

# The journey of the relative pronoun *who* in the North of England

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

University of Amsterdam / University of Potsdam  
j.bacskaiatkari@uva.nl / julia.bacskai-atkari.1@uni-potsdam.de

8th International Conference on Late Modern English (LModE8)  
Salamanca, 2–4 October 2024

## 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:

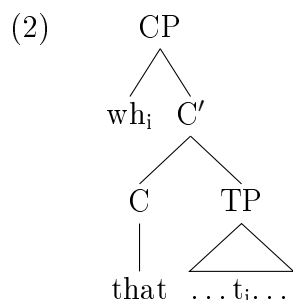
- *wh*-pronouns (especially *who*) promoted by prescriptive rules, already in Early Modern English (see e.g. Austen 1985, Ball 1996, van Gelderen 2009)
- *that* preferred in the spoken language (see e.g. Romaine 1982, Montgomery & Bailey 1991, Tagliamonte et al. 2005, van Gelderen 2009) and also in regional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

question: what changes (if any) apply to the subject/object asymmetry in British dialects (compared to norm-oriented contexts)

proposal: apparent reversal (or 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 2024c; 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 2024c)

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; 2024c), obliques potentially asymmetrical due to preposition stranding vs. pied piping (see Bacskai-Atkari 2024c 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 2024b) – between 1387 and 1400

	<b>SU</b>	<b>DO</b>
<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:  $X^2(2, N = 262) = 11.734$ ,  $P = 0.002831$
- asymmetry as expected

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

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

pattern:

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

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

	<b>SU</b>	<b>DO</b>
<i>who(m)/which</i>	<b>6330</b> (5339/924)	<b>1620</b> (398/1221)
<i>that</i>	<b>970</b>	<b>552</b>

pattern:

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

→ steady rise of *wh*-relatives in Middle and Early Modern English – apparently continued in strongly norm-oriented contexts in Late Modern English

## 4 Dialects in the North of England

question: whether an 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)

North: *wh*-relatives rare and *who* apparently absent in subject relatives in the SED but not in the NECTE and CSU corpora (Beal 2008)

low amount of contact with other languages/varieties (Trousdale 2020)

relative clauses in the North:

- *that* a dominant strategy, *wh*-strategy a minority pattern (Herrmann 2005)
- *that* also in non-restrictive relatives (Beal 2008, Herrmann 2005)
- loss of morphological case: no examples of *whom* in the sample of Herrmann (2005)
- zero relatives: also attested in subject relatives (Herrmann 2005)
- traditional strategy *as* apparently on the retreat (Kortmann & Wagner 2007) – 6 examples in the sample of Herrmann (2005)
- traditional strategy *at* (Beal 2008) – not shown in the areal distribution of Herrmann (2005: 25)
- innovative strategy: *what*-relatives (Herrmann 2005, Kortmann & Wagner 2007) – *what* as a uniform particle

examples for the additional strategies (Beal 2008: 132-133):

- (4)
- a. There's about twenty of them  $\emptyset$  are walking along.  
(NECTE)
  - b. He was a German **what** run this shop **what** I worked for.  
(CSU)
  - c. Kelvin **at** my first husband came out of.  
(CSU)

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)
- North: Central North (Westmorland, Cumberland, Lancashire)
- 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 North

database: Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects Sampler (FRED-S) – so far: data from the North (39 individuals) and from the Southwest of England (54 individuals; results similar to the North, see Bacskai-Atkari 2024a)

informants from the North:

- known age range: 47–93
- distribution: Lancashire (14), Yorkshire (12), Northumberland (5), Westmorland (5), Durham (3)
- uneven amount of contributions (also group interviews)

examples for *who*:

- (5) a. through a mate **who** worked there you see  
(FRED-S Dur\_002)
- b. That's **who** Kit married  
(FRED-S Nbl\_003)

examples for *which*:

- (6) a. put a deposit on a house **which** was being built  
(FRED-S Lan\_007)
- b. and you see, the thing was they had to be tempered according to the rock **which** you were boring  
(FRED-S Wes\_003)

examples for *that*:

- (7) a. if I showed the saw cuts of anything **that** shouldn't be there  
(FRED-S Yks\_001)
- b. the props **that** they put in  
(FRED-S Dur\_001)

results:

	<b>SU</b>	<b>DO</b>
<i>who/which</i>	<b>153</b> (38.15%)	<b>30</b> (26.32%)
<i>that</i>	<b>248</b> (61.85%)	<b>84</b> (73.68%)

significant differences with a tilted pattern:  $X^2(1, N = 515) = 5.4311, P = 0.01978$

unexpected asymmetry, just like in the highly normative context – potentially common Late Modern English development; alternatively: a minority pattern on the retreat, without grammatical distinction (occurring in the unmarked position)

but: asymmetry between *who* and *which* (same pattern in the Southwest, Bacskai-Atkari 2024a)

	SU	DO
<i>who</i>	65	1
<i>which</i>	88	29

difference statistically significant:  $X^2(1, N = 183) = 16.673, P < 0.00001$

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)

## 6 Conclusion

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

- *that*-strategy overall more frequent
- tilted asymmetry regarding *wh* versus *that* – similarly to a norm-oriented context
- but: pattern in the North caused by the loss of *whom*

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

## References

- Allen, Cynthia. 1977. *Topics in diachronic English syntax*: University of Massachusetts Amherst dissertation.
- Austen, Francis O. 1985. Relative *which* in late 18th-century usage: The Clift family correspondence. In Roger Eaton, Olga Fischer, Willem F. Koopman & Frederike van der Leek (eds.), *Papers from the 4th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics: Amsterdam, 10–13 April 1985*, 15–29. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi:doi.org/10.1075/cilt.41.05aus.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2020a. Changes affecting relative clauses in Late Modern English. In Merja Kytö & Erik Smitterberg (eds.), *Late Modern English: Novel encounters*, 91–115. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2020b. English relative clauses in a cross-Germanic perspective. *Nordlyd* 44. 93–115.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2022. Discourse-driven asymmetries between embedded interrogatives and relative clauses in West Germanic. In Nicholas Catasso, Marco Coniglio & Chiara De Bastiani (eds.), *Language change at the interfaces: Intrasentential and intersentential phenomena*, 189–214. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi:https://doi.org/10.1075/la.275.06bac.

- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2023. *The syntax of functional left peripheries: Clause typing in West Germanic and beyond*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2024a. The loss of *wh*-based relative pronouns in the southwest of England. Talk delivered at: 10th Biennial International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English (BICLCE2024), Alicante, University of Alicante, 26–28 September 2024.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2024b. Reconsidering the relative cycle: Reanalysis and language contact in Middle English relative clauses. Talk delivered at: The Linguistics Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Annual Conference 2024 (LAGB 2024), Newcastle, Newcastle University, 27–30 August 2024.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2024c. Subject-object asymmetries and the development of relative clauses between Late Middle English and Early Modern English. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 122(2). 308–326.
- Ball, Catherine N. 1996. A diachronic study of relative markers in spoken and written English. *Language Variation and Change* 8(2). 227–258. doi:10.1017/S0954394500001150.
- Beal, Joan. 2008. English dialects in the North of England: Morphology and syntax. In Bernd Kortmann & Clive Upton (eds.), *Varieties of English 1: The British Isles*, 373–403. Berlin: De Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110208399.2.373.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1989. *Language universals and linguistic typology: Syntax and morphology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Deane, Paul. 1992. *Grammar in mind and brain: Explorations in cognitive syntax*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Dekeyser, Xavier. 1986. Relative markers in the Peterborough Chronicle: 1070–1154. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 7(1). 93–105. doi:10.1515/flih.1986.7.1.93.
- Fleischer, Jürg. 2004. A typology of relative clauses in German dialects. In Bernd Kortmann (ed.), *Dialectology meets typology: Dialect grammar from a cross-linguistic perspective*, 211–243. Berlin: De Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110197327.211.
- Foley, William A. & Robert R. Van Valin. 1977. On the viability of the notion of ‘subject’ in universal grammar. In Kenneth Whistler, Robert D. Van Valin, Chris Chiarello, Jeri J. Jaeger, Miriam Petruck, Henry Thompson, Ronya Javkin & Anthony Woodbury (eds.), *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society Vol. 3.*, 293–320. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistic Society.
- van Gelderen, Elly. 2004. *Grammaticalization as economy*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi:10.1075/la.71.
- van Gelderen, Elly. 2009. Renewal in the left periphery: Economy and the complementiser layer. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 107(2). 131–195. doi:10.1111/j.1467-968X.2009.01216.x.
- Gisborne, Nikolas & Robert Truswell. 2017. Where do relative specifiers come from? In Eric Mathieu & Robert Truswell (eds.), *Micro-change and macro-change in diachronic syntax*, 25–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Givón, Talmy. 1976. Topic, pronoun and grammatical agreement. In Charles N. Li (ed.), *Subject and topic*, 149–188. London: Academic Press.
- Hawkins, John. 1995. *A performance theory of order and constituency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkins, John. 1999. Processing complexity and filler-gap dependencies across grammars. *Language* 75. 244–285.
- Herrmann, Tanja. 2005. Relative clauses in English dialects of the British Isles. In Bernd Kortmann, Tanja Herrmann, Lukas Pietsch & Susanne Wagner (eds.), *A comparative grammar of British English dialects 1: Agreement, gender, relative clauses*, 21–124. Berlin: De Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110197518.21.
- Johansson, Christine. 2012. Early Modern English: Relativization. In Alexander Bergs & Laurel J. Brinton (eds.), *English historical linguistics: An international handbook, Vol. I*, 776–790. Berlin: De Gruyter. doi:10.1515/9783110251593.776.
- Keenan, Edward L. & Bernard Comrie. 1977. Noun phrase accessibility and universal grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry* 8(1). 63–99.
- Keenan, Edward L. & Sarah Hawkins. 1987. The psychological validity of the accessibility hierarchy. In Edward L. Keenan (ed.), *Universal Grammar: 15 essays*, 60–85. London: Croon Helm.
- Kirby, Simon. 1996. *Function, selection and innateness: The emergence of language universals*: University of Edinburgh dissertation.
- Kortmann, Bernd & Susanne Wagner. 2005. The Freiburg English Dialect Project and Corpus (FRED). In Bernd Kortmann, Tanja Herrmann, Lukas Pietsch & Susanne Wagner (eds.), *A comparative grammar of British English dialects 1: Agreement, gender, relative clauses*, 1–20. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Kortmann, Bernd & Susanne Wagner. 2007. A fresh look at Late Modern English dialect syntax. In Javier Pérez-Guerra (ed.), *“Of varying language and opposing creed”: New insights into Late Modern English*, 279–300. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1991. *Foundations of cognitive grammar, Vol. 2: Descriptive application*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Montgomery, Michael & Guy Bailey. 1991. *In which*: A new form in written English. *American Speech* 66. 147–163. doi:10.2307/455883.
- Mustanoja, Tauno. 1960. *A Middle English syntax*. Helsinki: Société Néophilologique de Helsinki.
- Ringe, Donald & Ann Taylor. 2014. *The development of Old English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199207848.001.0001.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 1982. *Socio-historical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511720130.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 1984. Towards a typology of relative-clause formation strategies in Germanic. In Jacek Fisiak (ed.), *Historical syntax*, 437–470. Berlin: Mouton.
- Rydén, Mats. 1983. The emergence of *who* as relativizer. *Studia Linguistica* 37. 126–134.
- Santazilia, Ekaitz. 2022. *Animacy and inflectional morphology across languages*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tagliamonte, Sali, Jennifer Smith & Helen Lawrence. 2005. No taming the vernacular! Insights from the relatives in northern Britain. *Language Variation and Change* 17. 75–112. doi:10.1017/S0954394505050040.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 1992. Syntax. In Richard M. Hogg (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the English language, Volume I: The beginnings to 1066*, 168–289. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trousdale, Graeme. 2020. English dialects in the North of England. In Bernd Kortmann, Kerstin Lunkenheimer & Katharina Ehret (eds.), eWAVE: The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English. <https://ewave-atlas.org/languages/6>.