

Relativisation in Early Modern Urban Vernaculars: New Evidence from Oxford and Durham Witness Depositions

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Abstract

This paper explores regional and temporal variations in the use of relative pronouns in witness depositions from Early Modern English. Specifically, it traces the development of relativisation patterns within the context of the diffusion of supralocal forms and the adoption of standard forms. Given that a relatively uniform written language variety did not emerge from a single location or at a specific time, the role of multiple regional centres is considered. This study examines the use of relative pronouns in two distinct regions: Oxford (representing the Eastern Southwest dialect) and Durham (representing the Northern dialect). It compares the distribution of *wh*-forms, *that*, and *zero* in depositions across three time periods, from the latter half of the 16th century to the end of the 17th century. The study also investigates how restrictiveness, antecedent animacy, and grammatical roles influenced the choice of relative pronoun. Analysis of the Oxford and Durham corpora shows that *that* was used mainly in restrictive clauses, while *wh*-forms appeared more frequently in non-restrictive contexts. A gradual ‘dehumanisation’ of *which* was observed, with an increasing association with non-personal referents, while *who*, *whom*, and *whose* were used for personal references. Although both regions followed similar paths in adopting standard forms, Oxford retained regional features for a longer period. This study highlights the importance of regional centres in the development of standard written English and underscores the need for further research on regional language variations.

Keywords: relative pronouns; supralocalisation; standardisation; Early Modern English definitions; early modern urban vernaculars

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate regional and temporal variations in the use of relative pronouns in Early Modern English witness depositions. Specifically, it seeks to trace the development of relativisation patterns within the context of the diffusion of supralocal forms and the adoption of standard forms. Traditional accounts that focused on the development of written Standard English often attributed a significant role to London as a crucial political centre, or to the Central Midland dialect, in shaping the standard. However, this ‘single-ancestor dialect hypothesis’ (Hope 2000) has been rendered untenable by contemporary research (e.g., Gordon 2017; Oudesluijs and Auer 2019; Oudesluijs, Gordon and Auer 2022; Wright 2000). Current perspectives on standardisation suggest that a relatively uniform written language variety did not emerge from a single location or at a specific time. Consequently, the investigation of standardisation processes should consider multiple regional centres rather than focusing solely on one urban centre. This paper will thus examine the use of relative pronouns in two distinct regions: Oxford, representative of the Eastern Southwest dialect, and Durham, representative of the Northern dialect. It will compare the distribution of *wh*-forms, *that* and *zero* in depositions across three time periods, ranging from the latter half of the 16th century to the end of the 17th century. Additionally, the study will analyse the variation in relative pronouns based on the type of relative clause, the type of antecedent, and the syntactic function of the relative pronoun.

The relative pronominal system in Present-Day English differs significantly from pronoun usage in the past. The variation and changes associated with the choice of specific relative pronouns have consequently attracted the attention of numerous historical linguists (e.g., Ball 1996; Bergs 2005; Dekeyser 1984; Gordon 2017; Johansson 2012; Lezcano 1996; Raumolin-Brunberg 2000; Rissanen 1984; Romaine 1982; Rydén 1966). Significant changes to the relative pronoun system began in early Middle English and continued into the Early Modern English period, including the adoption of innovative forms such as *which* and *who*, which have gradually become part of the written standard language.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview of the development of relative pronouns, followed by a description of the material and methodology in section 3. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings from both regional urban centres. Section 5 revisits the aims outlined in the introduction and concludes the paper.

2. Development of relative pronouns: A brief overview

The use of relative pronouns in Present-Day English primarily operates along two parameters: the animacy parameter and the information parameter. The animacy parameter is crucial in determining the choice of relative pronoun: *who/whom/whose* and *that* are employed with personal antecedents, while *that* and *which* are used with non-personal antecedents. The information parameter distinguishes between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses (Fischer 1992: 295). The forms and usage of relative pronouns in earlier periods of English differed from those of today.

In Old English, the invariant particle *þe*, the inflectional demonstrative pronoun *se*, or *se þe* were employed as relatives (Traugott 1992: 224–228). During the Middle English period invariant *þe* was gradually lost and the inflectional paradigm *se, seo, þæt* was replaced by indeclinable *that/þat*. The pronoun *that* became the dominant relative pronoun used in both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, referring to personal as well as non-personal antecedents (Mustanoja 1960: 190; Fischer 1992: 296).

The Old English *wh*-pronouns *hwa*, *hwæt*, and *hwylc* were initially used as interrogatives, later evolving to serve a relative function. As Fischer points out, ‘the development of an interrogative pronoun into a relative pronoun is in itself not an unusual process; it is well attested in a number of other Germanic and Romance languages’ (1992: 297–298). The earliest instances of *wh*-pronouns following an antecedent appear in Early Middle English.

Wh-forms started to emerge at the beginning of the Middle English period, but their use was very rare during both the 12th and 13th centuries. In addition, these relative pronouns were not introduced simultaneously, but with the following chronology: *which* > *whose* > *whom* > *who* (Bergs 2003: 94).

In the context of the integration of *wh*-forms into the system of relative pronouns and the subsequent emergence of *who*, Romaine identifies a correlation between the use of these forms and their syntactic positions. She notes: ‘[...] the further one moves down the hierarchy of syntactic positions¹ which are relativizable, the more WH dominated the system becomes’ (1982: 151). This indicates that *wh*-forms did not initially appear

¹ Romaine uses Keenan and Comrie’s (1977) accessibility hierarchy for relatives, considering subject position the most accessible, genitive position the least accessible, with direct and indirect objects in between, see section 4.5.

in the most prominent syntactic positions when they began to be incorporated into the grammatical system.

The earliest recorded use of the relative pronoun *who* in the literature dates back to 1297; however, its occurrence was too infrequent to be clearly recognised as a relative pronoun. The first definitive uses of *who* as a strictly relative pronoun emerged in the early 15th century, primarily in stereotyped concluding phrases in letters referring to the Deity. It was not until nearly a century later that the use of the relative pronoun *who* became common outside these formulas (Mustanoja 1960; Fischer 1992). The adoption of *who* was not surprising from a linguistic perspective, as it filled a gap within the language system. Its introduction completed the paradigm that already included *whose* and *whom*, which were predominantly used with personal antecedents (Rydén 1983: 130; Fischer 1992: 301). The distribution of *wh*-forms along the animacy parameter was established during the 17th century, as also evidenced by the findings of this paper.

By the 16th century, *wh*-forms were firmly established in non-restrictive relative clauses (Rissanen 2000: 293). Additionally, Rydén (1966) observes that *wh*-relatives began to appear in restrictive relative clauses, as evidenced by his analysis of a substantial collection of early 16th-century texts. The prevalence of *wh*-pronouns in restrictive clauses further increased during the 17th century: '[t]hey seem to be first introduced into contexts with a noun antecedent; when the antecedent is a personal or indefinite pronoun, *that* prevails [...]. This is probably due to the fact that the link between the antecedent and the relative pronoun is tight in the last-mentioned contexts: in many cases the antecedent pronoun gets its entire meaning from the following relative clause' (Rissanen 2000: 293–294).

In addition to *that* and *wh*-forms, compound relative forms emerged, predominantly in Middle English. The forms *which*, *whose*, and *whom* could be preceded by *the*, followed by *that*, or occasionally both. *The which* was commonly used in the 16th century, but it was first evidenced in northern prose texts written in the early 14th century, gradually spreading southward. It typically appeared with inanimate antecedents in continuative clauses and in clauses separated from the antecedent (Rissanen 2000: 297). The relative combination *the which* fell out of use later in Modern English, as also evidenced by my findings: in the examined corpora, *the which* occurs only sporadically (see section 4).

Additionally, as Rissanen (2000: 297) points out, this form does not appear in the Helsinki Corpus from the second half of the 17th century.

The usage of the *zero*-relative construction in the 16th century was different from contemporary use. It also appeared in the object position or with a stranded preposition (Rissanen 2000: 298–299). At that time, the *zero*-relative construction was not limited to colloquial language; it also occurred in formal texts. Throughout the 17th century, *zero* became more prevalent in non-subject positions compared to its occurrence in subject positions. By the 18th century, it began to be viewed as a colloquialism (Rissanen 2000: 299).

In conclusion, the contemporary usage of relative pronouns was solidified in the 18th century, although some variation persisted. For example, the use of *which* with personal antecedents continued in non-standard speech until the late 18th century. Furthermore, the ‘dehumanizing’ of *that* in restrictive clauses appears to have emerged only after the late 18th century (Rissanen 2000: 294–295).

3. *Material and methodology*

This paper explores the use of relative pronouns in witness depositions from the Early Modern English period in two urban centres: Oxford and Durham. Adopting a variationist methodology, the study investigates regional and temporal differences, focusing on the development of relativisation patterns in the context of the spread of supralocal forms. Special attention was given to the pronominal markers that have been integrated into Present-Day standard English. Consequently, the distribution of *wh*-forms, *that*, and *zero* was analysed and compared across three time spans and between the two locations. The variation in the use of these relative pronouns was examined along the information parameter (restrictive vs. non-restrictive relative clauses), the animacy parameter (personal vs. non-personal antecedents), and their syntactic position.

For this purpose, a corpus of witness depositions written in Oxford and Durham between 1560 and 1699 was compiled. Witness depositions were chosen because this study is part of a larger project on standardisation processes in English, which examines and compares various text types. The Durham data was sourced from *An Electronic Text Edition of Depositions 1560–1760* (ETED). For the Oxford corpus, I used both ETED and my own manuscript transcriptions of depositions obtained from the Oxfordshire History Centre. To examine regional differences, two

urban centres from distinct dialect groups were selected: Durham, representing Northern dialects, and Oxford, representing Eastern Southwest dialects, according to the traditional dialect division (Trudgill 1990). Since there were no data available specifically from Durham for Period 3, data from surrounding areas, collectively labelled as Northern in ETED, were used instead. To explore diachronic changes in the use of relative pronouns, the analysed material was divided into three time spans, in line with the periodization in ETED: 1560–1599 (Period 1), 1600–1649 (Period 2), and 1650–1699 (Period 3). Table 1 summarises the word counts in the two urban centres across all three periods.

Table 1: Word counts in particular urban centres and periods

	Period 1 1560–1599	Period 2 1600–1649	Period 3 1650–1699	Total
Oxford	19,636	10,340	24,536	54,512
Durham/Northern	12,067	10,306	10,522	32,895
Total	31,703	20,646	35,058	87,407

Due to the relatively small size of the two sub-corpora, I employed a close-reading approach. For the extraction of *zero* relatives, it was necessary to read the entire corpus anyway. I excerpted all occurrences of *wh*-forms, *that*, and *zero*, including their variant spellings, along with the relevant context. All relative pronouns, along with their surrounding context, were imported into Excel and analysed quantitatively using the data filter function and pivot tables in accordance with the examined criteria: type of relative clause, antecedent, and syntactic position. Finally, a qualitative analysis based on the quantitative results was conducted.

One of the challenges I encountered was applying the traditional dichotomy of adnominal relative clauses to historical material. In Present-Day English, the distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses is more straightforward, primarily due to punctuation, though it can still be ambiguous at times. In Early Modern English texts, the classification proved much more difficult, making binary choices problematic. As Denison and Hundt (2013: 135) explain, ‘some analytic difficulties are due to changes in text-type-specific style and conventions over time, plus general diachronic change, but also that some examples genuinely resist hard-and-fast classification.’ Consequently, I decided to exclude these ambiguous cases from the analysis. Sentential relative

clauses were also omitted, as they were not the primary focus of the study, along with instances where distinguishing between adnominal and sentential relative clauses was not possible. Additionally, a detailed analysis of combined relative pronouns fell beyond the scope of this research.

Another important factor to consider was the role of the scribes and their influence on the language of the depositions. As Kytö, Grund, and Walker (2011: 148) state, scribes did not always reproduce the exact words spoken by the deponent, and ‘some aspects of the depositions, such as spelling and the use of abbreviations, exclusively reflect the language of the scribes rather than that of the deponents’. Despite this, little is known about their identity, social background, or education. Their names are frequently absent from depositions. The role of scribes was briefly considered in this study; however, a more detailed examination of this factor was beyond the scope of the research.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis of relative pronouns in Oxford and Durham during the Early Modern English period, as described earlier. The entire corpus contains 542 relative clauses, of which 112 were excluded. Among those excluded, 67 were identified as sentential, 15 were ambiguous, and 30 contained combined relative pronouns with *such* (e.g., *such as* and *such that*). Ultimately, the analysis was conducted on a total of 430 relative clauses, comprising 232 restrictive relative clauses and 198 non-restrictive relative clauses. Initially, the focus is on the distribution of relative pronouns along the animacy parameter.

4.1 Relative pronouns in restrictive clauses

Table 2 summarises the occurrence of restrictive relative clauses across all three periods in both corpora (in raw counts and frequency per 10,000 words). Although the findings are based on a relatively low number of relative pronouns and cannot be generalised, they do indicate observable tendencies.

Table 2: Relative pronouns in restrictive clauses in Oxford and Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

Oxford	P1	P2	P3	Durham/ Northern	P1	P2	P3
<i>that</i>	20 / 10.2	7 / 6.8	11 / 4.5	<i>that</i>	8 / 6.6	0	10 / 9.5
<i>which</i>	21 / 10.7	9 / 8.7	29 / 11.8	<i>which</i>	12 / 9.9	23 / 22.3	20 / 19.0
<i>the which</i>	3 / 1.5	0	0	<i>the which</i>	0	0	2 / 1.9
<i>who</i>	1 / 0.5	3 / 2.9	0	<i>who</i>	1 / 0.8	0	24 / 22.8
<i>whose</i>	0	0	4 / 1.6	<i>whose</i>	2 / 1.7	0	2 / 1.9
<i>whom</i>	0	0	15 / 6.1	<i>whom</i>	0	0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	1 / 0.97	0	<i>zero</i>	0	0	4 / 3.8
Total	45 / 22.9	20 / 19.4	59 / 24.0	Total	23 / 19.1	23 / 22.3	62 / 58.9

Which is the most frequent relative across the three periods in both urban centres, followed by *that*. A closer examination and a comparison of *that* and *which* during particular periods reveal that the difference in occurrence between *that* and *which* gradually increases in favour of *which*. This trend aligns with the overall development of relative pronouns in restrictive clauses (see Dekeyser 1984; Rydén 1966) and is evident in both urban centres. The use of *who*, which entered the language later, as previously explained, remains unstable.

The occurrence of *whom* in the Oxford data during Period 3 is particularly noteworthy, with a frequency of 6.1 per 10,000 words. In contrast, it does not appear in restrictive clauses at all in the Durham corpus. The high occurrence of *whom* in Oxford is linked to its use in formulaic phrases, as seen in examples (1)–(3).

- (1) & wisheth the victory impertially **to whome** most rightfully it
shall appeare to belong
(ETED: F_3SD_Oxford_008, 18 March 1669)
- (2) & wisheth the victory **to whome** it doth most rightfully belong
(ETED: F_3SD_Oxford_010, 19 March 1669)
- (3) shee would give the victory to that person **to whome** in right in
belongs were it in her power
(ETED: F_3SD_Oxford_016, 3 July 1674)

This relative pronoun appeared in several depositions in ETED written between 1668 and 1674 by two different scribes. The formulaic phrases in which it occurs are unique to the Oxford data and may therefore be regarded as region-specific. Regarding the incidence of *zero*, it is very low in both urban centres across the three periods examined.

4.2 Relative pronouns in non-restrictive clauses

Below are the findings on the occurrence of relative pronouns in non-restrictive clauses, which are somewhat less frequent than restrictive clauses in both corpora. As apparent from Table 3, there are noticeable differences in the occurrence of specific relative pronouns between the two types of relative clauses and the two urban centres.

Table 3: Relative pronouns in non-restrictive clauses in Oxford and Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

Oxford	P1	P2	P3	Durham/ Northern	P1	P2	P3
<i>that</i>	2 / 1.0	3 / 2.9	3 / 1.2	<i>that</i>	0	1 / 1.0	0
<i>which</i>	26 / 13.2	5 / 4.8	21 / 8.6	<i>which</i>	19 / 15.7	15 / 14.6	13 / 12.4
<i>the which</i>	1 / 0.5	0	0	<i>the which</i>	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	5 / 2.5	4 / 3.9	19 / 7.7	<i>who</i>	3 / 2.5	18 / 17.5	12 / 11.4
<i>whose</i>	4 / 2.0	0	1 / 0.4	<i>whose</i>	0	0	0
<i>whom</i>	0	4 / 3.9	5 / 2.0	<i>whom</i>	14 / 11.6	0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	<i>zero</i>	0	0	0
Total	38 / 19.4	16 / 15.5	49 / 20.0	Total	36 / 29.8	34 / 33.0	25 / 23.8

In non-restrictive clauses, the *wh*-forms significantly prevail over *that*. This relative pronoun has virtually disappeared from use in Durham; however, in Oxford, it still occurs in this type of clause. With some caution, given the small size of the corpus, we can surmise that Oxford retains supralocal features much longer than the northern region of Durham. This is likely due to Oxford's social and institutional prestige, which encouraged linguistic conservatism. As a university and administrative centre, Oxford was more insulated from external influences and maintained traditional forms. In contrast, northern Durham, shaped by industrialization and greater dialect contact, underwent more rapid

linguistic change, leading to earlier adoption of broader regional or standard features.

Regarding the *wh*-forms, there is a notable correlation between the decrease in the use of *which* and the corresponding increase in *who*, suggesting an emerging trend to use *who* for human referents and *which* primarily for non-human ones. However, this interdependence is not evident in the case of the relative pronoun *which* in Oxford during Period 3, where its occurrence increases rather than decreases. Thus, the overall decline in the use of *which* and the simultaneous rise in *who* cannot be attributed solely to the animacy of the antecedent. Other factors, such as the declining incidence of *that*, must also be taken into account. In Durham, there is a similar deviation from the general pattern in Period 3, with a drop in the occurrence of *who* instead of a continued rise.

The oblique form *whom* appears in non-restrictive relative clauses with varying frequency. Most occurrences are as prepositional objects, primarily with *to*, forming part of formulaic phrases such as in (4) typically accompanying direct speech.²

- (4) **to whome the said antony said** / Dyd not y^u promesse me y^t y^u
wold tell me and y^e parson of hunstonworth who stole george
whitfeild sheip /
(ETED: F_IND_Durham_001, 1572–1574)

Occasionally, *whom* occurs with the prepositions *with* or *for*. The incidence of *whom* in the Durham data is particularly noteworthy, reaching a frequency of 11.6 per 10,000 words in Period 1; however, it does not appear at all in the subsequent two periods. All but one of the depositions in Period 1 were written in the same hand, so this frequent use of *whom* may be attributed to the scribe's preference for this form. According to my findings, *whom* seems to be a more typical form in Oxford, i.e., in the Eastern Southwest region.

The possessive form *whose* does not occur in non-restrictive clauses in the Durham corpus and is also very scarce in Oxford. This finding is difficult to explain due to the limited extent of both corpora. The same applies to the *zero* relative pronoun, which does not appear in either the

² Direct speech, as another factor that could potentially influence the use of relative pronouns, is not examined in this study: according to Kytö, Grund, and Walker (2011: 45), it constitutes less than 9% of the ETED material.

Durham or the Oxford data. This finding aligns with Gordon's (2017: 270) study on relativisation in Bristol council ordinances (1506–1596), in which she also found no occurrences of *zero* in non-restrictive clauses in a similarly-sized corpus.

4.3 Antecedents in restrictive relative clauses

Overall, personal antecedents prevail over non-personal antecedents in both corpora. In Oxford, personal antecedents account for 52% (119 instances), while non-personal antecedents comprise 48% (108 instances). In Durham, the disparity is more pronounced, with personal antecedents making up 60% (121 instances) and non-personal antecedents 40% (82 instances). These figures represent the overall results for each corpus. I now turn to whether restrictiveness influences the use of antecedents and examine any regional variations.

In the Oxford corpus, non-personal antecedents dominate in Period 1 and Period 2, while personal antecedents become more frequent in Period 3 (see Table 4). This increase correlates with the establishment of *whom* and *whose* for personal reference.

Table 4: Antecedents in restrictive clauses, Oxford (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

Antecedent	P1 (1560-1599)		P2 (1600-1649)		P3 (1650-1699)	
	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal
<i>that</i>	10 / 5.1	11 / 5.6	2 / 1.9	5 / 4.8	10 / 4.1	1 / 0.4
<i>which</i>	2 / 1.0	18 / 9.1	3 / 2.9	6 / 5.8	10 / 4.1	19 / 7.7
<i>the which</i>	0	3 / 1.5	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	1 / 0.5	0	3 / 2.9	0	0	0
<i>whose</i>	0	0	0	0	4 / 1.6	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	0	0	15 / 6.1	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	1 / 1.0	0	0
Total	13 / 6.6	32 / 16.3	8 / 7.7	12 / 11.6	39 / 15.9	20 / 8.1

Regarding the two most frequent relative pronouns, *that* and *which*, both are used with personal antecedents, as shown in examples (5) and (6), and with non-personal antecedents, as exemplified in examples (7) and (8).

- (5) & heard her make some reply to
her, & was told by **others that** were thereby
(ETED: F_3SD_Oxford_017, 9 July 1674)

- (6) and this Dep^t doth beleive
that the said **person w^{ch}** spake the sayd words was the
Articulate Christopher London
(ETED: F_3SD_Oxford_001, 9/14 March 1667)

- (7) The beddyng and napery beyng lywyse devyded **the day that** the
said Sicely Gadbury was buried
(Oxf. Dioc. c. 21, 16 October 1573)

- (8) they were made sure in **a rome w^{ch}** this deponent calleth his hall
(Oxf. Dioc. d. 16, 30 January 1590)

The use of *that* shows a development from a predominantly non-personal usage in Periods 1 and 2 to a preferred personal usage in Period 3. However, interpreting the data objectively is challenging due to the low number of restrictive relative clauses in Period 2. For the relative pronoun *which*, non-personal antecedents are preferred across the three periods, with the highest frequency most evident in Period 1. At the same time, the use of *which* for personal reference exhibits a notable rising tendency throughout the periods. Thus, in Oxford, a clear shift toward the present-day use of *which* is not evident, as the dialect continues to retain some non-standard usages of this relative pronoun.

The pronoun *who* begins to emerge, gaining ground in Period 2, but in Period 3, there is no occurrence of this pronoun, likely due to the preference for *that* and *which* for personal antecedents.

The occurrence of relative pronouns in restrictive contexts in Durham/Northern dialects is summarised in Table 5. Non-personal antecedents clearly prevail in Period 1, while in the other two periods, the difference between non-personal and personal references is less pronounced. Similar to Oxford, the number of restrictive clauses in Durham is relatively low, especially in Periods 1 and 2, making it difficult to interpret the findings objectively.

Table 5: Antecedents in restrictive clauses, Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)		P2 (1600-1649)		P3 (1650-1699)	
Antecedent	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal
<i>that</i>	5 / 4.1	3 / 2.5	0	0	3 / 2.9	7 / 6.7
<i>which</i>	1 / 0.8	11 / 9.1	11 / 10.7	12 / 11.7	3 / 2.9	17 / 16.2
<i>the which</i>	0	0	0	0	0	2 / 1.9
<i>who</i>	1 / 0.8	0	0	0	24 / 22.8	0
<i>whose</i>	1 / 0.8	1 / 0.8	0	0	2 / 1.9	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	1 / 1.0	3 / 2.9
Total	8 / 6.6	15 / 12.4	11 / 10.7	12 / 11.7	33 / 31.4	29 / 27.6

In Period 1, the most frequent relative pronoun with a personal antecedent is *that*, while *which* is preferred for non-personal antecedents. For personal references, *who* and *whose* also appear, but not extensively. *Which* is the only form appearing in Period 2, supplanting not only *that* but also *who* and its oblique forms *whose* and *whom*. It is used with both personal and non-personal antecedents, and interestingly, exhibits an even distribution across these categories. In contrast, in Period 3, a wider spectrum of relative pronouns is used again. There is a clear tendency to use *which* with non-personal antecedents, then a decrease in use with personal antecedents, which correlates with a higher incidence of *who* with personal referents. This trend marks an important step towards standardisation.

Based on these findings, we can observe that the *wh*-pronouns gradually assert themselves in restrictive contexts in both regions across the three periods. This process is crucial for the development of the English relativisation system, marked by the gradual decline of *which* when associated with personal referents. This trend aligns with Gordon's study (2017) on relative pronouns in Bristol council ordinances (1506–1596) and the 1984 study by Dekeyser, who refers to the 'dehumanizing' of *which*. In contrast, the pronouns *whose* and *whom* establish themselves as personal relative pronouns. The occurrence of *zero* in both urban centres is negligible.

4.4 Antecedents in non-restrictive relative clauses

The overall number of non-restrictive clauses in both corpora is lower than that of restrictive clauses. Their predominance likely reflects the narrative and formal nature of the genre. Since referents were often known to both

speaker and audience, elaborative rather than identifying clauses were preferred. Non-restrictive clauses also allowed speakers to hedge statements and adopt a more cautious tone, fitting the legal context. Additionally, scribes may have favoured such structures to align with written conventions.

As with restrictive clauses, I cannot overgeneralise the findings and must interpret them more as certain tendencies in the development of the English pronominal system. As shown in Tables 6 and 7, non-personal antecedents prevail over personal antecedents only in Period 1 in Oxford. In all other examined periods, personal antecedents dominate in both Oxford and Durham.

Table 6: Antecedents in non-restrictive clauses, Oxford (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)		P2 (1600-1649)		P3 (1650-1699)	
Antecedent	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal
<i>that</i>	0	2 / 1.0	2 / 1.9	1 / 1.0	2 / 0.8	1 / 0.4
<i>which</i>	4 / 2.0	22 / 11.2	2 / 1.9	3 / 2.9	6 / 2.4	15 / 6.1
<i>the which</i>	1 / 0.5	0	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	5 / 2.5	0	4 / 3.9	0	19 / 7.7	0
<i>whose</i>	4 / 2.0	0	0	0	1 / 0.4	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	4 / 3.9	0	5 / 2.0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14 / 7.1	24 / 12.2	12 / 11.6	4 / 3.9	33 / 13.4	16 / 6.5

Table 7: Antecedents in non-restrictive clauses, Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)		P2 (1600-1649)		P3 (1650-1699)	
Antecedent	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal	Personal	Non-personal
<i>that</i>	0	1 / 0.8	0	1 / 1.0	0	0
<i>which</i>	11 / 9.1	8 / 6.6	8 / 7.8	7 / 6.8	4 / 3.8	9 / 8.6
<i>the which</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	3 / 2.5	0	18 / 17.5	0	12 / 11.4	0
<i>whose</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>whom</i>	13 / 10.8	0	0	0	0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	27 / 22.4	9 / 7.5	26 / 25.2	8 / 7.8	16 / 15.2	9 / 8.6

The relative pronoun *which* continues to refer to personal antecedents in non-restrictive relative clauses in both urban centres, as shown in examples (9) and (10), although it occurs more frequently, on average, with non-personal referents.

- (9) said y^t she had sent fo~ **John Todd**
& John Richerdson w^{ch} came nott
(ETED: F_IND_Durham_026, 19 February 1571)

- (10) a maide servant whose name was **Anne w^{ch}** had anesse manie
tymes to margarett Beckingham
(Oxf. Dioc. d. 16, 11 February 1592)

The ‘dehumanisation’ of *which* (Dekeyser 1984) thus extends to non-restrictive contexts; however, during the observed period (1560–1699), this process remains ongoing. Conversely, the forms *who*, *whose*, and *whom* are consistently associated with personal antecedents when employed.

The incidence of *that* in non-restrictive relative clauses in Oxford and Durham/Northern dialects is minimal with both personal and non-personal antecedents, indicating a decrease in supralocal features and consequently representing an important step towards standardisation.

Considering the aforementioned findings, it appears that non-restrictiveness is closely associated with the use of *wh*-forms, and animate antecedents tend to prefer the relative pronouns *who*, *whom*, or occasionally *whose*. As previously mentioned, these findings are influenced by the limited scope of the corpora; however, they tentatively support Rissanen’s claim (2000: 294) that the distribution of *wh*-forms along the animacy parameter was established during the 17th century. Overall, ‘the present-day state of usage is reached in the eighteenth century, though the “personal” *which* can still be found in uneducated usage at the end of the century’ (Rissanen 2000: 294).

4.5 Syntactic functions of relative pronouns

This section focuses on analysing the syntactic functions of relative pronouns in restrictive and non-restrictive clauses within the Oxford and Durham corpora. The findings support the Accessibility Hierarchy proposed by Keenan and Comrie (1977), who, based on a typological

comparison of about 50 languages, aimed to formulate universal strategies for the formation of relative clauses. The proposed scale is as follows: SU > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > OCOMP (Keenan and Comrie 1977: 66). This scale indicates that the subject function is the most accessible position for relativisation, followed by the direct object, indirect object, oblique object, genitive, and object of comparison. Additionally, the scale demonstrates that the frequency with which certain noun phrases are relativised is related to their syntactic complexity: the subject position is the most frequently relativised and the least complex, while each subsequent syntactic position further along the scale is less frequent and more complex. This is further substantiated by my findings for restrictive relative clauses in both regional centres, as shown in Tables 8 and 9. It is also apparent that as one progresses down the hierarchy of relativisable syntactic positions, the system becomes increasingly dominated by *wh*-forms. This development may suggest that *wh*-forms are regarded as more complex and abstract, while *that* is perceived as a simpler and less abstract form. This may explain why the relative pronoun *that* in the subject function remains resistant to change and is not replaced by *who*. This finding is supported by Romaine's research demonstrating that 'subject position relatives are the most frequently occurring and least syntactically complex and therefore last to yield to the WH system' (1980: 234). Furthermore, Romaine considers 'the infiltration of WH forms into the relative system by way of the most complex styles of writing and syntactic positions in the case hierarchy does suggest a pattern of external prestige borrowing', i.e., a change from above. She notes that the influence of French and Latin contributed to the adoption and reinforcement of *wh*-forms. The *wh*-relatives thus first occurred in written language and then gradually permeated through a stylistic continuum, starting from the most complex styles and moving towards the least complex ones (Romaine 1980: 234).

Table 8: Syntactic functions of relative pronouns in restrictive clauses, Oxford (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)			P2 (1600-1649)			P3 (1650-1699)		
	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB
<i>that</i>	12/6.1	8/4.1	0	5/4.8	1/1.0	1/1.0	10/4.1	0	1/0.4
<i>which</i>	11/5.6	9/4.6	1/0.5	2/1.9	5/4.8	2/1.9	12/4.9	10/4.1	7/2.9
<i>the which</i>	1/0.5	1/0.5	1/0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	1/0.5	0	0	2/1.9	1/1.0	0	0	0	0
<i>whose</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	2/0.8	2/0.8	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4/1.6	11/4.5
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	1/1.0	0	0	0	0
Total	25/12.7	18/9.2	2/1.0	9/8.7	8/7.7	3/2.9	24/9.8	16/6.5	19/7.7

Table 9: Syntactic functions of relative pronouns in restrictive clauses, Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)			P2 (1600-1649)			P3 (1650-1699)		
	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB
<i>that</i>	6/5.0	2/1.7	0	0	0	0	6/5.7	4/3.8	0
<i>which</i>	5/4.1	4/3.3	3/2.5	10/9.7	9/8.7	4/3.9	6/5.7	7/6.7	7/6.7
<i>the which</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2/1.9	0
<i>who</i>	1/0.8	0	0	0	0	0	24/22.8	0	0
<i>whose</i>	0	1/0.8	1/0.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2/1.9
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4/3.8	0
Total	12/9.9	7/5.8	4/3.3	10/9.7	9/8.7	4/3.9	36/34.2	17/16.2	9/8.6

Generally, the findings for non-restrictive clauses also indicate that the subject function is the most frequently relativised in both corpora (see Tables 10 and 11). The only exception is the relativisation of the oblique function in Period 1 in Durham, due to the higher occurrence of *whom*, a relative pronoun commonly found in the genre of witness deposition, as it frequently appears in formulaic phrases. The incidence of *that* in non-restrictive clauses is very rare, predominantly limited to the subject position. Notably, there is a gradual increase in the use of *who* in the subject position, accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in the use of *which*. This trend correlates with the rising preference for animate antecedents with *who* (see Tables 6 and 7 on animacy in non-restrictive relative clauses).

Table 10: Syntactic functions of relative pronouns in non-restrictive clauses, Oxford (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)			P2 (1600-1649)			P3 (1650-1699)		
	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB
<i>that</i>	1/0.5	1/0.5	0	3/2.9	0	0	3/1.2	0	0
<i>which</i>	12/6.1	11/5.6	3/1.5	4/3.9	1/1.0	0	11/4.9	4/1.6	6/2.4
<i>the which</i>	0	1/0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	5/2.5	0	0	4/3.9	0	0	19/7.7	0	0
<i>whose</i>	2/1.0	0	2/1.0	0	0	0	0	0	1/0.4
<i>whom</i>	0	0	0	0	1/1.0	2/2.0	0	0	5/2.0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	20/10.1	13/6.6	5/2.5	11/10.7	2/2.0	2/2.0	33/13.8	4/1.6	12/4.8

Table 11: Syntactic functions of relative pronouns in non-restrictive clauses, Durham/Northern dialects (raw counts / normalised frequency per 10,000 words)

	P1 (1560-1599)			P2 (1600-1649)			P3 (1650-1699)		
	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB	S	DO	OB
<i>that</i>	0	0	0	1/1.0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>which</i>	11/9.1	6/5.0	2/1.7	8/7.8	5/4.9	2/1.9	6/5.7	6/5.7	1/1.0
<i>the which</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>who</i>	3/2.5	0	0	18/17.5	0	0	12/11.4	0	0
<i>whose</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>whom</i>	0	0	14/11.6	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>zero</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14/11.6	6/5.0	16/13.3	27/26.3	5/4.9	2/1.9	18/17.1	6/5.7	1/1.0

5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the development of relativisation system in two early modern urban centres within the context of the spread of supralocal forms and the adoption of patterns that would later become standard forms. Previous research on relativisation (Gordon 2017; Dekeyser 1984; Johansson 2012; Romaine 1980; Rydén 1966) indicates that restrictiveness, the animacy of the antecedent, and the grammatical role of the relative pronoun are critical variables in the development of relativisation patterns. Therefore, these variables were examined in this study.

In general, restrictiveness appeared to influence the choice of a relative pronoun. The form *that* was predominantly found in restrictive contexts, while the *wh*-forms, especially *which*, were more frequently evidenced in non-restrictive relative clauses. These findings were observed in both the Oxford and Durham corpora. Region-specific distinctions were also noted: first, the frequent occurrence of *whom* in the Oxford data, particularly in restrictive clauses; and second, the incidence of *that* in non-restrictive contexts in Oxford, whereas this relative pronoun was virtually non-existent in Durham. This latter finding may suggest that the Oxford dialect was more conservative in this respect and retained regional forms longer than Durham.

Another tendency observable in both corpora is the gradual ‘dehumanisation’ (Dekeyser 1984) of the form *which* and its increasing association with non-personal referents. This process correlated with the adoption of *who*, *whom*, and *whose* as relative pronouns of personal reference in both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. However, the dehumanisation observed in my corpora was not as rapid as described by Dekeyser (1984), which may be attributed to differences in the genres analysed, as Dekeyser’s study focused on drama and various types of prose texts. Additionally, varying scribal conventions might account for this discrepancy. Specifically, scribes in Oxford may have adhered more strictly to local forms than scribes in Durham did.

Regarding the relative pronoun *that*, no clear pattern of development was observed. In restrictive contexts, it was sometimes preferred with personal antecedents, as seen in Oxford during Periods 1 and 3, and in Durham during Period 1. At other times, it was more frequently used with non-personal antecedents, such as in Oxford during Period 2 and in Northern dialects during Period 3. In restrictive relative clauses, the choice between *wh*-forms and *that* appeared to be influenced by the type of antecedent: *wh*-forms were preferred when the antecedent was a noun, whereas *that* was typically employed when the antecedent was a personal or indefinite pronoun. This pattern was also found by Rissanen (2000: 293–294), who attributed it to the strong connection between the antecedent pronoun and the relative pronoun.

The analysis of the grammatical functions of relative pronouns corroborated findings from previous studies (Bergs 2003; Gordon 2017; Romaine 1980), which describe the sequential introduction of *wh*-forms: beginning with *which*, followed by *whose* and *whom*, and concluding with

who. The subject position emerged as the most frequently relativised position and also the most resistant to change. This resistance likely explains why *that* in the subject position was not replaced by *who* for a long time.

In conclusion, Oxford and Durham generally followed similar paths in the diffusion of supralocal forms and the adoption of standard relativisation patterns, with Oxford retaining regional features for a longer period. However, it is important to note a major limitation of this study: the limited extent of the corpora precludes any broad generalisation of the results. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as indicative tendencies in the development of the English relativisation system and as an analysis of regional features. Another limitation is the absence of a deeper consideration of extralinguistic variables, such as the socio-historical context and the significance of these two urban centres during the time span analysed, as well as the role of the scribes. These aspects were beyond the scope of this paper. It should also be noted that this study serves as a starting point for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of additional material from Oxford, which will further expand upon the initial findings presented here.

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