

Wh-relatives in the history of German (and what gender's got to do with it)

This paper surveys the historical development of (headed) wh-relatives in German (drawing on data from the *Old German Reference Corpus*, the *Reference corpus of Middle High German*, and the *Bonn Early New High German Corpus*), focusing on the use of the neuter singular form *was* 'what'. In present-day German, *was* replaces the canonical neuter singular relative pronoun *das* 'that' in connection with neuter singular indefinites/quantifiers, demonstratives and deadjectival nouns (examples taken from the *German Reference Corpus*):

- (1) a. Alles, **was** die Zuschauer dort sehen, ist Lug und Trug.
everything what the spectators there see is lies and deception
'Everything that the spectators see there is lies and deception.'
(Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, 17.01.2013, Ressort: Meinungen; PRO & KONTRA)
- b. Das, **was** wir machen, ist das, **was** uns gefällt.
that what we make is that what us pleases
'What we do is what we like.'
(Braunschweiger Zeitung, 04.06.2007; „Das, was wir machen, ist das, was uns gefällt)
- c. Das Beste, **was** Microsoft heute tun kann, ist, Yahoo zu kaufen.
the best what Microsoft today do can is Yahoo to buy
'The best that Microsoft can do today is to buy Yahoo.'
(Hannoversche Allgemeine, 08.11.2008, S. 15; Microsoft lässt Yahoo abblitzen)

Following Brandt & Fuß (2014, 2017), I assume that the alternation between *das* and *was* reflects categorial properties of the antecedent of the relative clause: *das* is inserted in the presence of a lexical head noun (characterized by specified gender features on the category-defining head *n*), while *was* is the underspecified elsewhere case that is used in case the more specific licensing requirements of d-forms are not met (see also Boef 2012 on Dutch *wat*).

Similar to other early Germanic languages, the use of wh-pronouns as relativizers was originally confined to free relatives with indefinite/generalizing readings in Old High German (OHG), while all other types of free and headed relatives were usually introduced by d-pronouns. However, OHG also exhibits a small number of headed wh-relatives. In contrast to the history of English, relevant examples are not confined to wh-adverbials (and oblique cases, cf. Hogg & Denison 2006), but also include cases where the relative clause is introduced by the non-personal wh-form 'what' (often in contexts that still license *was*-relatives in present-day German):

- (2) a. dhazs sie ni eigun eouuihd [**huuazs** sie dhar uuidar setzan].
that they not own anything, what.REL they there against set
'that they do not possess anything that they set against it'
(lt. dum non habeant quod proponant, Isidor_DeFide_5 (edition 513 - 538))
- b. Sar so tház irscinit, [**waz** mih fon thír rinit]
As soon as that appears what me from you touches
'as soon as that appears that touches me from you'
(Otfrid, Gospel Harmony II 8, 202-222)

In general, headed wh-relatives keep a low profile up to the mid ENHG period. In the 16th century, however, the number of headed wh-relatives increases, and *das* is rapidly replaced by *was*, eventually leading to the distribution still found in present-day (standard) German. *Was* continues to gain a wider distribution in present-day colloquial German, moving on from indefinite antecedents to all kinds of neuter nouns. However, German differs from (related)

languages such as English or Dutch, in that personal *wh*-forms such as *wer* ‘who’ cannot introduce headed relative clauses.

The paper proposes an account of the historical facts that pays attention both to the emergence of *wh*-relatives and to their limited distribution in Standard German (i.e., the restriction to non-personal forms). Based on the observation that the introduction of *wh*-forms in free relatives led to a distinction between individualizing/‘definite’ free relatives (introduced by *d*-forms) and generalizing free relatives (introduced by *wh*-pronouns), it is argued that this distinction provided the model for the development of headed *wh*-relatives in connection with indefinite antecedents (which fit the generalizing force of *wh*-pronouns, e.g. ‘all’, ‘each’, ‘everything’, ‘nothing’). However, this extension only became possible when the use of *wh*-forms in headed relatives was not any longer blocked by the availability of *d*-forms (which require the presence of an antecedent with lexical gender features). More precisely, I take it that *was* could only begin to replace *das* when certain indefinite pronouns such as *alles* ‘all’ were reanalyzed as exponents of D^0 (lacking lexical gender features), a change that disrupted the licensing environment for *d*-relatives. Thus, the transition from *das* to *was* is portrayed as part of a larger change in which German developed a new set of determiners (cf. e.g. Ebert et al. 1993, Demske 2001). In contrast, personal *wh*-pronouns could not turn into relative pronouns in headed relative clauses, since they carry a (interpretable) gender feature, which gives rise to a feature mismatch in the contexts where headed *wh*-relatives are licensed in German (i.e., relative heads without gender specifications). Time permitting, I will add some remarks concerning the connection between the different status of gender in English, Dutch, and German and the distribution of *wh*-relatives in these languages. More precisely, I will propose that in the history of English and Dutch, the extension of personal *wh*-forms to headed relatives was facilitated by a general transition from grammatical gender to semantic gender (still an ongoing process in Dutch, cf. e.g. Audring 2009, Klom & de Vogelaer 2017), after which the presence of interpretable gender features on *wh*-forms did not any longer lead to a clash in the contexts where *wh*-relatives are potentially available.

References

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- Klom, Jan & Gunther de Vogelaer. 2017. Semantic agreement competing with syntactic agreement: the case of Dutch pronouns. *Leuvense Bijdragen: Leuven Contributions in Linguistics and philology* 101, 123-149.

Electronic corpora

- Old German Reference Corpus*, <http://www.deutschdiachrondigital.de>.
- Reference corpus of Middle High German*, <https://www.linguistics.rub.de/rem/>
- Bonn Early New High German Corpus*, <https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Fnhd/>
- German Reference Corpus (DeReKo)*, <http://www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora/>