

# Subject-object asymmetries and the development of relative clauses between Late Middle English and Early Modern English\*

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## 1 Introduction

major relativisation strategies in English (headed relative clauses):

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

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

differentiation between *who(m)/which* (human vs. non-human) a later development – process continuing well into Early Modern English (Johansson 2017)

→ question: what the decisive factors are for the change(s)

proposal: function of the gap (subject vs. object) decisive

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## 2 Structural 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.

complementiser shows no sensitivity to the head noun – already in Middle English:<sup>1</sup>

- (3) and suggeð **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)

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

- (4) 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)

personal/nonpersonal distinction becoming more explicit in Early Modern English (Johansson 2012; 2017)

- (5) 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)

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<sup>1</sup>The Middle English examples are from the Michigan Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse.

### 3 Corpus study

comparison of the earlier version of the Wycliffe Bible (1380s–1390s) and the King James Bible (1611/1769)

earlier version of the Wycliffe Bible contains more examples for *wh*-relatives than the later version

advantages:

- same loci – differences cannot be due to different sentences; allows for some quantitative comparison
- same register

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 [ $\pm$ 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:

- (6) a. Many there be **which** say of my soul, There is no help for him in God. Selah.  
(King James Bible; Psalms 2:3)
- b. For better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldst be put lower in the presence of the prince **whom** thine eyes have seen.  
(King James Bible; Proverbs 25:7)

the elements corresponding to “who” in the King James Bible:

Role in KJB	Element in KJB	Number of occurrences
subject (5405)	<i>who</i>	<b>478</b> (8.84%)
	<i>which</i>	<b>1194</b> (22.09%)
	<i>that</i>	<b>3667</b> (67.84%)
	<i>as</i>	<b>26</b> (0.48%)
	<i>zero</i>	<b>23</b> (0.43%)
	<i>whoso</i>	<b>10</b> (0.19%)
	<i>whosoever</i>	<b>7</b> (0.13%)
other	–	202
TOTAL		5607

the elements corresponding to “whom” in the King James Bible:

Role in KJB	Element in KJB	Number of occurrences
<b>direct object (398)</b>	<i>whom</i>	<b>312</b> (78.39%)
	<i>which</i>	<b>76</b> (19.10%)
	<i>that</i>	<b>10</b> (2.51%)
<b>indirect object (2)</b>	<i>whom</i>	<b>2</b> (100%)
<b>PP complement (265)</b>	P + <i>whom</i>	<b>256</b> (96.60%)
	P + <i>which</i>	<b>7</b> (2.64%)
	<i>that</i>	<b>2</b> (0.75%)
other	–	39
TOTAL		704

subject/object asymmetry regarding *wh/that* strong

examples from Middle English:

- (7) 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. 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)

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 Wycliffe Bible (Genesis, Exodus):

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences
<b>subject (120)</b>	<i>who</i>	<b>8</b> (6.67%)
	<i>which</i>	<b>2</b> (1.67%)
	<i>the which</i>	<b>18</b> (15.00%)
	<i>that</i>	<b>86</b> (71.67%)
	zero	<b>1</b> (0.83%)
	<i>whoso</i>	<b>1</b> (0.83%)
	<i>whosoever</i>	<b>3</b> (2.50%)
	<i>whatever</i>	<b>1</b> (0.83%)
other	–	66
TOTAL		186

the elements corresponding to “whom” in the Wycliffe Bible (Genesis, Exodus):

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

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

distribution of *who(m)/which/that* in the Wycliffe Bible (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)/which/that* in the King James Bible (Genesis, Exodus):

	<i>who(m)</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>that</i>
subject	21	45	114
object	20	20	1

statistical findings (chi-square tests):

- significant correlation between *who(m)/which/that* and function ( $P < 0.00001$ )
- significant correlation between *wh/that* and function ( $P < 0.00001$ )
- but: no significant correlation between *who(m)/which* and function ( $P = 0.062444$ )

→ conclusions regarding subject/object asymmetries:

- *wh/that* asymmetry from Middle English onwards
- *who(m)/which* asymmetry in Late Middle English, disappears later
- no significant changes in subject relatives
- significant changes in object relatives: lower proportion of *that* and higher proportion of *which* in the King James Bible

*wh/that* asymmetry:

- 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)

→ lower proportion of *that* in the King James Bible expected based on the general development in the language

*who(m)/which* asymmetry: spread of *who(m)* shows a similar path – from the lower functions (direct object, PP complement)

but: higher proportion of *which* still somewhat unexpected

reasons:

- overall spread of *wh*-markers
- primary *wh*-marker still *which*

→ spread of *who* one step behind

similar asymmetries in the speech-related corpus of Johansson (2012) → phenomenon not due to the more archaic language of the King James Bible (cf. van Gelderen 2014)

→ emergence of *who* related to a subject/non-subject distinction (see Bacskai-Atkari 2020b)

## 4 Conclusion

differences in the distribution of relative markers in Late Middle English and Early Modern English

- overall development: spread of the *wh*-strategy
- development in *wh*-relatives: spread of *who*
- both processes start from the lower functions in the Accessibility Hierarchy

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

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