

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

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# 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)
- a. This is the professor [**who/that** wrote the book].
  - b. This is the professor [**who(m)/that** we invited].
  - c. This is the book [**which/that** was a great success].
  - d. This is the book [**which/that** the professor wrote].

# Optionality

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)

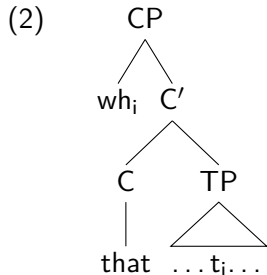
# Proposal

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

## 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



## 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

## Relative 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

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

## Middle English

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

## Early Modern English

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

## Modern English

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>	970	552



# Pattern

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

So...

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

## Dialects in the North 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

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)

## Literature

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

## 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

	SU	DO
<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%)

# Asymmetry

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)

# Pronouns

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

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

# Paradigm

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

# Animacy

→ 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)



# 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

Thank you!

Danke!

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