

# Afrikaans relative clauses and the principles of morphological and syntactic markedness

Julia Bacskai-Atkari  
University of Konstanz  
julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-konstanz.de

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## 1 Introduction

basic pattern in Afrikaans relative clauses (Den Besten 2012: 41):

- (1) a. die man **wat** hy gesien het  
the man what he seen has  
'the man that he has seen'
- b. die boek **wat** hy gelees het  
the book what he read.PTCP has  
'the book that he has read'

relative marker *wat* can occur with either head noun – head nouns are not inflected for gender

↔ Dutch:

- (2) a. de man **die** hij heeft gezien  
the.CG man that.CG he has seen  
'the man that he has seen'
- b. het boek **dat** hij heeft gelezen  
the.N book that.N he has read.PTCP  
'the book that he has read'

observations of Den Besten (2012):

- *wat* is a complementiser
- its emergence as the generalised relativiser is somewhat surprising – a neuter form in a language that had given up grammatical gender

proposal: both of these can be drawn back to markedness constraints, which were fostered by the particular multilingual situation in the early Cape (Raidt 1991, Carstens & Raidt 2017)

## 2 The complementiser strategy

Den Besten (2012): *wat*-relatives (taking *wat* as a complementiser) not exceptional in West Germanic – in this respect, the emergence of *wat*-relatives is not surprising

similar patterns:

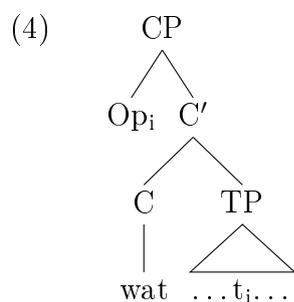
- English: *what*-relatives in e.g. the South of England (Herrmann 2005)
- German: Bavarian *was*-relatives (Weiß 2013)
- Mennonite Low German *waut*-relatives (Kaufmann 2018)
- Yiddish *vos*-relatives (Fleischer 2014)

examples:

- (3) a. the stuff **what** came from the gas corroded the cable. (Anderwald 2008)
- b. Röslen (...), **was** oben am hohlen Wege stehn  
 roses what above at.the empty road stand.3PL  
 ‘roses, which are above by the empty road’ (Weiß 2013)
- c. de Doktor **waut** min: Fuut will sehen is sehr besorgt  
 the doctor what my foot wants see.INF is very worried  
 ‘The doctor who wants to see my foot is very worried.’ (Kaufmann 2018)
- d. der bokher **vos** ikh ze  
 the boy what I see  
 ‘the boy that I see’ (Fleischer 2014)

common in all these patterns: *wat* not inflected and not sensitive to case, number, gender or personal/nonpersonal distinction

structure:



four major types of elements in West Germanic:

	<i>dem</i> -based	<i>wh</i> -based
<b>pronoun</b>	e.g. Dutch <i>die/dat</i>	e.g. English <i>who(m)/which/whose</i>
<b>complementiser</b>	e.g. English <i>that</i>	e.g. Afrikaans <i>wat</i>

two factors underlying the *wat*-pattern:

- general preference for the complementiser strategy in West Germanic – related to V2 property and doubly filled COMP patterns (in embedded interrogatives) – Bacskai-Atkari (2020b)
- availability of *wh*-elements as relative markers – typologically marked option (Comrie 2002), basic West Germanic relative strategy is demonstrative-based (Brandner & Bräuning 2013)

preference for the complementiser strategy:

- Dutch exceptional – pronoun strategy prevails, mostly also in regional dialects (see Boef 2013)
- German: preference only in (Southern) regional dialects (see Brandner & Bräuning 2013 on Bodensee Alemannic, Salzmann 2017 on Zurich German, Fleischer 2004; 2017 on Hessian, Weiß 2013 on Bavarian, cf. Kaufmann 2018 on Mennonite Low German) – no complementiser strategy in the standard variety
- English: pronoun strategy promoted by prescriptive rules – preference of complementisers in spoken language (see Romaine 1982, citing Sweet 1900; see also Montgomery & Bailey 1991, van Gelderen 2004, Tagliamonte et al. 2005 and in regional dialects of Britain Herrmann 2005); reanalysis of *that* as a complementiser in Old/Middle English (van Gelderen 2004; 2009)

→ Afrikaans *wat*-relatives coming from non-standard sociolects (Den Besten 2012) conform to this tendency

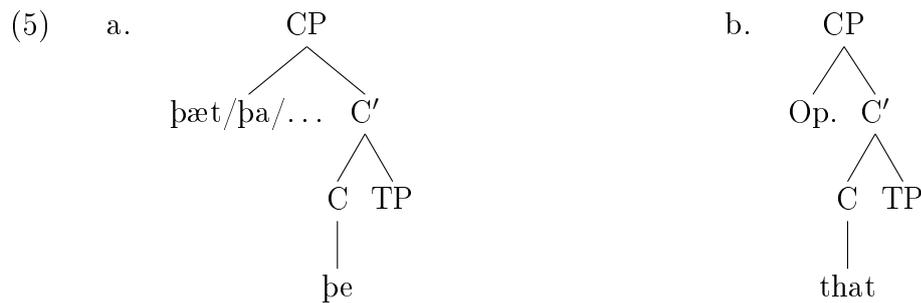
### 3 Markedness and relative pronouns

puzzle of Den Besten (2012: 439): *wat*-relatives in Afrikaans not grounded in either *dat*-relatives or *wat*-relatives in Dutch → rather surprising that they emerged at all and came to be established before the middle of the 18th century

compare the relative cycle for *that* in English (van Gelderen 2004; 2009):

- original relative complementiser in Old English: invariant *þe* (Traugott 1992: 226, Ringe & Taylor 2014: 467)
- various relative pronouns can co-occur – inflected for gender, number and case: *that* is singular neuter nominative (most unmarked)
- loss of other relative pronouns, establishment of *that* as a complementiser

structures:



markedness: low of the singular neuter pronoun – as defined by the relevant inflectional paradigm (as in Minimalist Morphology, see Wunderlich & Fabri 1995)

only “+” values of features are used to define the individual members of a paradigm → the absence of such values results in radical underspecification

underspecified values (cf. Wunderlich 2004):

- case: nominative
- gender: neuter
- number: singular

maximally underspecified element can be reinterpreted as a complementiser (inflectional features not compatible with the complementiser function must be lost – different results across West Germanic, Bacskai-Atkari 2020a)

prediction based on the narrow paradigm: *dat* or *wat* could become complementisers

Dutch: some dialects use *dat* as a relative complementiser (Boef 2013)

Afrikaans *wat*-relatives:

- apparently no diachronic continuity, unlike in English
- but: pattern expected based on markedness

diachrony (Den Besten 2012: 55–56):

- retained forms in the written language: *die* (for common gender), *dat/wat* (for neuter), *daar/waar* (used with prepositions, also stranded)
- “simplified Dutch” system: *die* (higher functions) and *waar* (with prepositions)
- competing system: “from below” – *wat* (18th century, from speakers born in the Cape – gaining more ground in the 19th century, process completed by the 20th century)

split in functions (cf. the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan & Comrie 1977)  
in the simplified system

status of *die* in the simplified system: neuter generally unmarked, but common gender  
can also be interpreted as non-neuter, whereby neuter would have a “+” value

similar split between of *d*-pronouns and *w*-pronouns attested also in German and in  
Frisian (see Hoekstra 2015) – but: in the simplified Dutch system, the *d*-pronoun is  
invariable as well

dichotomy: two elements (*die* and *waar*) maximally distinct morphologically – both as-  
sociated with distinct functions

introduction of *wat*: unmarked values in the *wh*-system, not part of the dichotomy

similar behaviour: English *what*-relatives and German *was*-relatives do not go back to a  
*wh*-based inflectional paradigm in relative clauses ↔ development of *that* in English

unmarkedness of *what* and *was* not in the narrow paradigm (such a narrow paradigm  
absent) but more generally in the pronominal paradigm – as attested in interrogatives  
and headless relatives

- (6) a. I don't know **what** they were doing.  
b. **What** disturbs me the most is their lack of creativity.

→ unlike pronouns like *die*, *wat* used also in lower functions:

- (7) a. die mense **wat** ons mee gepraat het  
the people what we with talked have  
'the people that we have talked with' (Den Besten 2012: 50)
- b. Daar staan 'n baksteen huis **wat** die voormuur heelmaal weggeval  
there stands a brick house what the front.wall totally down.fallen  
het...  
has  
'There stands a brick house the front wall of which has completely fallen  
down.' (Den Besten 2012: 51)

possible factors in favour of the morphologically simplified system:

- lack of normative pressure
- diglossia

similar effects in English – also in verb inflection (present tense) in East Anglia (possibly due to multilingualism, see Trudgill 2002):

- standard variety: *goes* (3Sg) versus *go* (all other forms)
- South of England: *goes*
- East Anglia: *go*

Afrikaans *wat*-relatives expected in a broader context precisely due to markedness constraints

## 4 Conclusion

status of *wat*-relatives in Afrikaans: diachronically somewhat unexpected (Den Besten 2012)

role of markedness:

- *wat* unmarked (neuter, singular) in the narrow pronominal paradigm – but this state of affairs was superseded by the “simplified Dutch” system, where *wat* was no longer used
- but: *wat* unmarked (also) in the broader pronominal system – superseding differentiation between *die* and *waar*

→ markedness plays a role in the establishment of relative complementisers beyond re-analysis in terms of the relative cycle

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