contrary (cf. (39) and (40)).

(44) *The Moore, howbe 't that I indure him not,*
       Is of a constant, louing, noble nature.   (*Othello II, i. 297*)

The idiom seems to have been favoured by the translators of the King James Bible, where we find as many as 93 instances of *howbeit* and only nine of *albeit*. The last occurrence of the conjunction *howbeit* is dated by the *OED* for 1634 (the adverb is recorded last in Ruskin's writings from 1887):

(45) *I ... would fain have access and presence to the King ...*
       euen howbeit I should break up iron doors.   (Rutherford *Letters I,110*)

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[4] *OED* also records the adverbial function of *howbeit* equivalent to *however it may be*, as in

  How be hyt I wyl not fayle you   (Malory *Morte d'Arthur x.i* 1470-1485)

[5] Another argument for treating *how-be-it* as a clause is an instance of the idiom that I came across in the *Paston Letters*, where the pronoun is used in its strong form *hit* without the phonetic reduction:

  Syr, hit nedith not, I trow, to send yow the tidyngys of these partyes, how be hit
  I have thryes send yow such as here were in entent that ye shuld send us yowrys
                            (*Letters 775/7* 1477)

but the spelling may be misleading – *h* may well have been mute, as in (6) and (7).

but Poutsma (1929: 712) records a much later example from Walter Scott:

(46) *Our good father Eustace says that, howbeit we may not do well to receive*
      all idle tales of goblins and spectres, yet there is warrant from holy
      Scripture to believe, that the fiends haunt wastes and solitary places.
                                                        (*Monastery XX/231*)

which, however, may have been a deliberate archaism.

4. *Albeit* in Modern English

As for *albeit*, its usage seems to have declined in the 17th, 18th and 19th
centuries. Noah Webster (1828 [1970]: s.v.) qualifies it as "now antiquated",
but, what is interesting, in his definition makes a reference to its discourse
function by saying that *albeit* is "equivalent to *admit* or *grant it all*". The
searcher program has provided me with no examples of the item in the selected
corpora of such authors as Milton, Dryden, Congreve, Defoe, Austen, Burke,
Mary Shelley, Darwin, Melville, Woolf, Scott Fitzgerald and Faulkner. Nev-
ertheless, we find occasional instances of this obsolescent word in Victorian
writers, e.g.

(47) *Albeit she was angry with Pen, against her mother she had no such*
      feeling.   (Thackeray *Pendennis I, Ch. XXI, 215*)
(48) *Maisey would have wept at the least encouragement, but Dick's indif-*
      ference, albeit his hand was shaking as he picked up the pistol, restrained
      her.   (Kipling *The Light that Failed Ch. I, 9*)
                                                   (both quoted after Poutsma 1929)

In all the Victorian English examples available to me *albeit* is used as a
conjunction (in both the examples above it is replaceable by *(al)though*, I be-
lieve), except for a single occurrence of *albeit that* from Stretton's *Chequered
Life* published in 1862:

(49) *From that day to this we have never met – albeit that he has had my*
      best wishes.   (Stretton *Ch .L.I, 125* after *OED*)

This is a rather too late occurrence to be interpreted as a combination of a
conjunction and a pleonastic subordinator, so the clausal analysis seems more
plausible in this case: *al be it that* S, which might have been a reflex of Middle
English Pattern Two.

In the 20th century *albeit* is becoming rare. Some short or concise English
dictionaries (especially those in the range of 40,000-50,000 entries) do not have
this entry at all, e.g. 1994 editions of Chamber's *Minidictionary, Compact Dic-
tionary, School Dictionary, Essential Dictionary*. Nor is it included in *Mini-*

Oxford Dictionary or *Little Oxford Dictionary*. The dictionaries that have *albeit*
usually give the following definition:

                    (conj.)unction *(al)though*

and sometimes qualify it with such epithets as "not colloquial", "formal" (e.g.
Hornby's *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* or dictionaries
published by Collins, Cassell, Harrap, Longman or Webster). Quirk et al. (1985:
§14.12) mention *albeit* among the "archaic concessive subordinators" that "still
have a limited currency". However, as we will see below this is not the case
at all. According to the modern data the role of *albeit* as a subordinating con-
junction is marginal, whereas it is becoming a more and more common discourse
marker of contrast functioning like a sentential adverb. It is only in the *BBC
English Dictionary* (1993) and *Collins/Cobuild* (1994) (both are based on the
Birmingham Concordance) that we find a more satisfactory definition:

CONJ: You can use *albeit* to introduce a fact or comment which contrasts
            in some way with what you have just said (a formal word)

where it is still classified as a conjunction, yet its discourse function is given
most prominence.

5. *Albeit* towards the end of the 20th century

Since my intuition was telling me that there was something wrong with the
modern definitions of *albeit,* in order to determine its present status I applied
a concordance program first to a relatively small corpus of modern English
texts of c. 8,000,000 words and then to a much larger one of more than
155,000,000 words. The data that I found were most revealing. The smaller
corpus included some issues of *Time Magazine,* extracts from the British *Times*
of 1992, lectures about road-building, a leaflet on AIDS and a short story *Small
is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher. The data from *Time* are particularly interesting,
as they show that contrary to expectations the usage of *albeit* has been gradually
increasing in recent times. In the five decades between 1920-1970 there were
barely 10 occurrences of the word. In 1989 there are as many as 12, in 1990
–17 and in the first six months of 1991 the writers used it 16 times. Curiously
enough, *albeit* does not appear even once in any of the 88 interviews scanned
(spoken register?), starting with the 1933 interview with Joseph Stalin. Unlike
the 19th century examples such as Thackeray or Kipling above, it is hardly ever
used to introduce a full concessive clause that would contain a verb, as does
(al)though, with which *albeit* is supposed to be synonymous according to most
dictionaries of Present-day English. Out of 69 occurrences (which gives the
average of one *albeit* per c.115,000 words) 17 introduce an adjective, as in

(50) *His initial speech was an eloquent, albeit quixotic, lament
       over the racist lyrics in the official state anthem.*

15 an adverb:

(51) *Saddam is hailed –albeit posthumously – as a hero of the Arab masses.*

6 a noun phrase:

(52) *But mostly it is because they couldn't accept that fellow Germans,
       albeit Communists, could create such a frightful economic mess.*

21 a prepositional phrase:

(53) *Job shedding is likely to continue, albeit at a slower rate.*

There are 8 instances of the pronominal *one*, either modified by an adjective:

(54) *for the year 2000 onwards, contemporary art will still be
       "of this century", albeit a brand new one.*

or a prepositional phrase:

(55) *She was as ferocious with her employees as a bulldog,
       albeit one with a face-lift.*

or a relative clause:

(56) *She is also an anomaly: an influential woman in a macho society,
       albeit one that claims to have eradicated sexism.*

The only example in the whole corpus that does introduce a clause has an intervening *that*. Admittedly, it represents so-called legalese, thus rather unusual English, as it comes from a judgement passed by the Queens Bench Divisional Court on June 30, 1992:

(57) *Mr Lyons submitted that the condition precedent to the justices having
       jurisdiction to order destruction of the dog under section 5(4) was not
       satisfied because the applicant had been prosecuted, albeit that it had
       been discontinued.*

Syntactically this sentence resembles the latest occurrence in *OED* for *albeit that* given under (49).

The observations from the smaller corpus are confirmed by the huge corpus of the CD-ROM editions of all the four 1993 British quality daily newspapers. Table One below presents the statistical occurrence of *albeit*:

Table One: Statistical occurrence of *albeit* in the corpus

Corpus	Number of words	Number of *albeit* occurrences	Occurrence of *albeit* per number of words
The Times	38,755,029	681	55,603
The Guardian	28,728,001	428	67,121
The Daily Telegraph	43,372,564	573	75,693
The Independent	44,557,571	633	70,391
TOTAL	155,413,165	2,315	66,672

Table Two shows the syntactic distribution of *albeit* in the corpus:

Table Two: The syntactic distribution of *albeit* in the corpus

Structure	Number of occurrences	Percentage
albeit + PP	949	40.92
albeit + Adj	489	21.09
albeit + Adv	465	20.05
albeit + NP (including the pronoun *one*)	366	5.78
albeit + *that* -S	30	1.29
albeit + S	11	0.47
albeit + *it*	8	0.35
albeit, S	1	0.04

It looks that in Present-day English *albeit* is only marginally a conjunction introducing concessive clauses and its main role is that of a marker of contrast. This function has its roots in Middle English, as occasional instances of usage similar to the modern examples above are found in Chaucer, e.g.

(58) *and by a maner thought, al be it nat clerly ne parfitely,
       ye loken from afer to thilke verray fyn of blisfulnesse.*

                                            (Boece III, p.3,4)

Yet in Chaucer's English such usage was marginal, the vast majority of the examples being found in the frame *al be it (so) (that)* –S.

The 1993 British dailies corpus also shows that *albeit that* is used not only in legalese, but is also found in the sports column:

(59) *A poorish performance by Poland in midfield, albeit that they had a 5-4
       advantage was contributory, yet England's authority could not be denied.*

It is also there (and in economy reports) that we find the item used as a conjunction equivalent to *although*:

(60) *Importantly for Scotland, their seven-match development tour of the South Sea islands began with a victory, albeit they almost let the game slip away in the dying minutes as they wilted in the heat.*

(61) *Analysts are predicting the company will return to profit this year, albeit their tax projections are for a figure of only £500,000.*

Examples like (59)-(61), however, are exceptional and, I believe, are fossilized instances of the earlier usage. As is well-known, language change does not come about abruptly and there always is a transitional period when one can find instances of earlier forms and functions which are used parallel with the innovations. It appears that in Present-day English the predominant function of *albeit* is not that of a conjunction, but it is first of all found as a marker of contrast. It functions as a comment referring to a preceding sentence element and expresses surprise, regret, reservation, downplaying and the like. In not a single example in the huge corpus of the British papers is *albeit* used at the beginning of a sentence, as still was the case in the 19th century (cf. (46) here). The fact that the syntactic status of *albeit* is unclear for Modern English speakers is borne out by the following examples with the apparently redundant pronoun *it*:

(62) *But the real reason Buckingham Palace has thrown its gilded gates open (albeit it for a hefty £8 per head) is that the Prince of Wales has been lobbying hard for such a move.*

(63) *Yet she had lived long enough, albeit it in her mother's womb.*

Finally, I have been able to find an instance of *albeit* without any accompanying words, used as a discourse marker equivalent to *nevertheless*. The sentence from the *Daily Telegraph* is merely a single example in the whole huge corpus, but shows another interesting development in the career of *albeit* in English. It also supports the diachronic path adverbial phrase > sentence adverbial > discourse marker proposed by Traugott (1985). *Albeit*, which may be regarded as a sentence adverb in sentences (50)-(56), has acquired a new pragmatic function of a comment to the prior discourse:

(64) *Admirably, Her Majesty has resisted the pressure on the Foreign Office, to preclude her meeting with Turkish Cypriots. Albeit, it will take place on British territory on the island.*

The vast majority of the late 20th century examples, thus, do not exclude the clausal analysis of *al-be-it*, and what is more, less than one per cent of

the instances support the conjunction interpretation. As for spoken English, I also think that modern native speakers tend to treat *albeit* more like a sort of a clausal phrase than a conjunction proper. The expression is stylistically marked, perhaps deliberately used to achieve an effect of sounding more sophisticated, somewhat archaic. Having heard several instances of *al-be-it* in both the British and American mass media, as well as from numerous native informants, I noticed that all the three elements of the phrase are distinctly pronounced as if they were three separate words, with the long vowels and pauses: [ɔːl biː ˈɪt][6] so the phonetic reduction characteristic of delexicalized elements does not seem to have taken place and one might claim that we are back in Chaucer's time, where *al* is the concessive conjunction, *be* the main verb in the subjunctive form and *it* the pronominal subject. Middle English Pattern Three appears to be recessive now and earlier Pattern Two is gaining more and more ground, though contrary to Middle English *al-be-it* is rarely followed by a full clause. Instead, we typically find NP, AdjP or AdvP.

Thus the history of *al-be-it* in English might provide a counterexample to the strong hypothesis of unidirectionality (Hopper – Traugott 1993: 126), which claims "that all grammaticalization involves shifts in specific linguistic contexts from lexical item to grammatical item, or from less to more grammatical item, and that grammaticalization clines are irreversible. Change proceeds from higher to lower, never from lower to higher on the cline". Hopper – Traugott (1993: 126), however, believe that "Extensive though the evidence of unidirectionality is, it cannot be regarded as an absolute principle. Some counterexamples do exist". *Albeit* apparently is one.

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[6] The 1992 edition of *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Third edition) gives two variant phonetic transcriptions – for *al-*, apart from more common [ɔːl], we also find [æl].

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