

# Renewal of Grammatical Forms in the History of English<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the development of English, new relative pronouns (*wh*-words) were introduced, while the relative pronouns used in Old English (*se/seþe*) underwent various restrictions of morphological nature (case, gender and number marking), thus tending to become progressively less frequently used. This paper attempts to describe the distribution of pronominal relativizers in Old and Middle English and reconstruct the conditions for their renewal.

## 1. Introduction

The pronominal relativization strategy has been present throughout the history of the English language. In earlier English, relative pronouns were represented by the demonstrative elements *se/seþe*, which were from late Middle English onwards substituted by *wh*-relative pronouns, still available in Present-day English.

In his typological analysis of relative clauses, Comrie in different studies (1989: 149) observes that the relative pronoun is a widespread relativization strategy in Germanic and Romance languages, but is cross-linguistically quite rare. This pronominal relativization strategy shows the following features:

- a. It involves case-coding relative pronouns, i.e. elements belonging to a specific set of pronouns that characteristically introduce relative clauses.
- b. These elements are of nominal character, in the sense that they are variable, they may be declined and they agree (in gender and

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to the Autonomous Government of Galicia (grant no. PGIDIT05PXIC20401PN), the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (CONSOLIDER grant HUM2007-60706) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF/FEDER) for generous financial support.

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number) with the antecedent they resume and in case with the syntactic function they realize.

- c. Cross-linguistically, they are usually related to the demonstrative or interrogative pronouns of the language (Keenan, 1985: 149-152).
- d. Relative pronouns are also characterized by being fronted to the initial position of their clause from the position where they are generated, regardless of the unmarked word-order of the language at issue and irrespective of the syntactic function they realize, whether subject (example (1)) or prepositional complements, both in Present-Day English (example (2)) and in earlier English (example (3)):

(1) I didn't know anybody [rc **who** acted like that].

(2) The desert [rc **in which** I would like to live].

(3) & gebaed hine se woer [rc **of ðæm** ða diowblas foerdon] þætte ...

*& ordered him the man of rel the devils went that*

*"And the man out of whom the devils were departed ordered him that..."*

[Q O3 XX NEWT LIND 8: 38]

In Old English, the 'relative pronoun relativization strategy' is represented by members of the paradigm of the demonstrative pronouns *se/seo/þæt*, either on their own (3) (dative form of *se*), or as compound elements by the addition of the indeclinable particle *þe* (4).

(4) & sendende ofslog ealle þa cnehtas [RC **þa þe** werun in bethlem]

*& sending killed all the boys rel were in Bethlehem*

*"...And sending (Herod) killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem."* [Q

O3 XX NEWT RUSHW 2: 16]

From Middle English onwards the pronominal relativizers *se* and *seþe* coexist with other relative pronouns, namely the *wh*-elements, as in example (5).

(5) ðat on scolde cumen of his kenne [RC ðurh **hwam** all mankenn scolde bien

*that one should come from his family through rel all mankind  
 should be  
 blessed]  
 blessed  
 “one should come of this family through whom all mankind should be  
 blessed” [Q M1 IR RELT VICES 1: 109]*

In sum, the pronominal relativization strategy has always existed in English, from Old English times to Present-Day English, but the elements involved have changed throughout the history of the language. Old and Early Middle English have elements inherited from the demonstrative pronominal system (*se(þe)/seo(þe)/þat(þe)*), and from Middle English onwards, the pronominal relativizers are represented by *wh-* words, derived from the interrogative pronouns. Available historical data point to a reduction of inflections as one of the main causes to account for the change: from a [+ gender, + number, + case] strategy to a more simplified strategy marking only [+ case], in line with the progressive reduction of English from a synthetic to an analytic language. Another cause frequently pointed out for the emergence of *wh-* pronouns as relativizers is the influence of Romance languages, such as French or Latin.

My intention in this paper is to analyze the distribution of the elements of the pronominal relativization strategy and attempt to reconstruct the conditions for their renewal, the change from *se/seþe* to *wh-*. In the analysis, I will try to answer the question “why and how *wh-* replaced *se(þe)*?”

## **2. Keenan and Comrie’s Accessibility Hierarchy and Maxwell’s Diachronic Generalizations**

In their analysis of relativization in different languages of the world, Keenan and Comrie observe that the syntactic functions of the relativized noun phrase (or relativizer) do not vary randomly. On the contrary, they discovered the existence of strong tendencies across languages to conform to a hierarchy that relative clause formation follows almost without exception, and constitutes the evidence to posit their ‘Accessibility Hierarchy’ (Keenan and Comrie, 1977: 66):

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SU > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > OCOMP

The Accessibility Hierarchy (AH) is a hierarchical ordering of noun phrase positions which can be relativized from the most to the least accessible, i.e. the easiest and hence most frequently relativized at the left-end of the hierarchy, to the most difficult and less frequently relativized syntactic functions at the right end.

The ‘Accessibility Hierarchy’, with synchronic implications, has been used by Maxwell (1982) to predict some following diachronic generalizations (DG), only 4 of which have been selected for the relevance for the present study:

- “DG IIa: No strategy may skip any position(s) when spreading across the AH” (1982: 140);
- “DG IIIa: No strategy may skip any position(s) while receding along the AH” (1982: 140);
- “DG V: Two strategies in a given language tend to complement each other; as one advances, the other recedes” (1982: 150);
- “DG VI: The form of a new relative clause strategy in a given language is severely restricted by the nature of the strategies already present. The new strategy must to a certain extent share syntactic features with those already present, since the former is diachronically derived from the latter” (1982: 150).

Inspired by Maxwell, my purpose here is to demonstrate how the Accessibility Hierarchy can also be used to characterize the change in the elements that have represented the relative pronoun relativization strategy throughout the history of the English language, that is, the change from *se* to *wh*- relative pronouns.

Using Maxwell’s analysis I will attempt to provide answers to the following questions (see Suárez-Gómez, forthcoming):

- i. How do *wh*- words spread across the AH, once they start to be used as adnominal relativizers?
- ii. How do *se* and *sepe* relative pronouns recede from the AH?
- iii. Are *wh*- words dragged by the recession of *se* and *sepe*?

- iv. What are the consequences of the introduction of *wh*- words for *se* and *seþe*?

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Description of the corpus

The data for the present study have been extracted from *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts: Diachronic and Dialectal*. Texts from late Old English (O3 and O4) and Middle English (M1 and M3) have been included in the analysis. Table 1 below sets out the number of words and tokens found per chronological sub-period.

Table 1. Corpus.

Period	Sub-periods	Nr of words	Nr of tokens
OE	O3 (950-1050)	36,630	121
	O4 (1050-1150)	53,960	91
ME	M1 (1150-1250)	75,800	54
	M3 (1420-1500)	57,774	119
	TOTAL	224,164	385

As can be seen in Table 1, the corpus contains ca. 225,000 words and has rendered 385 examples of relative clauses introduced by pronominal relativizers. For the compilation of the corpus, only original prose texts have been selected in order to avoid any possible influence from French and/or Latin originals, particularly where *wh*-relative pronouns are concerned. The last period to come under our analysis was late Middle English (M3), because by this time (1420-1500) *wh*-relative pronouns were already well-established, and analysis of later texts was therefore unnecessary.

#### 3.2. Distribution of pronominal relativizers

The distribution of pronominal relativizers in the corpus under analysis is illustrated in the following table:

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Table 2. Distribution of pronominal relativizers.

	O3	O4	M1	M3	TOTAL
<i>Se(pe)</i>	121	91	47 (87%)	-	259
<i>Wh-(that)</i>	-	-	7 (13%)	119	126
TOTAL	121	91	54	119	385

The only pronominal relativizers available in Old English are *se* and *sepe*. In early Middle English, *se(pe)* is the most frequent pronominal relativizer, however it is not the only available (as before) and coexist with *wh-* words, which very timidly begin their incursion into the English language (13%). Finally, the late Middle English texts show the complete disappearance of Old English relative pronouns and the adoption of *wh-* words as the only member of the pronominal relativization strategy.

In other words, *wh-*elements start functioning as relativizers in Middle English at the same time that the original relative pronoun *se* and the compound *sepe* become less and less frequent (see M1), until they eventually fade completely away. In late Middle English *wh-*relativizers are, on the contrary, progressively increasing in frequency and become, in turn, more and more commonly used in late Middle English as the only pronominal relativizer available.

*3.3. Pronominal relativizers and syntactic function*

The most relevant variable mentioned in the literature to trace the expansion of *wh-* relativizers has been the syntactic function of the relativizer in agreement with the Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie. It is generally agreed that *wh-* relativizers make their incursion into the English language through the bottom of the hierarchy, that is, via the less accessible functions (genitives and complements of a preposition), also because these functions were the first functions to be abandoned by the deictic relativizers of Old English (see Romaine, 1982: 62).

For my analysis I have adapted Keenan and Comrie's Accessibility Hierarchy so that four different categories are distinguished: subject (S), object (O), oblique (Obl), and genitive (G).

Table 3 shows the distribution of pronominal relativizers in the periods under analysis:

Table 3. Pronominal relativizers and syntactic role.

		S	O	Obl	Gen	TOTAL
O3		90 (74.4%)	11 (9.1%)	15 (12.4%)	5 (4.1%)	121
O4	<i>Se(þe)</i>	60 (65.9%)	11(12.1%)	7 (7.7%)	13 (14.3%)	91
M1	<i>Se(þe)</i>	29 (61.7%)	9 (19.1%)	3 (6.4%)	6 (12.8%)	47
	<i>Wh-</i>	1 (14.3%)	-	6 (85.7%)	-	7
M3	<i>Wh-</i>	40 (33.6%)	9 (7.6%)	54 (45.4%)	16 (13.4%)	119
	TOTAL	220	40	85	40	385

These results show that, in fact, pronominal relativizers in Old and early Middle English abandon the higher positions of the hierarchy later than the lower ones: *se*-relative pronouns start their recession from the lower –less accessible– positions of the Accessibility Hierarchy. In fact, the last stronghold occupied by *se* relative pronouns is that of subject, with a frequency which goes from 74.4% (in O3) to 61.7% (in M1). Such restriction to a specific environment is typical of elements which are in the process of becoming obsolete.

Nevertheless, the picture is less clear if we analyze the process of the introduction of *wh-* words. The results from early Middle English seem to confirm that *wh-* pronouns are more frequently used functioning as oblique, in agreement with Romaine (1982: 62) and as demonstrated by Table 3, with a frequency of 85.7%. *Wh*-relative pronouns in late Middle English also show a preference for the oblique function (45.5%), however, they are also quite frequently found as subjects (33.6%), the highest position of the hierarchy. The fact that *wh*-relativizers are frequently found as subjects demonstrates that they climbed the hierarchy at a very fast pace: they entered in the function of oblique, but immediately found themselves very comfortable as subjects, the most accessible position, which is not surprising, taking into account that subject is most accessible position and there was not any other pronominal relativizer which can fill it in.

3.4. *Pronominal relativizers and type of relative clause*

Another relevant variable in the distribution of relativizers is the degree of restrictiveness of the relative clause, which distinguishes relative clauses into restrictive and non-restrictive. The hypothesis under analysis is to observe whether the distribution of pronominal relativizers correlate significantly with the distinction of relative clauses into restrictive and non-restrictive. Throughout the history of the English language, relative pronouns introduce both restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, although they are favoured in non-restrictive relative clauses. Fischer (1992: 300) mentions that *wh*-pronouns appear first in non-restrictive relative clauses, a situation which is expected because non-restrictive relative clauses were the preferred locus of Old English pronominal relativizers.

Table 4. Pronominal relativizers and restrictiveness.

		RRC	NRRC	TOTAL
O3		35 (28.9%)	86 (71.1%)	121
O4	<i>Se(þe)</i>	13 (14.3%)	78 (85.7%)	91
<hr/>				
M1	<i>Se(þe)</i>	24 (51.1%)	23 (48.9%)	47
	<i>Wh-</i>	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)	7
M3	<i>Wh-</i>	29 (24.4%)	90 (75.6%)	119
TOTAL		103	282	385

Table 4 provides positive answer to the question posited above, which reveals a large prevalence of pronominal relativizers in non-restrictive relative clauses in almost all periods of the selected corpus of data ranging from Old to late Middle English. *Se(þe)* is favoured in non-restrictive relative clauses in all three periods of Old English, but especially in O3 and O4 (occurring in 71.1% and 85.7% of the occurrences). As expected, the results from Middle English also show that non-restrictiveness is the favourite locus for *wh*- pronominal relativizers, especially in M3. The numbers of early Middle English are very peculiar, as *se* and *seþe* are slightly favoured in restrictive relative clauses (51.1% *vs* 48.9%). This situation could, in my opinion, be accounted for by the low frequency of pronominal relativizers which



coincides with the almost complete fading away of *se* and the emergence of *wh*-. In fact, pronominal relativizers represent less than 5% of the relativizers used in early Middle English.

#### 4. Summary and conclusions

In this paper I have tried to reconstruct the conditions for the renewal of the members in the paradigm of relative pronouns in the history of the English language. I have brought some evidence as to how *wh*-words spread into the English language as a compensation phenomenon to fill a functional gap. The evidence shows that the reorganization of the relative clause pronominal paradigm in English was prompted by competing pressures: on the one hand, the language progressive loss of declensions (and change from a synthetic to an analytic language); on the other hand, *wh*-relativizers started to be used in the English language because there was a gap to be filled, namely left by the levelling of *se* relativizers.

Finally, I would like to hazard an answer to my initial question on why and how *wh*-relativizers in late Middle English replaced Old English *se/seþe* relative pronouns. Judging from the distribution of pronominal relativizers obtained in Tables 2, 3 and 4, it certainly seems that *wh*-words have been dragged by the recession of *se* and *seþe* into non-restrictive relative clauses from the lower and less accessible positions of the Accessibility Hierarchy (in order to fill a functional gap).

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