

Where do relative pronouns come from?

(Oral presentation)

This paper examines the diachrony of English relative clauses, focusing on the relationships between lexical change and directional “pathways” of syntactic change. Headed relatives with relative pronouns (as opposed to indeclinable relative particles like *that*) are common in Indo-European (IE), but almost nonexistent elsewhere: they are attested in 27 of 40 IE languages in de Vries (2002), but only 7 of 132 other languages. However, such relatives were not plausibly a feature of Proto-IE, as the oldest attested IE languages all use correlative relative clauses (Haudry 1973, Kiparsky 1995, Bianchi 2000). A correlative is a biclausal paratactic structure like (1), from Hindi. The second clause contains a demonstrative NP (*vo* in (1)), anaphorically related to a relative element in the first clause (*jo laRkii* in (1)).

- 1) [*jo laRkii khaRii hai*][*vo lambii hai*]
which girl standing is that tall is
“The girl who is standing is tall” (Srivastav 1991: 639-40)

Headed relative pronouns must have evolved independently in several IE daughter languages, then, suggesting a “pathway” in which hypotactic headed relatives with relative pronouns develop from paratactic correlatives.

The history of English illustrates this pathway on a smaller scale. Old English (OE) could form relative clauses with *þe* (an ancestor of *that*), with inflected demonstrative pronouns, as in (2), or with both.

- 2) *Her feng to Dearne rice Osric þone Paulinus ær gefullode*
Here succeeded to Dearne kingdom Osric dem Paulinus earlier baptized
“In this year Osric, whom Paulinus had earlier baptized, succeeded to the kingdom of Deira” (Peterborough Chronicle, 12th century, Allen 1977: 83)

OE *wh*-forms had three functions: they appeared in questions, as interrogatives, and in generalizing relatives such as (3). They did not appear in headed relatives.

- 3) *And to swa hwilcere leode swa we cumað, we cunnon þære gereord*
and to so which people as we come we know their language
“And whichever people we come to, we know their language.” (Ælfric Homilies, c.1000)

Inflected demonstratives disappeared from English as case inflection declined after 1000AD, and headed *wh*-relatives emerged gradually over c.1100-1500AD. The innovation of headed *wh*-relatives cannot be a case of lexical replacement (with new forms assuming the function of inflected demonstratives as the latter disappear) for two reasons. First, the OE system of case inflections collapsed several generations before headed *wh*-relatives emerged in Middle English (MidE, Allen 1977). Second, clause-medial headed *wh*-relatives are unattested in early MidE, which suggests that *wh*-relatives, like correlatives, were initially paratactic structures. Clause-final headed *wh*-relatives like (4a) emerge at a time when clause-medial non-*wh* relatives like (4b) were attested, but it was fully 200 years before the emergence of unambiguously hypotactic clause-medial *wh*-relatives like (4c).

- 4a) *meister we wolden sen sum fortočne of þe. Warbi we mihten cnowen gif it*
master we would see some sign of you whereby we might know if it
soð were þat þu seist
true were that you say
“Master, we would like to see some sign from you, whereby we might know if what you say is true” (Trinity homilies, c.1200)

- 4b) *Ɔas & feola oþre þa wæron þær kyninges þeonestmen hitgeotton ealle*
 These and many other dem.pl were there king's attendants it confirmed all
 "These, and many others who were there of the king's attendants, all confirmed it."
 (Peterborough Chronicle) (Peterborough Chronicle, 12th century)
- 4c) *And the Lord God bildide [the rib [which he hadde take __fro Adam]] in to a woman*
 "And the Lord God formed the rib which he had taken from Adam into a woman"
 (Wycliffe, Old Testament, late 14th century)

Therefore, English has independently developed two sets of declinable relative pronouns in its history, despite their typological rarity. Moreover, there are several interacting, gradual, and directional pathways at work in the innovation of headed *wh*-relatives (the earlier development of headed relatives with inflected demonstratives clearly had slightly different properties – see Hock 1991 – but largely took place before written records exist, and so is not amenable to close textual analysis in the same way): *wh*-pronouns shifted from generalizing to definite interpretation, and concurrently spread from left-dislocated to right-dislocated to clause-medial environments. Moreover, as documented by Romaine (1982), this happened at different times for different positions on the accessibility hierarchy, with oblique and adverbial headed *wh*-relatives appearing first (as in (4a)), and object and subject pronouns (as in (4c)) emerging c.200 years later.

We aim to understand this apparently complex, constructional, directed change in terms of a series of local lexical reanalyses, by analogy with evolution by natural selection, which can give a global illusion of teleology, despite being composed of a series of small, locally directionless, changes. Our motivation in this respect is that, for many modern lexicalist theories of syntax, all syntactic change ultimately reduces to lexical change (Roberts & Roussou 2003) – a hypothesis which will gain in plausibility to the extent that a complex change like this can be understood in lexicalist terms.

From this perspective, grammatical pathways can give indirect information about biases during language acquisition. The gradual changes identified above plausibly all reflect local ambiguities. For example, the innovation of definite *wh*-pronouns may be facilitated by contexts like (5), where the quantificational force of the *wh*-form is unclear in context.

- 5) *Swa hwær swa þæt hold biþ, þider gadriað þa earnas*
 so where so that body is there gather the eagles
 "Eagles will gather {wherever/in the place where} that body is" (Ælfric homilies)

Likewise, following Hock (1991), the spread from clause-final to clause-medial position can be understood as reanalysis of a paratactic structure as one where a *wh*-clause is embedded within a clause-final NP. We show how each of these small changes can be motivated by biases towards simple, and mutually exclusive, lexical representations. This suggests that a large-scale pathway of grammatical change can be grounded in local, lexical reanalysis.

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