

# Where do relative pronouns come from?

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## Headed relative types

1. Is there a **specifier** (phrasal, linked to gap site)?
2. Is there a **complementizer** (head, invariant)?

The food 

which that	which
that	∅

 she ate.

## Relative specifiers and IE

- Relative specifiers are massively skewed towards IE.

	IE	Other
Rel spec	27	7
No rel spec	13	125

Summary of languages in De Vries (2002).

- But PIE had relative specifiers only in correlatives, not headed relatives.

## Broad research question

Why do relative specifiers evolve so frequently in IE headed relatives, and so rarely elsewhere?

## Smaller research question

- English has had two sets of headed relative specifiers.
  1. Inflected demonstratives (OE)
  2. *Wh*-phrases (ME)
- These are the two major diachronic sources of headed relative specifiers.
- Precursors of the second set exist before the first set disappears.
- These can teach us about language-internal influences on the emergence of one type of headed relative specifier.
- It also rules out functionalist explanations based on *renouveau* formel.
- Hypothesis: language-internal factors had already paved the way for the development of headed *wh*-relatives, while *th*-relatives were still common.

## Potential antecedents among OE *wh*-forms

- OE had three uses of *wh*-forms.
  1. Indefinites (NPIs?)
  2. Questions
  3. Free relatives (mainly in peripheral positions)
- Clause-final free relatives are the most likely source of postnominal headed relatives.
- OE free *wh*-relatives are typically discussed as “generalizing” or “indefinite”, but the indefiniteness is not always clear.
  - (1) ... ac sprecð [swa hwæt swa he gehyrð]  
but spoke so what so he heard  
“but he repeated (whatever/the thing that) he had heard” (coaelhom,7:27.1074)
- Several arguments suggest that they are not inherently definite or indefinite.

## Argument 1: Marking generality

- OE has overt markers of generality — surprising if generality is inherent.
  - (2) a. onginn nu to donne [loc hwæt þe geðynce]  
begin now to do look what thee think  
“Begin now to do whatever comes to mind” (coaelhom,24:180.3878)
  - b. And gif he þurh his drycraeft þæt fyr adwescan mæg, gewitna hi [ealle loca hu þu wylle]  
And if he through his sorcery that fire quench may punish them all look how thou will  
“And if he manages to quench that fire with his sorcery, punish them however you like” (coaelive,261.1097)

## Argument 2: Inferring generality from context

- Many independent factors can strongly favour a generalizing interpretation. These cases do not constitute evidence that the *wh*-relative itself is generalizing.
  - (3) a. Ond he sona ðurhferde eall Breotone ealond, [swa hwyder ymb swa Ongolþeode drohtedon & wunedon]  
and he soon through.travelled all Britain’s island so whither about so Englishmen dwelled and lived  
“And he immediately travelled through all of Britain, wherever Englishmen dwelled and lived” (cobede,4:2.258.5.2621)
  - b. & do þonne on þæt hors, oððe on [swa hwylc neat swa hit sie]  
and do then on that horse or on so which animal so it be  
“and do [put holy water] on that horse, or whichever animal it may be” (colacnu,118.1.578)

## If nothing favours generality, generality comes and goes

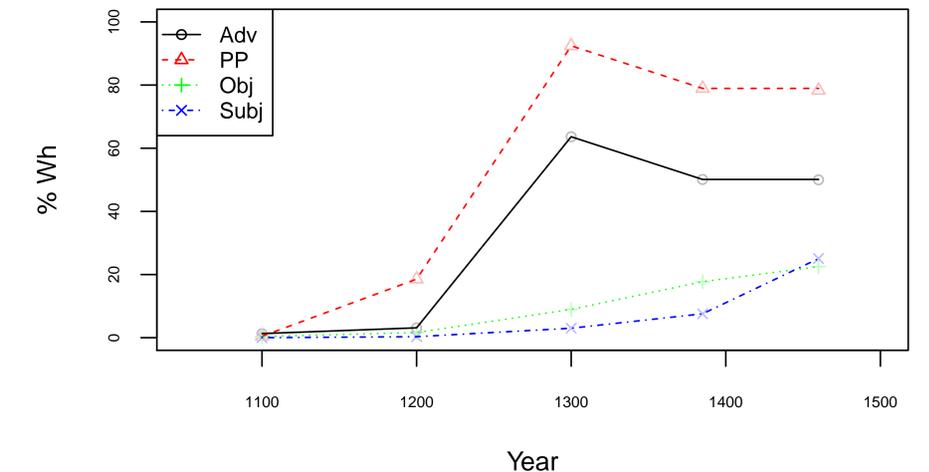
- (4) **Probably generalizing:**
  - a. ac ic swaðeah wat þæt God þe getiþað [swa hwæs swa þu hine bitst]  
but I yet know that God thee grants so what so you him ask  
“But yet I know that God grants you what you ask him for” (coaelhom,6:51.893)
- Probably definite:**
  - b. & ic cydde eow [swa hwæt swa ic æt minum fæder gehyrde]  
and I told you so what so I at my father heard  
“And I told you what I heard from my father” (cocathom1,36:488.63.7179)

## Free *wh*-relatives in apposition

- OE free relatives (with generalizing interpretations) can occur in apposition to a preceding DP, adjacent or nonadjacent.
  - (5) a. ðu sægst þæt God selle ælcum men freedom swa good to donne swa yfel, [swæðer he wille]  
you say that God give all men freedom so good to do so evil so.whether he will  
“You say that God gives all men freedom to do good or evil, whichever he chooses” (coboeth,41.141.22.2827)
  - b. and eow ealle þing geswutelað, [swa hwæt swa ic eow secge]  
and you all thing show so what so I you say  
“and [he] explains to you everything that I tell you” (coaelhom,10:11.1410)

## Guesses about what happened next

- Possible steps in the emergence of headed *wh*-relatives.
  1. *Wh*-relatives in apposition to definite NPs could emerge;
  2. Apposition could be reinterpreted as modification;
  3. Clause-final free relatives in apposition could be reanalysed as extraposed headed relatives;
  4. This reanalysis would pave the way for the introduction of clause-medial *wh*-relatives.
- A clause-medial RC with a distinct antecedent is unambiguously a headed *wh*-relative.
- These emerged very gradually (ME: c.4% clause-medial; EME: 14–19%; MBE: 24%)
- As is well known (e.g. Maxwell 1982), they spread gradually up the accessibility hierarchy.



*Wh*-relatives by grammatical function in ME

- One future challenge is to make sense of these very gradual developments in terms of the grammars of individual speakers.

## Conclusion

- Where do relative pronouns come from? In this case, the best guess is that they came from earlier grammars of English.
- It seems plausible (though far from proven) to attribute the emergence of this typologically rare construction to a series of simple reanalyses, not to borrowing or to any “European language type”.
- Next steps:
  1. Can we learn anything about acquisition biases from the gradual spread of headed *wh*-relatives (12th–16th centuries)?
  2. Which elements of the story for English headed *wh*-relatives are transferable to the development of relative specifiers in other languages?

## Details

Research partially funded by the Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa. All data from YCOE. A more detailed version with references is available at [http://artsites.uottawa.ca/robtruswell/doc/CLA\\_Rel\\_Slides.pdf](http://artsites.uottawa.ca/robtruswell/doc/CLA_Rel_Slides.pdf).