

Relative markers and subject-object asymmetries in the Wycliffe Bible*

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

University of Konstanz / University of Potsdam

julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-konstanz.de / julia.bacskai-atkari.1@uni-potsdam.de

The 12th International Conference on Middle English

Glasgow, 22–24 August 2022

1 Introduction

major relativisation strategies in English (headed relative clauses):

- *wh*-pronouns – *who(m)*, *which*, *whose*
- complementiser *that*

major development (the relative cycle of van Gelderen 2004; 2009, see also Romaine 1982):

- *that* grammaticalised from a relative pronoun during Old and Middle English
- appearance of *wh*-elements as an innovation in Middle English

later developments:

- differentiation between *who(m)* for personal and *which* for non-personal referents (Johansson 2017)
- preference for *who(m)* over *that* for personal antecedents in norm-oriented contexts (Ball 1996)

→ question: whether the personal/non-personal difference matters in Middle English

case study: two versions of the Wycliffe Bible

proposal: personal/non-personal distinction matters – function of the gap (subject vs. object) decisive, as well as differences between the versions

*This research was funded by the German Research Fund (DFG), as part of my project “Asymmetries in relative clauses in West Germanic” (DFG-BA 5201/2).

2 Distributional differences and historical development

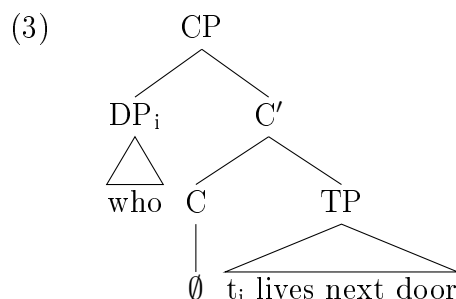
wh-pronouns in [Spec,CP]:

- (1) a. I saw the woman **who** lives next door in the park.
 b. The woman **who(m)** I saw in the park lives next door.
 c. I saw the cat **which** lives next door in the park.
 d. The cat **which** I saw in the park lives next door.

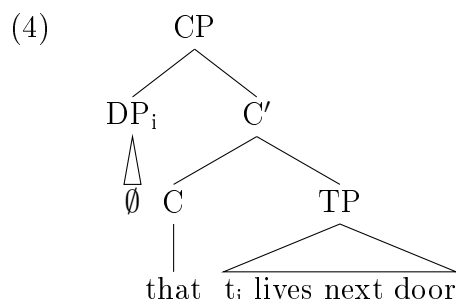
complementiser *that*:

- (2) a. I saw the woman **that** lives next door in the park.
 b. The woman **that** I saw in the park lives next door.
 c. I saw the cat **that** lives next door in the park.
 d. The cat **that** I saw in the park lives next door.

structure for overt relative pronoun:



structure for overt relative complementiser:



both cases involve operator movement but only the relative pronoun lexicalises the gap

complementiser shows no sensitivity to the head noun – already in Middle English:¹

- (5) and sugged **feole þinges**; bi Arðure þan kinge. // **þat** næuere nes
 and say many things about Arthur the king that never not-was
 i-wurðen
 happened
 ‘and say many things that never happened.’
 (Layamon, *Brut*, Caligula version, 11473–11474)

that originally a relative pronoun in Old English (singular, neuter antecedents, van Gelderen 2004, citing Grossmann 1906) – inflected also for case (nominative/accusative)

¹The Middle English examples are from the Michigan Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse.

appearance of *wh*-pronoun in addition to the complementiser – doubling:

- (6) a. the est Orisonte, **which þat** is cleped comunly the assendent
‘the East horizon, which is commonly known as the ascendent’
(Chaucer *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, folio 10)
- b. Criseyde **which that** certeynly // Receyueth wrong
‘Cressida, who has certainly received a wrong’
(Chaucer *Troilus and Criseyde*, Campsall ms, 2.240)

factors:

- Latin and French influence (see van Gelderen 2004, citing Mustanoja 1960 and Rydén 1983)
- stylistic factors (see Romaine 1982)
- no internal pressure for the introduction and the spread of *wh*-relatives (Gisborne & Truswell 2017)
- analogy with embedded interrogatives may have been an additional factor (Bacsikai-Atkari 2022)

personal/non-personal distinction becoming more explicit in Early Modern English (Johansson 2012; 2017) – variation attested even in this period:

- (7) a. *Nightingale*. [...] I enquired of another **who** lived in the Mews, if he knew Mrs. Baynton
(1702 Trials, Haagen Swendsen; Johansson 2012)
- b. *Mrs Busby*. [...] I saw a man in the Coach, **which** was Hartwel the Bayliff
(1702 Trials, Haagen Swendsen; Johansson 2012)

special type of antecedents: deities (very high personal status) – *who* starts being used with these antecedents (cf. Rydén 1983, Johansson 2012; 2017)

3 Corpus study on the Wycliffe Bible

comparison of the earlier version and the later version of the Wycliffe Bible – both 1380s–1390s

- earlier version traditionally associated with John Wycliffe – no consensus regarding its authorship
- later version generally attributed to John Purvey (see Bruce 1984)
- later version generally considered to be closer to idiomatic English (Bruce 1984)

→ expectation based on language contact: the earlier version probably contains more examples for *wh*-relatives

methodology: hits for “*who*” and “*whom*” in the New King James version (1989) and examining the corresponding element in the earlier translations (see Bacskai-Atkari 2020a;b for Early Modern English)

newest version fairly reliable on [±human] distinction – only few nouns show variation, e.g. *people*, *country* – “borderline cases” (beyond the classical “sanctioned borderline cases”, see Herrmann 2005, quoting Quirk et al. 1985)

preference for the relative pronoun strategy with *who(m)* with human referents in present-day Standard English

examples from Middle English:

- (8) a. But and of Loth, **the which** was with Abram, weren flockis of sheep, and
‘but Lot also, who was with Abram, had flocks of sheeps and’
(Wycliffe Bible EV; Genesis 13:5)
- b. But also flockis of scheep, and droues of oxun, and tabernaclis weren to Loth,
that was with Abram
‘but also flocks of sheep and herds of oxen and tabernacles were with Loth,
who was with Abram
(Wycliffe Bible LV; Genesis 13:5)
- (9) a. Forsothe the Lord God had plawntid paradise of delice fro bigynnyng, in the
which he sette man **whom** he had fourmed.
‘Truly the Lord God had planted a paradise of delight at the beginning, in
which he put the man whom he had formed.’
(Wycliffe Bible EV; Genesis 2:8)
- b. Forsothe the Lord God plauntide at the bigynnyng paradis of likyng, wh-
erynne he settide man **whom** he hadde formed.
‘Truly the Lord God had planted a paradise of delight at the beginning, in
which he put the man whom he had formed.’
(Wycliffe Bible LV; Genesis 2:8)

distribution of *who/whom* (Genesis, Exodus):

- *who* in headless relatives
- *whom* both in headed and in headless relatives
- deity/non-deity distinction does not seem to play a role

the elements corresponding to “who” in the earlier version (Genesis, Exodus):

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences in EV
subject (119)	<i>who</i>	8 (6.72%)
	<i>which</i>	2 (1.68%)
	<i>the which</i>	18 (15.13%)
	<i>that</i>	86 (72.29%)
	zero	1 (0.84%)
	<i>whoso</i>	1 (0.84%)
	<i>whosoever</i>	3 (2.52%)
other	–	67
TOTAL		186

the elements corresponding to “whom” in the earlier version (Genesis, Exodus):

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences in EV
direct object (33)	<i>whom</i>	21 (63.64%)
	<i>the which</i>	2 (6.06%)
	<i>that</i>	10 (30.30%)
PP complement (16)	P + <i>whom</i>	12 (75.00%)
	P + <i>the which</i>	4 (25.00%)
other	–	15
TOTAL		64

the elements corresponding to “who” in the later version (Genesis, Exodus):

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences in LV
subject (118)	<i>which</i>	18 (15.25%)
	<i>that</i>	96 (81.36%)
	zero	1 (0.85%)
	<i>whoever</i>	3 (2.54%)
other	–	68
TOTAL		186

the elements corresponding to “whom” in the later version (Genesis, Exodus):

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences in LV
direct object (33)	<i>whom</i>	18 (54.55%)
	<i>which</i>	15 (45.45%)
PP complement (16)	P + <i>whom</i>	7 (43.75%)
	P + <i>which</i>	9 (56.25%)
other	–	15
TOTAL		64

question: which correlations are statistically significant ($P < 0.5$)

distribution of *who(m)/(the) which/that* in the earlier version (Genesis, Exodus):

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject	8	20	86
object	21	2	10

statistical findings (chi-square tests):

- significant correlation between *who(m)/which/that* and function ($P < 0.00001$)
- significant correlation between *wh/that* and function ($P < 0.00001$)
- significant correlation between *who(m)/which* and function ($P < 0.00001$)

→ the distribution of *wh/that* and the *who(m)/which* distinction is dependent on the function

distribution of *who(m)/(the) which/that* in the later version (Genesis, Exodus):

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject	0	18	96
object	18	15	0

statistical findings (Fisher exact tests):

- significant correlation between *who(m)/which/that* and function ($P = 0$)
- significant correlation between *wh/that* and function ($P < 0.00001$)
- significant correlation between *who(m)/which* and function ($P = 0$)

→ preference for *wh*-pronouns in object relatives and for *that* in subject relatives:

- in line with the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977) – subjects are the least marked function
- relative pronouns more likely to appear in lower functions (Herrmann 2005 for English dialects, Bacskai-Atkari 2020a;b for Early Modern English) – due to processing reasons (Romaine 1984, Kirby 1996, Fleischer 2004, see the Filler-Gap-Complexity Hypothesis of Hawkins 1999)
- appearance of *wh*-based relative pronouns also in the lower functions first (Romaine 1982, Gisborne & Truswell 2017; see also van Gelderen 2004, citing Dekeyser 1986 and Allen 1977: 197–199)

comparison of the two versions:

- significant differences in subject relatives ($P = 0.00904762$) – regarding *who/which* ($P = 0.0155$), not regarding *wh/that* ($P = 0.098889$)
- significant differences in object relatives ($P = 0.00001017$) – regarding *who/which* ($P = 0.003248$), not regarding *wh/that* ($P = 0.3102$)

→ subject/object asymmetry regarding *wh/that* stable between the two versions

→ expectation that the earlier version should contain more *wh*-relatives is not born out
– higher frequency of *who*-relatives in the later version not due to translation (recall: later version closer to idiomatic English)

comparison to relative clauses with non-personal referents (corresponding to “which”):

earlier version:

	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject	32	86
object	23	10

later version:

	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject	21	96
object	33	0

results:

- significant correlation between *which/that* and function in both versions ($P < 0.00001$)
- significant differences between the two versions in object relatives ($P = 0.0009$) but not in subject relatives ($P = 0.092618$)

→ asymmetries and differences indicate the beginning of two tendencies:

- the emergence of a subject-object asymmetry (in terms of *that* vs. *wh*, respectively)
- the specification of *which* for non-personal referents

differentiation started in the more marked functions (non-subjects) – oblique gaps (PP complements) exclusively marked by *wh*-elements in both versions

tendencies stronger in the later version – more conservative earlier version masks the tendencies (but also: idiolectal variation)

4 Conclusion

comparison of relative clauses with a personal referent between the earlier version and the later version of the Wycliffe Bible

- general observation: two versions from the same period, earlier version closer to the Latin original, later version closer to idiomatic English
- subject/object asymmetries regarding *wh/that* observed in both versions
- *who/which* asymmetry arising – starting also from the lower functions (PP complements, objects)
- later version shows the tendencies stronger

→ subject/object (subject/non-subject) asymmetries are decisive in the diachronic processes affecting relative markers – already in Middle English

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