

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

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Introduction

major relativisation strategies in English (headed relative clauses):

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

Development

the relative cycle (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

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.

Complementisers

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.

Middle English

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

- (3) and suggeð **feole þinges**; bi Arðure þan kinge. // **þat**
and say many things about Arthur the king that
næuere nes i-wurðen
never not-was 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)

Doubling

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

- (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)

Early Modern English

personal/nonpersonal distinction becoming more explicit
(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)

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 shouldest be put lower in the presence of the prince **whom** thine eyes have seen.
(King James Bible; Proverbs 25:7)

King James Bible

the elements corresponding to “who”:

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

King James Bible

the elements corresponding to “whom”:

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

Asymmetry

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

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

Wycliffe Bible (Genesis, Exodus)

the elements corresponding to “who”:

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

Wycliffe Bible (Genesis, Exodus)

the elements corresponding to “whom”:

Role in WB	Element in WB	Number of occurrences
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>which</i>	4 (25.00%)
other	–	15
TOTAL		64

Question

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

Wycliffe Bible (Genesis, Exodus)

distribution of *who(m)/which/that*:

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

Findings

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

King James Bible (Genesis, Exodus)

distribution of *who(m)/which/that*:

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

Findings

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 ($P = 0.062444$)

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

Similarities

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)

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



Thank you!

Danke!

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