

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

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1 Introduction

two major relative clause formation strategies in Standard English that occur both in subject and object relative clauses:

- complementiser *that*
- relative pronouns *who/whom* and *which*: [\pm personal] distinction

distribution:

- (1)
- This is the professor [**who/that** wrote the book].
 - This is the professor [**who(m)/that** we invited].
 - This is the book [**which/that** was a great success].
 - This is the book [**which/that** the professor wrote].

optionality between the two strategies not complete:

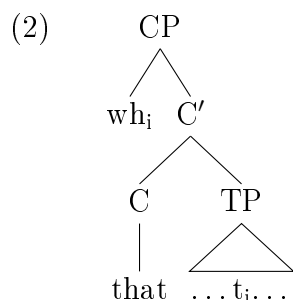
- *wh*-pronouns promoted by prescriptive rules, already in Early Modern English (see e.g. Austen 1985, Ball 1996, van Gelderen 2009)
- *that* preferred in the spoken language (see e.g. Romaine 1982, Montgomery & Bailey 1991, Tagliamonte et al. 2005, van Gelderen 2009) and also in regional British dialects (Herrmann 2005)
- subject/object asymmetry from Middle English onwards (Bacskai-Atkari 2023; 2024b)

question: what the distribution of the overt marking strategies is like regarding the subject/object asymmetry in British dialects (compared to norm-oriented contexts)

proposal: apparent levelling of the asymmetry – primarily due to the association of *who* with subjects and topics

2 Syntactic differences

syntactic difference between complementiser *that* and *wh*-operators (see Bacskai-Atkari 2023 for discussion):



diachronic relation:

- *that* originally a relative pronoun in Old English (see e.g. Traugott 1992, Ringe & Taylor 2014) – reanalysed into a complementiser in Old/Middle English (van Gelderen 2009)
- *wh*-pronouns innovative in headed relative clauses in Middle English (see e.g. Mustanoja 1960, Rydén 1983, Gisborne & Truswell 2017, Bacskai-Atkari 2020b): language contact with French/Latin (van Gelderen 2004, Gisborne & Truswell 2017), analogy with (embedded) interrogatives and free relatives (Bacskai-Atkari 2022)

inflected *wh*-pronouns:

- initially *which* used for both personal and non-personal referents
- distinction between *who(m)* and *which* completed in Early Modern English (Johansson 2012)

no reanalysis of *who(m)* and *which* → syntactic distinction retained

3 Subject-object asymmetries

Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977):

- (3) SU > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > OCOMP

implicational hierarchy: subjects are the least marked function – grounded in processing factors (Keenan & Hawkins 1987, Hawkins 1995, Kirby 1996)

original observation of Keenan & Comrie (1977) pertained to the occurrence of resumptive pronouns

but: hierarchy relevant for relative pronouns as well

- pronouns also fill the gap – more likely to occur in the lower functions (Filler-Gap-Complexity Hypothesis of Hawkins 1999: 252–258; see also Romaine 1984: 440, Fleischer 2004: 230, Bacskai-Atkari 2023)
- relative pronouns diachronically spreading from the lower functions in English (Romaine (1982: 61), Gisborne & Truswell (2017: 31–32), Bacskai-Atkari 2024b; see also van Gelderen 2004: 87, citing Dekeyser 1986: 100–101 and Allen 1977: 197–199)
- spread from the lower functions: not only for *wh* versus *that* but also for *who(m)* versus *which* (Bacskai-Atkari 2024b)

focus on *wh*-relatives and *that*-relatives in subject and object relatives:

- indirect objects rare in corpora (see Herrmann 2005: 51–52, Fleischer 2004: 61, Bacskai-Atkari 2023; 2024b), obliques potentially asymmetrical due to preposition stranding vs. pied piping (see Bacskai-Atkari 2024b on Middle English)
- zero strategy not available in the standard variety in non-coordinated contexts (possible but still less frequent in dialects, see Herrmann 2005), other strategies non-standard

overall tendency: *that* more typical in subject relatives, *wh*-pronouns more typical in object relatives – statistically significant ($P < 0.05$) differences

distribution in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (The General Prologue, The Knight’s Tale, The Miller’s Tale; Bacskai-Atkari 2024a) – between 1387 and 1400

	SU	DO
<i>who(m)/which</i>	5	4
<i>who(m) that/which that</i>	11	5
<i>that</i>	209	28

pattern:

- overall dominant strategy: *that*-relatives
- subject/object differences statistically significant: $X^2(2, N = 262) = 11.734$, $P = 0.002831$

distribution in the King James Bible (Bacskai-Atkari 2020a;b; 2023) – 1611/1769

	SU	DO
<i>who(m)/which</i>	2555	1544
<i>that</i>	4677	624

pattern:

- overall picture: clear asymmetry
- subject/object differences statistically significant: $X^2(1, N = 9400) = 873.6215$, $P < 0.00001$

distribution in the New King James Bible (Bacskai-Atkari 2020a;b; 2023) – strongly norm-oriented version from 1989

	SU	DO
<i>who(m)/which</i>	6330	1620
<i>that</i>	970	552

pattern:

- overall dominant strategy: *wh*-relatives
- subject/object differences statistically significant: $X^2(1, N = 9472) = 182.5271$, $P < 0.00001$
- but: tilted pattern – *wh*-relatives with a higher proportion in subject relatives than in object relatives

→ overall 3 different surface patterns in English systems – but: asymmetry constant (with a tilted pattern in the norm-oriented system)

4 Dialects in the Southwest of England

question: whether the asymmetry also holds in (traditional) regional varieties

- recall: *wh*-relatives less frequent in spoken language
- original claim by Romaine (1982: 212): *wh*-pronouns became established in the written language, they barely had an effect on the spoken language (refuted by e.g. Ball 1996)

Southwest: rural and relatively remote (Wagner 2008), low amount of contact with other languages/varieties (Wagner 2020)

relative clauses in the Southwest:

- *that* a dominant strategy, *wh*-strategy a minority pattern (Herrmann 2005)
- loss of morphological case: no examples of *whom* in the sample of Herrmann (2005)
- zero relatives: also attested in subject relatives but more frequent in object relatives (Herrmann 2005) – potential processing bias
- traditional strategy *as* apparently on the retreat (Kortmann & Wagner 2007) – no examples in the sample of Herrmann (2005)
- innovative strategy: *what*-relatives (Herrmann 2005, Kortmann & Wagner 2007) – *what* as a uniform particle

examples for the additional strategies (Wagner 2008: 165):

- (4)
- a. ... we had a big churn **what**'d hold forty gallons...
(FRED Som_011)
 - b. ... my dear sister **as** is dead and gone...
(FRED Wil_005)
 - c. There's a pair of blocks down there \emptyset was made when I was apprentice.
(FRED Som_016)

study by Herrmann (2005):

- relative clauses across the British Isles
- dataset: various sources, including a subpart of the Freiburg English Dialect Corpus (FRED), cf. Kortmann & Wagner (2005)
- Southwest: also various sources, only from the Central Southwest (East Somerset)
- distribution along the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy examined – but no statistical testing of the asymmetry
- data for *which* and *that* separated according to the regions – data for *who(m)* not

→ additional study needed

5 The results from the Southwest

database: Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects Sampler (FRED-S) – so far: data from the Southwest (54 individuals) and from the North of England (39 individuals)

results from the North similar to the Southwest

Southwest informants:

- known age range: 52–102
- distribution: Wiltshire (16), Devon (13), Somerset (13), Cornwall (8), Oxfordshire (4)
- uneven amount of contributions (also group interviews)

examples for *who*:

- (5) a. because we had a workboy called Albert, he **who** was called Albert before, you know and then they took up calling him Captain Albert (FRED-S Con_005)
- b. Mi brother Henry, **who** I do go and see, he live at Hastings (FRED-S Som_012)

examples for *which*:

- (6) a. down to Everton, Brixton, down that way, **which** is right close to Plymouth (FRED-S Som_001)
- b. a better one, **which** he kept for himself (FRED-S Wil_004)

examples for *that*:

- (7) a. all water mills **that** was on the river (FRED-S Oxf_001)
- b. that's the little strip **that** you put over the inside (FRED-S Som_002)

results:

	SU	DO
<i>who/which</i>	149 (33.33%)	35 (33.65%)
<i>that</i>	298 (66.67%)	69 (66.35%)

no significant differences: $X^2(1, N = 551) = 0.0038967, P = 0.9502$

possible reason: *wh*-relatives altogether a minority pattern – on the retreat, without grammatical distinction

but: asymmetry between *who* and *which*

	SU	DO
<i>who</i>	63	3
<i>which</i>	86	32

difference statistically significant: $X^2(1, N = 184) = 14.002, P = 0.0001827$

possible reason: change in the paradigm of *wh*-pronouns with a loss of *whom*

- *who* rarely used in the object (or oblique) slot
- *who* primarily associated with nominative case and the subject function

→ association of the [+personal] pronoun with subjects and topics (in line with the animacy hierarchy)

- animate entities tend to be an agent or subject more than inanimate ones (see e.g. Santazilia 2022, citing Foley & Valin 1977, Comrie 1989, Langacker 1991)
- topics more often associated with animate entities than with inanimate ones (see e.g. Santazilia 2022, citing Givón 1976 and Deane 1992)

in this respect: similar pattern to the norm-oriented system (but: due to an internal change in the paradigm)

→ levelling only apparent

6 Conclusion

subject-object asymmetries regarding *that*-relatives and *wh*-relatives in the Southwest

- *that*-strategy overall more frequent
- no statistically significant differences regarding *wh* versus *that*
- but: apparent levelling caused by the loss of *whom*

→ partial gap in the paradigm leading to a strong association of *who* with subjects

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