

Reconsidering the relative cycle: Reanalysis and language contact in Middle English relative clauses

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

University of Amsterdam / University of Potsdam

j.bacskaiatkari@uva.nl / julia.bacskai-atkari.1@uni-potsdam.de

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1 Introduction

cyclic changes in syntactic history: paths that can lead to the emergence of innovative patterns again and again

prototype: the Jespersen cycle of negative elements (see e.g. Wallage 2008, van der Auwera 2009, Hoeksema 2009) – English:

(1) ne → ne ... not → not

doubling stage as a middle stage in the development crucial (Wallage 2013; see also Schwenter 2006, Hansen 2009, Hansen & Visconti 2009 for Romance)

reinforcement: introduction of a novel marker alongside the original one – gradual phonological weakening as well as feature loss (from semantic features to interpretable formal features to uninterpretable formal features, cf. Zeijlstra 2014)

van Gelderen (2009) identifies various paths in terms of cyclic changes – different domains involved (e.g. positions, features)

one potential example: the relative cycle (van Gelderen 2009):

(2) that → WH that → WH

question: whether the path in (2) actually matches the Middle English data

proposal:

- Middle English corpus data: doubling a minority pattern
- emerging system: variation primarily related to the subject/non-subject difference

→ doubling pattern as a middle stage in the relative cycle is an illusion

2 The relative cycle

prototypical case of a cyclic change (van Gelderen 2009)

- original relative pronoun reanalysed into a complementiser
- this reanalysis makes the [Spec,CP] position available for novel relative pronouns

original relative markers in Old English (Traugott 1992, van Gelderen 2009, Ringe & Taylor 2014):

- complementiser *þe*
- *d*-pronouns
- the combination of the above options

combination:

- (3) a. ac gif we asmeagaþ þa eadmodlican dæda **þa** **þe** he
but if we consider those humble deeds that.F.PL.ACC REL he
worhte, þonne ne þincþ us þæt nan wundor
wrought then not seems us that no wonder
'But if we consider the humble deeds that he wrought, then that will not
appear marvellous to us.' (*Blickling Homilies* p. 33)
- b. þurh **þæt** **þe** he on þam gebede gehyrð
'through that.N.ACC REL he in this.DAT prayer hears
'through what he hears in this prayer'
(Aethelwold, *The Benedictine Rule*, 884–885)

most frequent pattern in Old English involved the complementiser *þe* (Traugott 1992, Ringe & Taylor 2014)

reanalysis of *that* into a complementiser:

- *that* was the most unmarked pronoun (singular, neuter, nominative/accusative)
- disappearance of *þe*
- disappearance of the other *d*-pronouns

that attested as a complementiser on its own from Middle English onwards (see van Gelderen 2009):

- (4) 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 about King Arthur that never happened.'
(Layamon, *Brut*, Caligula version, 11473–11474)

innovation in Middle English: appearance of *wh*-based relative pronouns (see, for instance, Mustanoja 1960, Rydén 1983, van Gelderen 2004, Gisborne & Truswell 2017, Bacskai-Atkari 2020a; 2022)

cyclic template for change (van Gelderen 2009):

(5) that → WH that → WH

doubling apparently in stage II of the cycle

examples from Chaucer:

- (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)

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

3 Theoretical problems

negative cycle: *ne* ultimately replaced by *not*

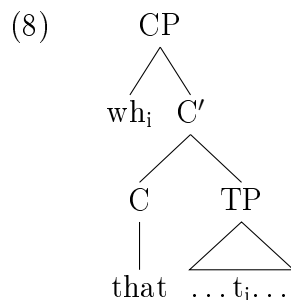
↔ no replacement in relative clauses:

- (7) a. This is the book **that** I have written.
 b. This is the book **which** I have written.

underlying difference between the two processes: introduction of *wh*-relatives not a genuine reinforcement but fostered by other factors

- language contact with French/Latin (van Gelderen 2004, Gisborne & Truswell 2017)
- analogy with (embedded) interrogatives and free relatives (Bacskai-Atkari 2022)

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



→ negative cycle and relative cycle operate differently

4 Empirical problems

existence of patterns like (6) in Middle English but not much beyond (van Gelderen 2013, Bacskai-Atkari 2022) seems to support (5)

problems with (5):

- *wh*-pronouns in relative clause understood as an innovative, additional step
- unclear how substantial the doubling stage is – only (6a) cited in van Gelderen (2004: 87)

→ question ultimately: whether doubling is a genuine middle stage or a by-product

the Campsall ms of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (from the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse): mid-1380s

- 45 hits for *which that* (2 for *which that* and 43 for *which þat*)
- 141 hits for single *which*

→ proportion of the doubling pattern (at 24.19% of cases involving a *wh*-element) unexpectedly low if doubling in Chaucer's time is taken to be stage II of the relative cycle

data from *The Canterbury Tales* (The General Prologue, The Knight's Tale, The Miller's Tale) – between 1387 and 1400:

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>who(m) that</i>	<i>which that</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (225)	3	2	0	11	209
direct object (37)	1	3	1	4	28
PP complement (54)	6	35	3	2	8
Total (316)	50 (15.82%)		21 (6.65%)		245 (77.53%)

note: *who* used for subjects, *whom* for objects and PP-complements; *which* subsumes the *which*

→ doubling pattern altogether a minority pattern (proportion at 29.58% of involving a *wh*-element – similar to *Troilus and Criseyde*)

results from the Wycliffe Bible (sample: Five Books of Moses) – Bacskai-Atkari (2024):

- earlier and later version: both 1380s–1390s
- later version generally attributed to John Purvey and considered to be closer to idiomatic English (see Bruce 1984)
- relative clauses with a personal antecedent (*who(m)* as equivalent in the New King James version)
- in the sample: no examples for doubling in relative clauses (↔ *whether that* in embedded polar interrogatives well attested, see Bacskai-Atkari 2023)

distribution in the earlier version (Bacskai-Atkari 2024):

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (412)	14	33	365
direct object (66)	32	15	19
PP complement (20)	14	6	0
Total (498)	114 (22.89%)		384 (77.11%)

distribution in the later version (Bacskai-Atkari 2024):

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (403)	0	63	340
direct object (68)	31	37	0
PP complement (18)	8	10	0
Total (489)	149 (30.47%)		340 (69.53%)

comparison: relative clauses with a non-personal antecedent (*which* as equivalent in the New King James version) – Genesis and Exodus: again no doubling

earlier version:

	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (42)	12	30
direct object (90)	12	78
PP complement (30)	30	0
Total (162)	54 (33.33%)	108 (66.67%)

later version:

	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (44)	17	27
direct object (89)	86	3
PP complement (28)	28	0
Total (161)	131 (81.37%)	30 (18.63%)

summary of the data:

- doubling a minority pattern and may not occur – idiolectal variation
- doubling patterns with *wh*-relatives in general
- *that*-relatives altogether more dominant – but: *which*-relatives emerging as markers of non-personal relatives

→ doubling not a middle stage (stage II) but a by-product of the emerging *wh*-strategy

5 Parallel systems and asymmetries

question: why doubling emerges

lexicalisation of the finite C head: general tendency across Germanic (Bacskai-Atkari 2020b; 2023)

- V2 patterns and T-to-C movement (finite verb in C)
- doubly filled COMP in embedded interrogatives
- doubly filled COMP also in other Germanic relative clauses – e.g. South German varieties

major patterns in English:

- *that*-relatives lexicalise the finite C – preference in spoken language and regional dialects (see Romaine 1982, citing Sweet 1900; Montgomery & Bailey 1991; van Gelderen 2004; 2009; Tagliamonte et al. 2005, Herrmann 2005)
- *wh*-relatives are more explicit in terms of identifying the properties of the gap (personal/non-personal distinction, case) – they may ease processing in the more marked functions (cf. the Filler-Gap-Complexity Hypothesis of Hawkins 1999)

subject/non-subject asymmetry in the major strategies:

- *that*-relatives more frequent in subject relatives than in object (non-subject) relatives
- *wh*-relatives more frequent in object (non-subject) relatives than in subject relatives

asymmetry robust in Early Modern English and Modern Standard English – correlation statistically significant (see Bacskai-Atkari 2023; 2024; see Johansson 2012 for speech-related Early Modern English data)

subject/object differences in the Wycliffe Bible statistically significant for personal antecedents (Bacskai-Atkari 2024):

- earlier version (chi-square test): $X^2(1, N = 478) = 128.79, P < 0.00001$
- later version (Fisher exact test): $P < 0.00001$

subject/object differences in the Wycliffe Bible statistically significant for non-personal antecedents as well (chi-square tests):

- earlier version: $X^2(1, N = 132) = 4.4698, P = 0.0345$
- later version: $X^2(1, N = 103) = 56.687, P < 0.00001$

subject and object relative clauses in *The Canterbury Tales*:

	<i>wh</i>	<i>wh + that</i>	<i>that</i>
subject (225)	5	11	209
direct object (37)	4	5	28

subject/object differences in *The Canterbury Tales*:

- significant overall differences (*wh* vs. *wh + that* vs. *that*): $X^2(2, N = 262) = 11.734$, $P = 0.002831$
- no significant differences between *wh* vs. *wh + that*: $X^2(1, N = 25) = 0.43523$, $P = 0.5094$
- significant differences between *wh + that* vs. *that*: $X^2(1, N = 253) = 4.9917$, $P = 0.02547$

→ the decisive difference lies in the presence of the *wh*-element – *wh*-relatives dominant in non-subject relatives, where they started to appear and spread from (Romaine 1982, Gisborne & Truswell 2017)

differences between direct objects and PP-complements also statistically significant: $X^2(2, N = 91) = 39.745$, $P < 0.00001$

- *wh*-relatives more frequent in obliques
- same for the earlier (but not the later) version of the Wycliffe Bible (Bacsikai-Atkari 2024)
- not attested in later corpus data (cf. Johansson 2012, Bacsikai-Atkari 2023; 2024)
- independent motivation: general lack of preposition stranding (see Bergh & Seppänen 2000)

→ major development: two strategies employed for a partial differentiation between subject and non-subject relative clauses

6 Conclusion

reconsidering the relative cycle – doubling stage as a potentially decisive middle stage, as in the negative cycle

- appearance of *wh*-relatives not motivated by reinforcement – language contact, analogy
- development: no substitution of *that*-relatives
- data from Middle English: doubling altogether a minority pattern
- subject/object asymmetries between *wh*-relatives and *that*-relatives already in Middle English

→ doubling in Middle English relative clauses as a subtype of the innovative *wh*-pattern – development essentially not cyclic

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