

# A Note on Push-down Relative Element in Modern English\*

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## 0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider one of the relative constructions in Modern English, the so-called push-down relative element, which has lost its status in Present-day English (hereafter PDE). The specific construction we shall pay attention to is:

- (1) At length his pace was increased to such a degree, that I was often left behind a considerable way, *which* when he perceived, he would wait for me ... (Smollett, *Roderick Random*. p. 15)

Here *which* functions as an object to the verb only in the immediately following subordinate clause in the relative clause (i.e. *when he perceived*), but does not in the main clause (i.e., *he would wait for me*). This construction, according to Visser (1967–1973: §535), ‘is well represented in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century there are only a few struggling survivals. Pres. D. English avoids the idiom and uses the paratactic arrangement.’

The organisation of this essay is as follows: in Section 1 we shall take a look at the brief history of relatives in English; Section 2 will introduce the relative constructions special to the period ; the data from a corpus will be exhibited in

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Section 3; and we shall try to explain the rise and decline of the construction in the final section.

## 1. The History of Relatives

1.1 In this section, we will trace the history of English relative clauses from Old English.<sup>1)</sup>

There are two types of relativisers in OE: the indeclinable *þe* and the declinable *se, seo, þæt*. Alternatively, there may be no marker at all. There is a tendency that *þe* occurs more often with restrictive relative clauses and *se, seo, þæt* with nonrestrictive relative clauses.

The pronominal relativiser (*se, seo, þæt*) is normally inflected for the case of the relativised noun phrase and it may be followed by the particle *þe*. This relativiser occurs in poetry and prose of all periods. However, it is noticed that *se þe* is rare in poetry. There has been much debate over whether *se* is a demonstrative or a relativiser in any particular instance. The invariant particle *þe* occurs in prose and poetry from earliest OE on. There is a tendency for *þe* to be favoured over a pronominal relativiser if the head is singular and modified by a demonstrative. Further, *þe* is favoured when the head is modified by a quantifier. There are a few instances in OE of *þæt* used invariantly. The presence in OE of invariant *þæt* is of particular interest because *that* totally replaced *þe* in ME as the invariant relativiser.

The gradual loss of *þe* and the replacement of *se, seo, þæt* by indeclinable *that* collapsed the OE system of relativisers. *þæt* rapidly spread from the north to the other dialects, and in the thirteenth century *þæt* is the rule everywhere except southeastern and West Midland texts, in which *þe* is found next to *þæt*. Consequently, in the thirteenth century *that* stood as a relativiser

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1) The following description is mainly based on Traugott (1992) and Fischer (1992).

which was used in restrictive as well as nonrestrictive clauses.

The use of *wh*-relatives dates from the beginning of ME, though rare everywhere in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. *Which* is infrequent at first, whereas *whom* and *whose* are less so. *Which* begins to replace *that* only in the fifteenth century. In the fourteenth century, *that* is the usual relative, especially in poetry; in more formal prose, *which* is more popular. According to Mustanoja (1960: 197), Chaucer uses *that* in 75 percent of cases, while Caxton in 50 percent. Despite the early appearance of *whom* and *whose*, *who* occurs only sporadically until the fifteenth century. Thus, by the mid-sixteenth century, there are three relativisers available: *that*, *who* (*whom*, *whose*), and *which*.

Other characteristics of relativisers in ME would include *wh*-relatives + *that* forms and *the which*. *Wh*-relatives + *that* forms were popular all through the ME period but became rare by the end of the fifteenth century. The existence of *wh*-relatives + *that* forms is often taken as evidence to support the analysis that *that* is a complementiser, not a pronoun. Since definiteness is essential to relativisation, it is quite reasonable for relativisers to be preceded by the definite article *the*. However, it is noticed here that the regular use of this construction is restricted to *which* only.

EModE saw the preference of *wh*-relatives over *that*, especially in the Renaissance period, when writers tried to imitate the more elaborate and expressive style of Latin. Although *that* again became common in the late seventeenth to eighteenth century, the growth of *wh*-relatives continued until the present usage was established.

1.2 At this point it would be appropriate to discuss a couple of constraints on relative constructions in PDE and in older English.

In standard PDE, relative clauses have a 'gap'. However, we sometimes

come across sentences, especially in spoken English, in which the ‘gap’ is filled by a pronoun, that is, ‘resumptive pronoun’ as in:

- (2) He’s the kind of fellow that you have trouble liking *him*.
- (3) He’s the man that I know *his* wife.

In written English too, we have had constructions with ‘resumptive pronoun’ throughout the history of English:

- (4) ... it was þat ilk cok,/þat petre herd *him* crau, ... (Cursor 15995–6 [Fischer])
- (5) some of them ... write their sins, — which, however, they cannot deliver on paper to the confessor, but must read *them* aloud. (1885–9 Ruskin, Proeterita [Jespersen, Visser, Denison])

Another constraint in PDE is so-called ‘island constraint’: only NPs in the clause immediately subordinate to the head may be relativised, but not an NP in another clause which is itself subordinate to this subordinate clause, for instance:

- (6) \*The woman that he knew John thought Bill might want to meet.

Though PDE grammar eliminates the above structure, OE, ME and eModE allowed an NP in the subordinate clause in the relative clause to be relativised:

- (7) Ic seolfa cuðe sumne broðar ðone ic wolde þæt ic næfre cuðe (Bede 158 5.15.442.9 [Traugott])

## 2. Some Remarkable Relative Constructions in lModE

Before moving on to the consideration of the construction, we should like to examine some constructions with relatives which have lost their status in standard PDE, but were common at the beginning of lModE.

a) *That* in a non-restrictive use:

(8) my only child, my poor Sophy, that was the joy of my heart. (Fielding [Jespersen])

b) Isolated *that* (often doubtful whether *that* is the relative or the demonstrative):

(9) not one grain of that I sow'd this time came to any thing. (Defoe [Jespersen])

c) *Which* referring to animate antecedents:

(10) the savage, which we had taken prisoner of war. (Defoe [Jespersen])

d) Personal pronoun + *that* in generic sense:

(11) he that's born to be hang'd, will never be drowned. (Swift [Jespersen])

e) *Who* in an independent use:

(12) Who think like Romans, would like Romans fight. (Tickell [OED])

f) *Which* introducing mental parenthesis:

(13) Whether this hard-hearted judge felt any remorse for his cruel treatment of his son and daughter; or (which is more probable) was afraid his character would suffer in the neighbourhood. (Smollett, *Roderick Random*, p. 4)

g) Coordination + relative:

(14) he beheld a sail at a very little distance, and which luckily seemed to be making towards him. (Fielding [Jespersen])

h) Relative referring to an antecedent in genitive case:

(15) This piece of satire occasioned a great deal of mirth at Weazel's expense, who muttered a great many oaths and threatened to cut Isaac's throat. (Smollett, *Roderick Random*, p. 60)

i) Relative clauses with a resumptive pronoun:

(16) A fellow whom you must make drunk before you can get a word of truth out of him. (Boswell [Jespersen])

j) *Which* functioning as an object to the verb only in the immediately

following subordinate clause in the relative clause:

(17) At length his pace was increased to such a degree, that I was often left behind a considerable way, which when he perceived, he would wait for me. (Smollett, *Roderick Random*, p. 15)

As seen in the above, lModE was still on the way to the regulation of relatives and presents us with many research topics on relatives. However, we shall concentrate only on the construction (17) and leave others to another occasion.

### 3. The Data and Analysis

In this section, we take a look at concrete examples of the construction and consider some characteristics of it. The data were taken from a part of the *ARCHER* corpus,<sup>2)</sup> which was searched for relative clauses introduced by *which* that contain an adverbial clause of time or condition. For convenience, only adverbial clauses introduced by *when*, *while*, *after*, *before*, *if* and *unless* were considered.

#### 3.1 The Data

The following examples are found in the *ARCHER* corpus:

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2) The *ARCHER* corpus has been compiled by Douglas Biber (Northern Arizona University) and Edward Finegan (University of Southern California). The purpose of the *ARCHER* corpus is “to enable analysis of historical change in the range of written and speech-based registers of English from 1650 to the present. The general design goal has thus been to represent as wide a range of variation as possible” (Biber and Finegan 1994: 3). The corpus has not been completed yet, but the complete corpus will be made up of c. 1,000 texts and c. 1.7 million words and is expected to fill the gap between the corpora of PDE and the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. Acknowledgements are due to Professor Douglas Biber and Professor Edward Finegan for the use of the *ARCHER*.

(18) but Frank contrary to my knowledge was rid out with her, to accompany Major Stroud who they tell me intended to take him with him to Chester *which* if he doth (and he is not yet returned) he can not be here till next week, and so I have lost this oppertunity .... (LETTERS, 1664 AnneConway.X1 1:1)

(19) Sir, I thought fitting to send Dean Rust's letter unto you, *which* when you have perused, I shall desire you to return by the post to your servant, who resolves, by the first vessel, to sail for England, ... (LETTERS, 1665 Valentine 1 : 1)

(20) And saying this, he hasted backward, fumbling with his Beads, and Crossing himself all over, continually flinging Ora-pro-nobis'es to the Virgin Mary. *Which* when Eucompsus perceived he holp to Cross him too, and fell into such a violent Laughter, that while none of us could refrain, the noise being at least trebly increased by the reverberation of that mountainous and hilly Country .... (FICTION, 1675 BARNES. F1 1 : 1)

(21) A single persuasion was not sufficient nor any arguments strong enough to remove our knight *which*, when Lady Galliard saw, she resolved to take her daughter and be gone without him. (FICTION, 1727 davys. f2 1 : 1)

(22) He pulled off his hat with an air of great respect to one of the drawers and desired a mug of Nottingham ale, *which* when he had brought, he desired he would please to sit down and take share on't. (FICTION, 1727 davys. f2 1 : 1)

(23) Under his protection therefore they equipped two or three Ships, such as they judged most proper for this voyage. *Which* when the Governours of the Dutch East-Indian Company had information of, they raised a considerable sum of mony .... (SCIENTIFIC, 1675 ANO2. S1 1 : 1)

(24) You easily persuaded yourself 'twas no more than a dream: however, I durst attempt your courage no more, but give you this important information this way; *which* if you should not credit, you are undone. (LETTERS, 1728 Rowe. f2 1 : 1)

(25) "He may indeed,"] reply'd she, [" assume the Pageantry of that Title,

but never can possess the real Dignity, since that must be conferred by me alone: *which* when I do, may Heaven, and all good Things, forsake me, and I have as little hope in the eternal Eos, as the Injustice of Mankind has left me here on Earth.” (FICTION, 1736 haywood. f2 1 : 1)

(26) Jesus Christ, while he was on earth, had told his disciples and followers, That he was the bread of life, the life-giving bread, which came down from heaven, *which* if any man should eat, he should live for ever. (SERMON, 17XX WILS. H2 1 : 1)

The next instance is construed in a similar way, but the adverbial clause takes a form of a participle construction:

(27) The Magistrates severely reprimanded him before many People at the Council-house, and fined him 17l. for his Fraud; *which*, after paying down, he was very much hiss'd by the poor People. (NEWS, 1735REA1. N2 1 : 1)

The characteristics of the above examples are summarised as follows:

1. The adverbial clause in a relative clause precedes its principal clause.
2. The meaning of the adverbial cause is 'time' or 'condition'.
3. In most cases, the relative clause is of the non-restrictive type.
4. The nominal function which is fulfilled in the relative clause is exclusively that of object.
5. As far as date and register of the construction are concerned, it is well represented in fictional prose of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries.

### 3.2 The Analysis

Let us look into the construction in more detail, focusing particularly on the functional aspects of the items in it.

As to the information structure of discourse in which a relative clause is embedded, it is considered that a non-restrictive relative clause contains 'new

information', while a restrictive relative clause contains 'old information' (or 'given information'). This means that what is apparently a subordinate clause, which is usually explained as containing 'old-information', behaves like a main clause. Consequently, it might not be wrong to say that the relative acts as if it were a mere 'clause connective' (of course, it refers to its antecedent, though). It could be said that the relative clause has a function similar to a co-ordinate clause.

Next, if we turn our attention to the adverbial clause after relative *which*, it is obvious that the clause is always positioned before its main clause. Here the order of the two clauses matters because an adverbial clause preceding its main clause contains 'old information' and the main clause 'new information', that is, the adverbial clause forms a 'presupposition' to the message in the main clause within the information structure. Attention should also be paid to the relative *which*, which is functioning as an object to the verbs only in the immediately following subordinate clause in the embedded clause, but does not in the main clause. Here the combination of 'which + adverbial clause' is so tight that it functions as a single unit, just like a 'conjunctive adverb' to advance discourse. Thus, (21), for example, could be analysed as (21)':

(21) A single persuasion was not sufficient nor any arguments strong enough to remove our knight which, when Lady Galliard saw, she resolved to take her daughter and be gone without him.

(21)' A single persuasion was not sufficient nor any arguments strong enough to remove our knight **AND** <which>, **THEREFORE** [when Lady Galliard saw], she resolved to take her daughter and be gone without him.

I think this usage was a convenient device in a narrative discourse such as fiction, in which most of our examples are found. However, in terms of usage in PDE, the structure in (21) is felt to be rather clumsy.

#### 4. The Rise and Decline of the Construction

In this section, we try to give answers to two questions: how it came to be used; and why it disappeared from standard PDE.

##### 4.1 The Rise of the Construction

Visser (1963–1973: § 534) and Jespersen (1909–49: 10.8) observe that the construction is modelled after Latin syntax. Visser (§ 535)'s first citation is dated 1535:

(28) Then the Hunters should seeke after the Hare, which when they haue gotten, they haue no great gaines thereby. (1535 Bp. Fisher 368, 11)

The OED's first citation (*which*, 7.d.) is also from the early sixteenth century:

(29) To conuey hym selfe into some other place, without delay, which if he did they assured hym, yt he should haue neither hurte nor damage. (a1548 Hall Chron., Edw. IV 214 b)

The Helsinki corpus shows no examples of this in the OE and ME period. It is safe to say, therefore, that the origin of the construction was imitation of Latin, and dated from the sixteenth century.

Next, we should like to consider the reasons why the construction was frequently found in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Two factors appear to have motivated its spread and frequent use in the period: contemporary usage of relative markers on the one hand, and contemporary English style on the other. These two factors can be conceived as internal and external factors of change. The interaction of the two has been influenced the history of the construction.

As pointed out earlier, this construction prefers non-restrictive relative

clauses. This means if there was a change in the preference concerning the choice of restrictive or non-restrictive clauses in the history of relative construction, it is presumable that the possibility of the occurrence of the construction must be influenced. The following two Tables 1 and 2 from Dekeyser (1984: 69) clearly shows the decrease of non-restrictives in the Modern English period (+R and -R in the tables indicate restrictive and non-restrictive use respectively):

Table 1 Early 17th century: WHO-WHICH-THAT and +R/-R

|        | +R             | -R             | Totals |
|--------|----------------|----------------|--------|
| WHO    | 163 (27.72%)   | 425 (72.28%)   | 588    |
| WHICH  | 381 (40.57%)   | 558 (59.43%)   | 939    |
| THAT   | 913 (79.25%)   | 239 (20.75%)   | 1,152  |
| Totals | 1,457 (54.39%) | 1,222 (45.61%) | 2,679  |

Table 2 PDE: WHO-WHICH-THAT and +R/-R

|              | +R           | -R           | Totals |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------|
| WH-human     | 224 (87.84%) | 31 (12.16%)  | 255    |
| WH-non-human | 298 (67.73%) | 142 (32.27%) | 440    |
| THAT         | 372 (99.73%) | 1 ( 0.27%)   | 373    |
| Totals       | 894 (83.71%) | 174 (16.29%) | 1,068  |

(from Dekeyser 1984: 69)

It can be said that eModE offered more favourable circumstances for the occurrence of the construction than PDE.

The next passage well represents a typical use of relative construction at the period:

The next Lodging our Hero took, was near Covent-Garden; *where* he met with a Gentleman, *who* accidentally lodg'd in the same House, *whose* Conversation Mr. Simple was mightily charmed with: He had something in

his Manner, *which* seemed to declare that inward Serenity of Mind, *which* arises from a Consciousness of doing well, and every Trifle appeared to give him pleasure, because he had no Tumults within to disturb his Happiness. His Sentiments were all so refined, and his Thoughts so delicate, that David imagined such a Companion, if he was not again deceived in his Opinion, would be the greatest Blessing this World could afford.

(Sarah Fielding, The opening passage of Chapter IX, *The Adventures of David Simple*, p. 57. *My italics*)

We notice that clauses are connected again and again by relatives. The above passage also shows a quite different style of writing at the time from ours.

Concerning the development of English style, a study by Biber and Finegan (1989) is suggestive. They trace the history of written genres (fiction, essays and letters) over the last four centuries by a multidimensional approach, focusing on three dimensions of linguistic variation: Informational vs. Involved Production; Elaborated vs. Situation-Dependent Referenced; and Abstract vs. Nonabstract Style. They observe that although the three genres have evolved at different rates and to different extents, all three genres have undergone a general pattern of 'drift' towards a more oral style — more involved, less elaborated, and less abstract. They regard relative clauses as devices for 'the explicit, elaborated identification of referents', so their observation would also be a support for the construction to occur more frequently in eModE than in PDE. In Section 3.2 it was pointed out that 'which + adverbial clause' forms a single unit and the unit functions as a connective. It is easily imagined that such a clumsy construction was favoured by writers who had tried to write English in more informational, more elaborated and more abstract style. This may be called an external factor of the development of the construction. I believe the attitude towards style of writing at a given time has had a great influence over the language use.

#### 4.2 The Decline of the Construction

The disappearance of the construction in PDE would be explained by the same two factors in an opposite way: the unpopularity of non-restrictive relative clauses and the preference for oral style restrict the circumstance for its occurrence. However, there may be other reasons that have constrained the occurrence of the construction. I suggest two possibilities: (a) the establishment of so-called ‘functional amalgamation’ in relative constructions, and (b) prescriptivism in lModE.

‘Functional amalgamation’ means the double function of the relative pronoun: 1) it serves to connect the clauses; and 2) it functions as subject, object, and so forth within the clause (see Moessner 1992). Functional amalgamation is a modern phenomenon. A construction with ‘resumptive pronoun’ (example (16)) and a coordination + relative structure (example (14)) are instances lacking functional amalgamation. (In this sense, the relative clause with ‘parasitic gap’ might be looked upon as a progressive phenomenon of functional amalgamation.) I suspect *which* in the relative construction we have been dealing with could be in the midst of the development to its full functional amalgamation. If it is the case, we could say the characteristic of functional amalgamation of *which* blocks generation of the construction.

### 5. Summary

In this paper we have considered a special relative construction with *which*, functioning as an object to the verbs only in the immediately following subordinate clause in the embedded clause, but not in the main clause. We found that the construction came to be used as a result of imitation of Latin syntax in the early sixteenth century, when the linguistic climate was suitable for its birth. However, following the development of relatives and the drift of English style, the construction has lost its status in standard PDE.

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