

## The loss of *wh*-based relative pronouns in the Southwest of England

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

### Abstract:

In Standard English, relative clauses can be introduced by two kinds of overt relative markers: *wh*-based relative pronouns and the complementizer *that*. Relative pronouns are sensitive to the [ $\pm$ human] feature of the head noun; the complementiser *that* is invariant. While prescriptive rules promote the use of relative pronouns, speakers generally prefer the use of *that* (see e.g. Romaine 1982, van Gelderen 2009). This is also corroborated by the findings of Herrmann (2005) on regional dialects of Great Britain.

The issue is not merely quantitative in nature, though. In my talk, I will focus on the distribution of these two major strategies in the Southwest of England, based on the corpus material in FRED-S (The Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects Sampler). The overall preference for the *that*-strategy over the pronoun strategy in this dataset (involving 603 relative clauses) is of a 7:3 ratio.

More importantly, however, the difference between subject and object relative clauses is not significant ( $P < 0.05$ ). This is striking inasmuch as the subject-object asymmetry (with relative pronouns used more frequently for objects than for subjects), as my corpus results show, was present already on the introduction of these pronouns in Middle English and continued to be attested in later periods as well, both in text types close to the spoken language, such as trials (see the data of Johansson 2012), as well as in more norm-oriented texts (Bacskai-Atkari 2023). This deviation suggests that while other (contemporary and historical) subsystems in English use the pronoun strategy to express a grammatical distinction, pronouns in the Southwest have lost this function and are thus no longer systematic, making them prone to eventual loss. I will show that the decline of relative pronouns in this system is facilitated by the low amount of contact with other languages/varieties (see Wagner 2020).

**Keywords:** contact; language change; Southwest of England; subject-object asymmetry; relative clause; relative pronoun

### References

- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2023. *The syntax of functional left peripheries: Clause typing in West Germanic and beyond*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Herrmann, Tanja. 2005. Relative clauses in English dialects of the British Isles. In *A comparative grammar of British English dialects 1: Agreement, gender, relative clauses*, edited by B. Kortmann, 21–124. Berlin: De Gruyter.



Universitat d'Alacant  
Universidad de Alicante



Johansson, Christine. 2012. Early Modern English: Relativization. In *English historical linguistics: An international handbook, Vol. I*, edited by A. Bergs and L. J. Brinton, 776–790. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Romaine, Suzanne. 1982. *Socio-historical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van Gelderen, Elly. 2009. Renewal in the left periphery: Economy and the complementizer layer. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 107(2): 131–195.

Susanne Wagner. 2020. English dialects in the Southwest of England. In *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* edited by B. Kortmann, K. Lunkenheimer and K. Ehret. Available online at <http://ewave-atlas.org/languages/7>, Accessed on 2023-12-11.