

Revisiting Transatlantic Relatives: Evidence from British and Canadian English

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Diachronic layering in restrictive relativization strategies (Romaine 1982; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2002) coupled with extensive variation in synchronic dialects (Britain 2010; Tagliamonte et al. 2005) have conspired to make relativization an ideal candidate for comparative sociolinguistic investigation. Our analysis of relativizer variation across four varieties of English sets out to test previous claims that there is no vernacular norm for relativizer distributions in British or North American Englishes (Ball 1996).

Our large-scale variationist study of restrictive relatives draws on more than 3,400 tokens from the vernacular of 130 speakers of the following varieties: (1) Tyneside English (TyE), a mainstream variety in northeast England; (2) Berwick English (BwE), a peripheral variety in northeast England; (3) London English (LnE), a rapidly innovating variety in southeast England; and (4) Ottawa English (OttE), spoken in Canada's Capital Region. We coded these data for broad extra-linguistic variables, a number of conventional linguistic factors implicated in relativizer choice (e.g., syntactic function of the relativizer; animacy and definiteness of the antecedent head NP; adjacency and length of the relative clause), as well as more innovative predictors (e.g., uniqueness and lexical specificity of the antecedent head NP).

Among our major findings are: (i) an elevated rate of subject relativizer omission in BwE; (ii) evidence of apparent-time change in WH-relativization (BwE) and zero-relativization strategies (BwE, OttE); (iii) negligible rates of relativizer which in all varieties (Hinrichs et al. 2015); and (iv) a general propensity for unique and non-specific antecedent head NPs to co-occur with the zero relativizer in conventionalized structural configurations (Wiechmann 2015).

We implicate the mainstream versus peripheral status of varieties as a key explanation of inter-varietal differences in relativizer patterning, and appeal to processing constraints, entrenchment of constructional patterns and discourse-pragmatic considerations in order to elucidate inter-varietal commonalities.