

Alls, a Relative Pronoun?¹

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One of the foremost advantages of corpus work is that it allows us to uncover facts about language that would not have been noticed with more traditional methods. What would earlier have been dismissed as an isolated error, an unfortunate turn of phrase or a misunderstanding may well, when the computer presents all the instances of the phenomenon in the corpus, turn out to be a significant innovation in the language. A case in point may be *alls*.

In the CobuildDirect Corpus, a 57-million-word corpus of modern British, American and Australian English, there are a number of occurrences of the word *alls*. Here are a few specimens:

(1) <M02> You're hanging round
<F01> <ZGY>
<M02> with people who are into Gear. And alls you talk about alls your conversation is about for that day is drugs and drugs and drugs
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.

(2) <M02> My mum's just had a <ZF1> new <ZF0> newborn baby now like. And like that's alls I've got in this world is my brothers. <ZGY> that's alls
<F01> And me.
<M02> I think of.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.
(<ZF1> ... <ZF0> indicate repetition.)

(3) Alls he needs is a bit of help and that you know.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.

Alls thus seems to be equivalent to *all*, cf. “all you talk about,” “all I’ve got in this world,” “all he needs.” *Alls* is not known to either standard grammar books or dictionaries, not even the OED records it, but as we have seen it occurs in Cobuild, and although it is not very frequent, it is

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far from a misprint or an accidental inadvertency. In the “ukspok” section of Cobuild (“UK transcribed informal speech”), where it occurs 28 times, it represents 3 occurrences per one million words, which makes it about as frequent as *gruesome* or *mule* or *sombre* in the whole Corpus. So *alls* is primarily, if not exclusively, a spoken feature. Although it thus seems to be unknown in British English, there are indications that it exists, and has existed for some time in American English. It is mentioned (as *all's*) and translated as ‘All that’ in DARE, and a number of contributors to the Internet testify to its existence in various parts of the US. It is said to be characteristic of Boston slang, it is often heard in Maryland and Michigan, it is part of “Delaware Valleyisms,” and it used to be common in Ohio. One correspondent suspects that it is “widespread in America.” The *Merriam-Webster Open Dictionary* includes it as “**alls** (other): Used at the beginning of a sentence to describe a limit: ‘Alls I need to do is ...’” There are also a couple of American examples in the Corpus, from National Public Radio broadcasts:

(4) I can't give you a time frame on that, Rick. Alls I can say is that the US and coalition forces are attacking with an aggressive spirit, and we're meeting the enemy
Corpus: npr/07. Text: S2000910226.

(5) if you care to avoid the law alls you have to do is strap a gun to your waist and buy a cabin on a mountaintop somewhere in Idaho.
Corpus: npr/07. Text: S2000920824.

It seems we can conclude that the form arose in the US and, if we are to trust the Corpus evidence, is beginning to have an impact on British English.

What is the origin of this form? Various suggestions put forward on the Internet are generally unlikely: that it is a plural of *all* (“pack up your alls”), that it is *all* + an S from a following *is* (“all I know iS”), or even that it is a contraction of German [!] *alles*. It is clear that its origin must lie elsewhere.

Although *alls* seems to be interchangeable with *all*, there are restrictions on it; there are no cases of, say, **That will be alls*, or **Alls in alls*. Unlike pronouns like *anyone*, *everybody*, etc., *alls* is never used outside of the relative context. Cf.

anyone you ask	anyone would know that
everything they saw	everything looked all right
alls you talk about	*alls was in order

Alls only functions as a relativiser and means ‘all that.’ This gives a clue to its etymology. In all probability it is a contracted form of *all as*, where *as* does duty as a relative pronoun, which is also DARE’s suggestion for the American form.

As has a long tradition as a relative pronoun. Mustanoja (1960: 202) gives examples of it, such as the following, from the 14th century:

(6) arsmetrike is a lore þat of figours al is And of drauʒtes as me drawep in poudre,
EE Poems xvii 225 (‘Arithmetic is an art that is wholly made up of figures And of drawings that one draws in powder’)

In later days, *as* occurs as a relative pronoun in different English dialects, according to the EDD s.v. *AS, rel. pron.* (“You mean him as Miss T. is going to marry,” “Every lad and every wench as went”). The Survey of English Dialects (under Harold Orton) found relative *as* in large parts of England, as illustrated in *The Linguistic Atlas of England* (1978), where it covers a substantial part of the Midlands (in Map S5). The OED (s.v. as B†24a) states “*Obs.* in standard English, but common *dial.* in England and the United States.” More recent studies, such as those reported on in Kortmann and Schneider (2004), show that the relative particle *as* is found in six varieties of English: North of England, Southeast of England, Southwest of England, Appalachian English, New Zealand English and Cameroon English (Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi 2004: 1151). In Tanja Herrmann’s material (2005: 25), restricted to UK dialects, the relative particle *as* occurs 19 times, representing 0.8% of all the relative markers. It is most frequent (11 occurrences) in Nottinghamshire. EDD also shows (s.v. ALL 5) that relative *as* can take *all* as its antecedent in various dialects (“If yō’ don’t like it, yō’ can lump it, and that’s all as is”).

Here are a few examples from Cobuild of *all as* (relative) from present-day English:

(7) We haven’t got anything. All as I used to live for was my house to have my house nice and clean you know to have nice things in it.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000001271.

(8) They come back from the football or wherever we've been on a Sunday afternoon bath the kids get the telly on the fire on and get them a bit of tea and try and sit and watch the telly and all as you hear is effing and blinding and screaming and shouting and threatening. He hates baths.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000001271.

If the suggested etymology of the form *alls* is correct, it thus comprises the antecedent + a relative pronoun rolled into one and is itself a nominal relative pronoun. Relative *what* can be seen in the same light, viz. as consisting of an antecedent ('that') and a relative pronoun ('which'), as in e.g. *What you see is what you get*. "In fact, *that which...* is rare and formal, and is generally replaced by *what*" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 373). *Alls* is thus a functional parallel of relative *what*, and like relative *what* it can be seen, syntactically, to belong to both the matrix and the relative clause.

Interestingly, Cobuild also records a few occurrences of *alls what* (probably coming from the same speaker):

(9) <M02> And she was in the street like she knew that I was <tc text=pause>
<M0X> Sh
<M02> leaving. And that's alls what broke my heart really you know what I mean leaving the babby.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.

(10) <M02>And erm alls what hurt me most of all was the baby had a little run with me you know what I mean.
Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.

We can assume that *alls what* is influenced by *all what*. *What* is "[u]sed as a *rel. pron.*, referring both to persons and things; in *gen. colloq. use*." (EDD s.v. WHAT II 4: "I've got a poor son what's a cripple," "Something what somebody imagines," "I got a letter what she wrote on her dying bed," etc.). Under *what* C 7 the OED says "now *dial.* or *vulgar.*" Herrmann shows (2005: 25) that the relative particle *what* (170 occurrences) is much more frequent than the relative particle *as*. Most of the occurrences in her material come from the southern parts of the country (Eastern Somerset, Suffolk, Eastern Cambridgeshire). The collocation *all what* is reasonably frequent in modern English, and its place is often but not always the spoken colloquial language. Here are a few examples from the Corpus:

(11) <F04> They just like said about all what can happen and but I don't think anybody

<F0X> How it <ZGY>

<F04> takes it really seriously

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000001237.

(12) and as a result of monetary expansion you increase demand and of course all what happens is that the price level rises.

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S0000000078.

(13) <M01> I remember my father telling me and <ZG1> as you say about the cycling <ZG0> <ZF1> that's <ZF0> that's all

<M02> Yeah.

<M01> all what my father used to do.

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000263.

(14) I have never been so nervous as I was playing the last seven holes on Sunday, confessed Couples. But I recalled all what Ray had told me and managed to calm myself

Corpus: today/11. Text: N6000920414.

So *alls what* in (9) and (10) is probably a blend of *all (a)s* and *all what*.

Occasionally there are signs of hesitation between *alls* and *all*, as in

(15) They sit there <ZF1> alls they do <ZF0> all they do is they tell you the same things over and over again.

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000000507.

This hesitation could be taken to show that *alls*, although present as a variant in the idiolect, is not (yet) firmly established. On the other hand, the existence of the collocation *alls what* may suggest that *alls* is apprehended as monomorphemic and no longer associated with *all as* (cf. the impossibility of **all as what*) and indeed beginning to establish itself as an independent unit. If that trend continues we may see *alls* taking its place in the future alongside *what*, *whatever*, *whichever* and *whoever* and be recognised as a nominal relative pronoun in British as well as American English. It is only thanks to corpora that such a possibility could be imagined.

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