The origins of clause-medial *wh*-relatives in Middle English

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CLA, 2/6/13
Section 1

Introduction
Postnominal relatives and relative pronouns

- Broad 3-way distinction:
  1. Postnominal RCs: I’ll have [the food \(\text{that} \ [\text{she’s having } \_\]}.]
  2. Free RCs: I’ll have \(\text{what she’s having}_\_\).
  3. Reduced RCs: I’ll have the food \(\text{prepared } \_\_\text{by the Michelin-starred chef}\).

- We’re primarily interested in postnominal RCs.
Subtypes of English postnominal relative

- A $2 \times 2$ classification of English postnominal relatives.
  1. Is $\text{[Spec,C]}$ filled by a relative specifier?
  2. Is $C^0$ filled by a relative complementizer?

(1) The food $\frac{\text{which that}}{\text{that}}\frac{\text{which}}{\emptyset}$ she’s having __.

- *Which that* is no longer attested, but all four variants occurred in Middle English (Keyser 1975, Chomsky & Lasnik 1977).

- NB: standard terms for *relative specifier/complementizer* are *relative pronoun/particle*. I avoid these because they’re misleading (*that* looks like a pronoun) and vague.
The typological weirdness of this

- Postnominal relatives with just a complementizer are crosslinguistically common and are attested throughout the written history of English.
- Zero-relatives have a more interesting diachrony in English, but English doesn’t look hugely weird here.
- The relative specifiers are unusual: they are substantially restricted to Indo-European.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I-E</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rel spec</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No rel spec</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>125</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Marking of postnominal relatives in 172 languages from meta-analysis of typological literature in De Vries (2002), \( p \approx 0 \)

- Non-IE languages with relative specifiers do exist (Hungarian, Bambara, Georgian), but are rare enough for relative specifiers to form part of Comrie’s (1998) “European-type”.
Even worse

- This is not because relative specifiers have descended from Proto-Indo-European. PIE may have had them in correlatives, but not in postnominal relatives.
- So the broad research question is: Why do relative specifiers keep evolving in IE languages, but evolve so rarely elsewhere?
- We won’t get near that question today, but we will consider one case-study: the emergence of *wh*-phrases in English postnominal relatives.
- One rationale for choosing this change: availability of excellent corpus data (*YCOE*, Taylor et al. 2003; *PPCME2*, Kroch & Taylor 2000).
Two types of relative specifier in the history of English

- English poses the same question as IE, in microcosm: English has had two series of relative specifiers in its history, despite their typological rarity.
  1. Old English used inflected demonstratives as relative specifiers.
  2. The *wh*-relative specifiers used today emerged in Middle English.

- Demonstratives and *wh*-specifiers are the two most common sources of postnominal relative specifiers (Hendery 2012).

- Postnominal relatives with inflected demonstratives are already attested in the earliest English texts (Hock 1991); they disappeared with the decline of the OE system of case inflections (Allen 1980).

- Postnominal *wh*-relatives emerge soon after the decline of inflected demonstratives.
This all looks very functionalist

- This pattern looks like *renouvellement formel*: the grammar of English is set up in such a way that English should have relative specifiers, and when its current set of relative specifiers disappears, it uses whatever else is around.

- Alternatively, postnominal *wh*-relatives could have been borrowings from Latin or French.

- We present evidence that changes in the grammar of *wh*-forms are instead largely causally independent of changes in the grammar of demonstratives.

- The argument is based on two new observations, backed by corpus data:
  1. Postnominal *wh*-relatives initially tended to occur in different positions in the clause from postnominal relatives with inflected demonstratives.
  2. *Wh*-forms were already used in constructions syntactically and semantically very close to postnominal relatives in the OE period.
Section 2

Position of the relative clause
The distribution of demonstrative relatives

- OE demonstrative relatives are typically clause-final.

(2) Gehereð nu þæt se byð Godes bearn geceid [se heard now that he is God’s child called DEM þe wyle gesibsum beon] C will peaceful be “They heard now that he who would be peaceful is called God’s child.” (Alcuin, *De virtutibus et vitiis*)

- But there are exceptions: just under 5% of examples, like (3), are clause-medial throughout OE and ME.

(3) þas & feola őpre [þa væron þær kyninges these and many others DEM were there king’s þeonestmen] hit geotton ealle attendants it confirmed all “These, and many others who were there of the king’s attendants, all confirmed it” (Peterborough chronicle)
The distribution of $Wh$-relatives

- The few OE postnominal $wh$-relatives are exclusively clause-final.

  (4) ... & seotte þa dæi [hwonne man scolde þæt and sought the day when man should that mynstre gehalegon] minster consecrate “and [he] asked on which day the minister should be consecrated.” (Peterborough chronicle)

- Clause-medial $wh$-relatives emerged gradually in ME.

  (5) For þe earest Pilunge [hwer of al þis uuel For the cruellest deprivation where of all this evil is] nis buten of prude is not is except of pride “For the cruellest deprivation, which is the root of all this evil, comes only from pride” (Ancrene riwle)
Nonfinal postnominal relatives

Figure 1: Nonfinal postnominal relatives by period
Let’s not overdo this

- There are several reasons to see this as suggestive, rather than conclusive, evidence of a distributional difference between postnominal *wh*- and demonstrative relatives.
  - The differences are too small to be significant, for the most part.
  - There is sparse data for *wh*-relatives in OE and for demonstrative relatives in ME.
  - There are confounds from grammatical function (early *wh*-relatives, like late demonstrative relatives, are predominantly adverbial).
- But still, it does suggest that *wh*-relatives don’t just fit into a void left by the disappearance of demonstrative relatives.
Section 3

Semantics of OE $wh$-phrases
OE *wh*-phrases: Standard description

- It is standardly claimed that OE *wh*-phrases have three functions:

  1. **Indefinites (NPIs?)**
     
     *(6) and gif hwa hyt bletsað, þonne ablinð seo
     and if who it blesses then ceases DEM
     dydrung.
     illusion
     “And if anyone blesses it, then the illusion is dispelled”*

  2. **Questions**
     
     *(7) Saga me on hwilcne dæig he gesingode
     Say me on which day he sang
     “Tell me which day he sang on”*

  3. **Generalizing free relatives**
     
     *(8) [eal swa hwæt swa ic þe gehet] [eal ic hit
     all so what so I thee promised all I it
     gesette]
     appoint
     “Whatever I promised you, I will do it all”*
The distribution of free *wh*-relatives

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<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
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<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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Table 2: Rough distribution of OE free *wh*-relatives in clauses. “Initial” = left-dislocated or subject; “final” = immediately before end of sentence; “medial” = everything else.

- Clause-initial free relatives, although very salient to analysts, are unlikely candidates for reanalysis as postnominal relatives.
- We’re more interested in the other $\frac{2}{3}$ of the free relatives. Today: just the final free relatives (as most likely precursor of final postnominal relatives).
How generalizing are clause-final *wh*-relatives?

- Main claim: it really isn’t obvious that clause-final *wh*-relatives are generalizing, and sometimes it’s obvious that they aren’t.
- Many examples are like this:

  (9) ... ac sprecð [swa hwæt swa he gehyrð]
      but spoke so what so he heard
      “but he repeated (whatever/the thing that) he had heard” (Ælfric, Homilies)

- *Swa hw... swa* is traditionally taken to be a generalizing construction. However, examples like (9) do not seem straightforwardly generalizing.
- Often, context will favour a generalizing or a definite reading, but not always.
Generality is often marked

- If free *wh*-relatives are unambiguously generalizing, it is striking that OE employs so many other resources to militate in favour of a generalizing interpretation.

- **Particles**

(10) 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” (*Ælfric Homilies*)

b. And gif he þurh his drycraeft þæt fyr And if he through his sorcery that fire adwescan mæg, gewitna hi [ealle loca hu quench may punish them all look how þu wylle] thou will “And if he manages to quench that fire with his sorcery, punish them however you like” (*Ælfric, Lives of saints*)
Generality is often independently inferrable

- Sometimes, we would know a generalizing interpretation were intended from other linguistic cues, even if \( wh \) were not interpreted as generalizing.

- **Quantification over something else**

  (11) Ond he sona ḏurhferde \( eall \) Breetone and he soon through.travelled all Britain’s ealond, [swa hwyder ymb swa Ongol̄peode island so whither about so Englishmen drohtedon & wunedon] dwelled and lived
  “And he immediately travelled through all of Britain, wherever Englishmen dwelled and lived” (Bede, History of the English church)

  (Modals would come here too)

- **Negation**

  (12) \& ic næbbe [hwider ic ahylde min heafod] and I NOT.have whither I recline my head
  “and I have nowhere to lay my head” (Ælfric, Catholic homilies)
Generality is often independently inferrable

- More of the same.
  - **Disjunction**
    
    (13)  
    ðu sægst þæt God selle ðælcum men freodom swa you say that God give all men freedom so good to donne swa yfel, [swæðer he wille] 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” (Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*)

- **Subjunctive**
  
  (14)  
  & do þonne on þæt hors, oððe on [swa hwylc and do then on that horse or on so which neat swa hit sie]
  animal so it be
  “and do [put holy water] on that horse, or whichever animal it may be” (*Lacnunga*)
Otherwise, *swa hwæt swa* doesn’t force generality

(15)  
\[\text{ac ic swaðeah wat } \text{þæt God } \text{þe getiþað } [\text{swa hwæs but I yet know that God thee grants so what swa } \text{þu hine bitst}]\]  
so you him ask  
“But yet I know that God grants you what you ask him for”  
(*Ælfric, Homilies*)

(16)  
\[\text{Hat him findan } [\text{hwar he hine mæge wurðlicost Bid him find where he him may honourably-est gerestan]}\]  
rest  
“[he] asked him to consider where he may most honourably stay”  
(*Apollonius of Tyre*)

(17)  
\[\text{& ic cydde eow } [\text{swa hwæt swa ic æt minum fæder and I told you so what so I at my father gehyrde}]\]  
heard  
“And I told you what I heard from my father”  
(*Ælfric, Catholic homilies*)
Final point: OE *wh*-relatives need not behave as arguments, but can also appear in apposition to an argument.

(18) ˈðu sægst þæt God selle ðælsum men freodom swa you say that God give all men freedom so good to donne swa yfel, [swæðer he wille]
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” (Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*)

(19) and eow ealle þing geswutelað, swa hwæt swa ic and you all thing show so what so I
eow secge you say
“and [he] explains to you everything that I tell you” (Ælfric, Homilies)
Section 4

Conclusion
Ingredients from OE

- OE *wh*-relatives can already:
  1. Receive definite interpretations;
  2. Appear clause-finally;
  3. Appear in apposition to another NP

- This makes them a likely source for postnominal relatives, which can:
  1. Receive definite interpretations;
  2. Appear postnominally or be extraposed to clause-final position;
  3. Modify, or appear in apposition to, another NP.

- So we could invoke *renouvellement formel*, or wholesale constructional borrowing (from French or Latin), but we probably don’t have to: there is a plausible language-internal source for postnominal *wh*-relatives.
What happened next?

- Postnominal *wh*-relatives appeared very gradually over the 12th–16th centuries.
- They slowly spread from clause-final to clause-medial position.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1150–1250</th>
<th>1250–1350</th>
<th>1350–1420</th>
<th>1420–1500</th>
<th>1500–1640</th>
<th>1640–1770</th>
<th>1770–1914</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>c.14</td>
<td>c.19</td>
<td>c.24</td>
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*Table 3: Percentage of postnominal *wh*-relatives in clause-medial position*
What happened next?

- They also slowly spread up the Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977, Romaine 1982, Suárez-Gómez 2006), from the most to the least oblique grammatical function.
What may have happened next

- This suggests a story along the following lines:
  1. Clause-final appositive free relatives become reanalysed as extraposed postnominal relatives;

     (20) a. \( \ldots \text{NP}_i \ldots [\text{wh} \ldots]_i \)
     b. \( \ldots [\text{NP} \text{ NP} x_i] \ldots [\text{wh} \ldots]_i \)

  2. Postnominal \( \textit{wh} \)-relatives are initially restricted to low-accessibility functions, then spread up the accessibility hierarchy (by whatever mechanism usually allows that).

  3. Further reanalysis allows clause-medial postnominal \( \textit{wh} \)-relatives.

     (21) a. \( \ldots [\text{NP} \text{ D} \text{ N} x_i] [\text{CP} \text{ wh} \ldots]_i \)
     b. \( \ldots [\text{NP} \text{ D} \text{ N} [\text{CP} \text{ wh} \ldots]] \)
     c. \( \ldots [\text{NP} \text{ D} \text{ N} [\text{CP} \text{ wh} \ldots]] \ldots \)

- Certainly not proven, but hopefully plausible.
General conclusion

▶ There is so much work on the synchronic syntax and semantics of *wh*-forms and relative clauses, because there is a range of formal and interpretive variants, and the lines between them are not often clear.

▶ The above results hint that the learner is often in the same position as the analyst in these respects: subtle ambiguities can lead to small reanalyses, which can feed apparently gradual change.

▶ It is easy, as an analyst, to reach for borrowing or *renouvellement formel* as an explanation of phenomena like these, but in this case, it appears that language-internal factors may be sufficient to explain the development of postnominal *wh*-relatives.
Bibliography


