

The journey of the relative pronoun *who* in the North of England

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My talk focuses on the distribution of the relative markers *who*, *which* and *that* in the dialects spoken in the North of England, relying on a corpus study based on the material available in FRED-S (The Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects Sampler). I will show that the distribution points to a decline in the use of the *wh*-strategy, which took place in Late Modern English. Further, I argue that specifically the loss of the case-marked form *whom* caused the [+personal] pronoun to be primarily be associated with the subject function, causing a shift of the pronoun on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977) that differentiates the resulting grammar from Early Modern English.

In Standard English, relative clauses can be introduced by two kinds of overt relative markers: *wh*-pronouns, which are sensitive to the [\pm personal] feature of the head noun, and the invariable complementizer *that*. 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.

My corpus study likewise indicates an overall preference for the *that*-strategy over the pronoun strategy: it is of a 7:3 ratio in this dataset (involving 558 relative clauses). The issue is not merely quantitative in nature, though: when comparing subject and (direct) object relative clauses, it appears that there is a significant ($P < 0.05$) difference between the two, such that the *wh*-strategy is more likely to occur in subject relatives than in object relatives. This is striking inasmuch as the subject-object asymmetry is regularly attested the other way round (in line with the Filler-Gap-Complexity Hypothesis of Hawkins 1999), as shown also by the speech-related (Johansson 2012) and more norm-oriented (Bacskai-Atkari 2023) Early Modern English data.

However, the unexpected asymmetry arises only in the case of *who*, which in the given dialect system lacks its case-marked counterpart *whom* (unlike the Early Modern English and Standard English systems). While the form *who* is available for subjects, the Northern dialectal development in Late Modern English points to a primary association of the [+personal] pronoun with subjects and topics, in line with the animacy hierarchy. I will show that this development was facilitated by the low amount of contact with other languages/varieties (see Trousdale 2020).

References

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