English relative clauses in a cross-Germanic perspective

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1 Introduction

two major types of relative clauses in English:

(1) a. This is the linguist **who** has an interesting theory.
     b. This is the linguist **that** has an interesting theory.

two strategies:

- relative pronoun strategy

- relative complementiser strategy

two possible sources of relative markers:

- demonstrative elements

- *wh*-elements

English quite unique among Germanic languages – number and distribution of options

other standard Germanic languages: clear preference for either strategy

- German, Dutch: relative pronouns

- Scandinavian languages: relative complementisers

→ question: what factors contributed to the emergence of the English pattern

proposal: development primarily related to case system and to the feature properties of the source elements behind relative markers

2 Operators versus complementisers

relative pronoun versus complementiser in Standard English: apparently in complementary distribution:

(2) *This is the linguist **who that** has an interesting theory.

proposal of Chomsky & Lasnik (1977): COMP position – in varieties like Standard English, the co-presence of the two elements violates the Doubly Filled COMP Filter

but: violation of the supposed filter possible in non-standard varieties:

(3) %This is the town **in which that** I live.

more recent approaches (Van Gelderen 2009, Brandner & Bräuning 2013, Bacskai-Atkari 2018a): doubling patterns involve an overt specifier and an overt head in the CP – non-doubling patterns realise only one of these positions overtly

(4)

```
              CP
             /  \
      in which   C′
                /  \
               C   …
               |
              that
```
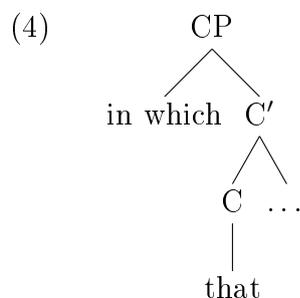
doubling patterns like (3) similar to doubling in interrogatives (Chomsky & Lasnik 1977 treat them similarly):

(5) %She asked me **in which city that** I lived.

but: doubling in interrogatives more frequent than in relative clauses

same observation holds for German: dialects prefer the complementiser strategy and may additionally use a pronoun (cf. Bayer 1984, Salzmann 2006; 2009)

standard versus dialectal pattern in German (Brandner & Bräuning 2013):

(6) a. … der Mann **der**   seine Schuhe verloren hat
         the man   that.M his shoes   lost   has
         'the man who has lost his shoes'

     b. … dea Mo **(dea)** **wo** seine Schu verlora hot
         the man   that.M   PRT his   shoes lost   has
         'the man who has lost his shoes'

different from embedded interrogatives – doubling may be obligatory:

(7) I frog-me, **fia wos dass**-ma an zwoatn Fernseher braucht.
     I ask-REFL for what that-one a   second TV   needs
     'I wonder what one needs a second TV for.' (Bayer & Brandner 2008)

very few doubling patterns reported by Boef (2013) for Dutch

strong preference for lexicalising the C position favours complementisers (preference in Germanic also in main clauses, e.g. V2, see Bacskai-Atkari 2018a;b)

one reason for the interrogative/relative asymmetry: differences in information structure

- embedded interrogatives: the operator is focus-marked – adding the complementiser results in doubling

- relative clauses: the operator carries GIVEN information (redundant) and can be left out when a complementiser is already there (clause typing)

preference for complementisers in relative clauses: Van Gelderen (2009): *wh*-pronouns promoted by prescriptive rules but English speakers prefer *that* over a *wh*-pronoun (at least a 4:1 ratio; see also Romaine 1982, Montgomery & Bailey 1991, Van Gelderen 2004, Tagliamonte et al. 2005)

corpus study on two versions of the King James Bible (Bacskai-Atkari to appear):

- original version (1611/1769)

- modernised version from (1989)

distribution of relative markers – examination of parallel loci

sample results from the original version (Genesis):

TOTAL	who	whom	which	that	as
374	14 (3.74%)	25 (6.68%)	123 (32.89%)	210 (56.15%)	2 (0.53%)

sample results from the new version (Genesis):

TOTAL	who	whom	which	that
374	106 (28.34%)	41 (10.96%)	118 (31.55%)	109 (29.14%)

clear preference for the complementiser strategy also in present-day dialects (cf. Herrmann 2005, Kortmann & Wagner 2007, Beal 2008):

- demonstrative-based complementiser *that*

- *wh*-based complementisers *what, where*

- traditional patterns with *as, at*

similar preference across Germanic:

- German dialects: *wo, was* (see Brandner & Bräuning 2013 on Bodensee Alemannic; Salzmann 2017 on Zurich German; Fleischer 2004; 2017 on Hessian; Weiß 2013 on Bavarian; see also Kaufmann 2018 on Mennonite Low German)

- Mainland Scandinavian *som*

- Icelandic *sem*

- Flemish: *dat* mostly only in combination with a pronoun (Bennis & Haegeman 1984, Boef 2013)

→ English pattern not unique in favouring a complementiser strategy, but:

- unique in employing a demonstrative-based complementiser

- unique in the extent to which the pronoun strategy concurs

→ question: what historical processes are decisive for this pattern

3   The relative cycle

relative pronouns can be reanalysed as complementisers (Van Gelderen 2004; 2009)

Stage 1: *that* a relative pronoun

(8)   ac   gif we asmeagaþ þa   eadmodlican dæda **þa   þe**   he worhte, þonne ne
       but if   we consider   those humble   deeds that that he wrought then   not
       þincþ us þæt nan wundor
       seems us that no   wonder
       'But if we consider the humble deeds which he wrought, that will seem no wonder
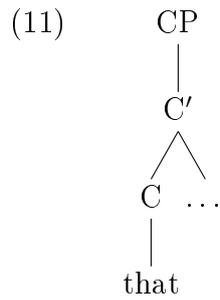   to us.' (*Blickling Homilies*)

structure:

(9)   CP

       se/þam/þat   C′

                  C   …

                  |
                  þe
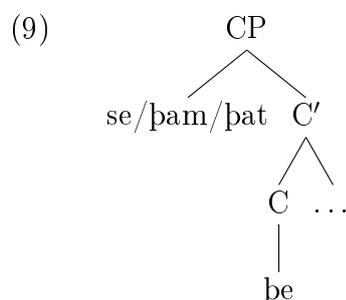
Stage 2: *that* reanalysed as a complementiser

(10)   and suggeð feole þinges... **þat** næuere nes   i-wurðen
        and say   many things   that never   not.was happened
        'and say many things that never happened.' (Layamon, *Caligula*)
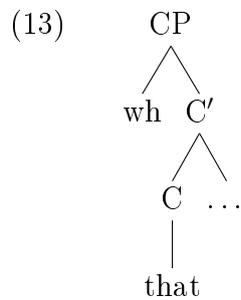
4

structure:

(11)
```
        CP
        │
        C′
       ╱╲
      C   …
      │
     that
```

Stage 3: *wh*-elements can appear in the specifier

(12)   the est orisonte, **which that** is clepid comounly the ascendent
        'the East horizon, which is commonly known as the ascendent' (Chaucer)

structure:

(13)
```
        CP
       ╱╲
     wh   C′
         ╱╲
        C   …
        │
       that
```

in Stage 3: new relative pronouns can move to the position left "empty" by the reanalysis
    of the original pronoun

appearance of *wh*-elements in relative clauses also involves a change in the feature proper-
    ties of these elements: loss of quantificational features → they are no longer associated
    with complete propositions and can thus appear in relative clauses (Watanabe 2009)

relative markers fulfil functions other than typing the clause as relative:

  • complementiser: encoding finiteness

  • relative pronoun: in argument relative clauses, it carries phi-features

→ relative pronouns have to lose features that are not available on complementisers –
    case, number, gender

reanalysis step (Stage 2) motivated by economy (Van Gelderen 2004; 2009): preference
    of Merge over Move

→ question: how strong such economy considerations operate

4   Relative elements and case

loss of case features on *that*: in line with the general loss of overt case marking in Middle English – feature loss not only motivated for the particular element but also fostered by the system

→ questions:

- how other (Germanic) languages behave in this respect

- whether the loss of overt case markings has any other traceable effect

reanalysis from (relative) operator to complementiser: not the only source of relative complementisers

many relative complementisers derive from equative complementisers

- mainland Scandinavian *som*, Icelandic *sem*

- English *as* (see Bacskai-Atkari to appear)

- German *so* historically, present-day German *wo* (Brandner & Bräuning 2013)

→ case is irrelevant for these items as case was never part of their feature array

moreover: they are taken over from constructions in which they were complementisers already → no reanalysis in the sense of the relative cycle

German: no reanalysis of the pronouns *der/die/das*: evidently marked for case, number, gender

→ no reanalysis in line with there being overt case marking in the language

→ economy considerations definitely constrained by morphology

Dutch: no reanalysis of demonstrative-based relative pronouns either

- loss of overt case marking later than in English

- gender marking not lost – difference between *die* and *dat*

- reanalysis not a necessary consequence

gender difference maintained:

(14)   a.   het   boek **dat**   ik heb   gelezen
               the.N book that.N I   have read.PTCP
               'th book I have read'

        b.   de   man **die**   daar staat
               the.M man that.M there stands
               'the man who is standing there'

$\rightarrow$ overt gender marking also constrains reanalysis

$\rightarrow$ economy considerations constrained by various aspects of an inflectional paradigm

various aspects can be relevant:

- case (e.g. NOM *der/die/das* vs. ACC *den/die/das* vs. DAT *dem/der/dem*)

- gender (e.g. *die/dat*)

- human or non-human referent (e.g. *who(m)/which*)

Old English: various relative pronouns, out of which *that* came to be the "winner" – appearing more frequently in the environments where the other potential candidates also appeared

not possible for different members of the same inflectional paradigm: all items show sensitivity towards the referent $\rightarrow$ insertion into the syntax from the morphological paradigm (in the sense of Wunderlich & Fabri 1995) carries the paradigmatic inflectional information

possible prediction: pronouns not appearing in contrastive paradigms become complementisers:

- true in the sense that pronouns appearing in contrastive paradigms are apparently never reanalysed

- false in the sense that pronouns not appearing in contrastive paradigms are not necessarily reanalysed – e.g. *was* in Hessian restricted to neuter antecedents (Fleischer 2017) but it has no masculine/feminine *wh*-based counterparts

$\rightarrow$ reanalysis apparently a strong tendency but not a strict economy constraint

inventory of Germanic complementisers (in argument relative clauses; incomplete):

		d-based	*wh*-based
Pronoun-based	Operator	*der/die/das* (Ger.) *die/dat* (Dutch)	*who/whom/which* (Eng.) *welcher/welche/welches* (Ger.) *was* (Hessian)
	C	*that* (Eng.)	*what* (Eng.) *was* (Bavarian)
Equative-based	C	*as* (Eng.) *so* (Eng./Ger. hist.) *som* (Mainland Scand.) *sem* (Icelandic)	*wo* (South Ger.)

5   Case and the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy

additional question: why a relative pronoun strategy is maintained/renewed even if a
 complementiser is available

relative pronouns identify the gap in the relative clause – processing

differences along the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977): sub-
 ject > direct object > indirect object > oblique object (complement of preposition) >
 genitive (possessor phrase) > object of comparison

asymmetries also attested in the King James Bible

sample results from the original version (Genesis):

Role	who	whom	which	that	as
subject	14	–	41	169	2
(226)	(6.19%)	–	(18.14%)	(74.78%)	(2.21%)
direct object	–	14	78	35	–
(127)	–	(11.02%)	(61.42%)	(27.56%)	–
PP complement	–	11	4	6	–
(21)	–	(52.38%)	(19.05%)	(28.57%)	–

sample results from the new version (Genesis):

Role	who	whom	which	that
subject	106	–	52	68
(226)	(46.90%)	–	(23.01%)	(30.09%)
direct object	–	30	62	35
(127)	–	(23.62%)	(48.82%)	(27.56%)
PP complement	–	11	4	6
(21)	–	(52.38%)	(19.05%)	(28.57%)

complementiser strategy more likely to occur higher on the scale (Herrmann 2005)

main difference in the data: subject vs. lower functions

Fleischer (2004) for German dialects (subsuming Yiddish): subjects and direct objects
 pattern also together and contrast with all other functions lower in the scale

asymmetries in relative clauses:

- English: subject/oblique pattern

- German: subject/direct object/oblique pattern

$\rightarrow$ differences pattern with differences in the case system:

- English: nominative–oblique system (with more syntactic than morphological distinctions)

- German: difference between nominative, accusative dative (and genitive)

$\rightarrow$ differences in the case system also have an effect on the distribution of relative markers (including complementisers)

6   Conclusion

relative markers in English and their distribution among Germanic languages

English pattern to some extent unique among Germanic languages – interplay of various factors:

- purely syntactic factors (operator movement versus base-generated complementiser)

- morphological factors (the availability of overt lexical elements)

- feature content of potential complementisers

- the effect of the case system

$\rightarrow$ the particular setting in English is not dependent on a single parameter but on various factors that are otherwise present in other Germanic languages as well

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