



# English wh-relatives:

## Borrowing or internal development?

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### Abstract

There is extensive evidence that the English language has been heavily influenced by French, particularly in terms of borrowing both verbs and nouns. However, the borrowing of grammatical structures remains a more controversial topic. Two hypotheses concerning the Middle English origins of *wh*-relatives were tested: were they borrowed from French or did they develop as a result of language-internal processes of change? Texts written in the 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries were examined to determine which structures appeared first in English: *wh*-relative clauses beginning with *the* presumably fashioned after the French *lequel*-relatives or *wh*-relatives not preceded by *the*. The Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English (PPCHE) was utilized to compare *wh*-relatives to the *which*-relatives and determine which grammatical structure appeared first based on the dates of the respective texts. Analysis showed that *wh*-relatives, while appearing rarely at the beginning of Middle English, did precede the introduction of *the which*-relatives. The case study found no evidence to support constructional borrowing as a means of change.

### Introduction

When languages come into contact with one another, it is common for one language to borrow words from the other. In the case of French and English, examples of borrowing are rife throughout history. Borrowing occurs more easily between languages that are more structurally similar to one another. Some examples of English borrowing words from French are as follows in Figure 1.

Old French	Modern French	Modern English
ancestrel/auncestral	ancestral	ancestral
delicieux	délicieux	delicious
accident	accident	accident
chatel	château	castle
gouvernement	gouvernement	government

Figure 1. Chart of French adjectives and nouns borrowed by English.

These examples motivate questions such as to what extent can one language borrow from another and are certain structures easier to borrow than others? French has had, at various points, two types of *wh*-relatives: *qui/que*-relatives, similar to the English *who/which*-relatives, and *lequel*-relatives, similar to Middle English *the which*-relatives. This case study focuses on *the which*-relatives and if their introduction into the English language preceded or followed the introduction of *wh*-relatives. Analysis of texts shows that *wh*-relatives appear first in early Middle English and *the which*-relatives do not appear until later, providing evidence against structural borrowing for this case study.

### References

Gelderen, E. V. (2006). *A history of the English language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing.

Romaine, S. (1988). *Socio-historical Linguistics: Its status and methodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Results

Robust evidence of *wh*-relatives within English appear in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as early as 1230, on more than one occasion and within more than one text. *The which*-relative clauses do not appear until 1350 (Figure 2).

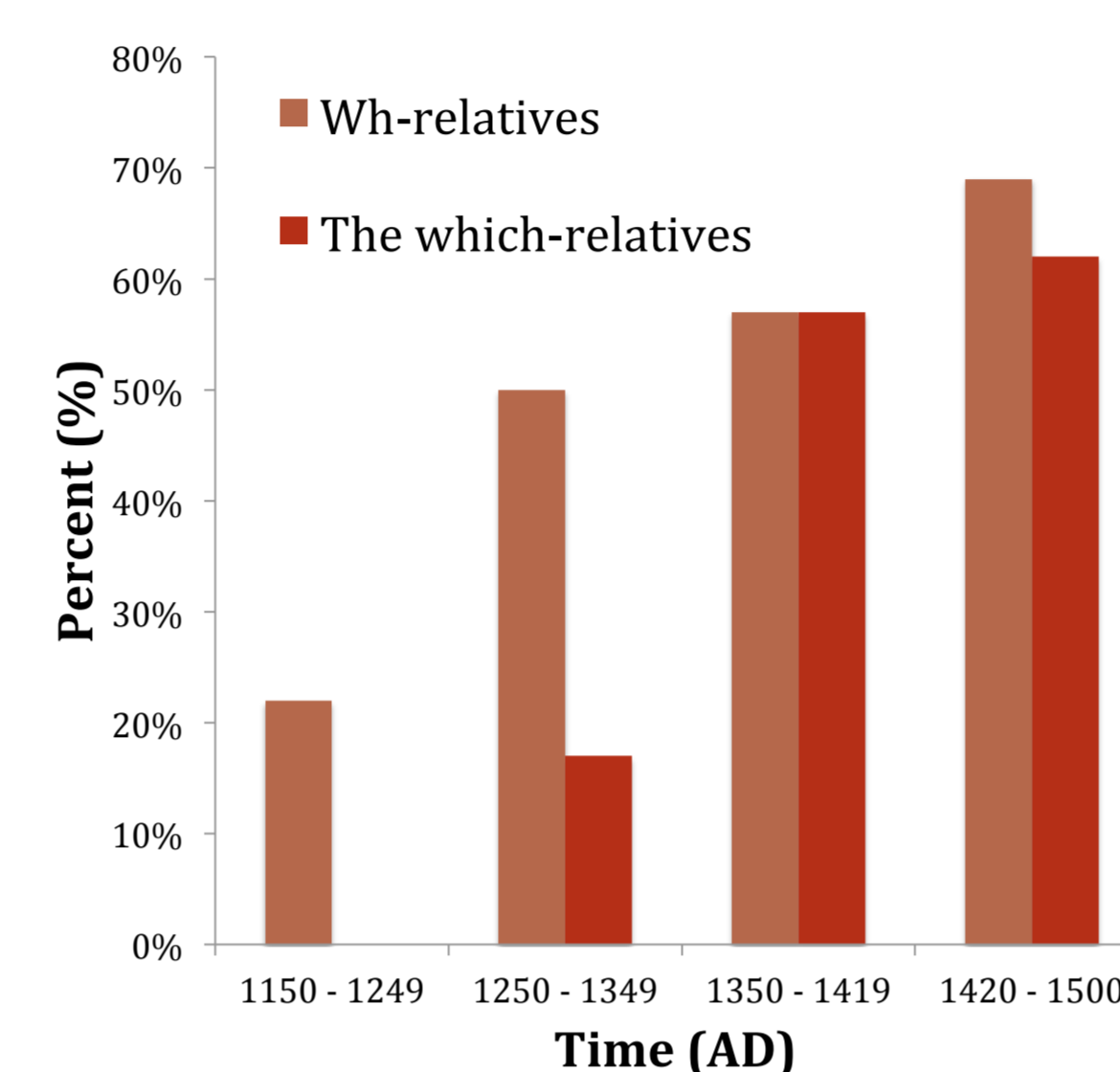


Figure 2. percentage of all texts analyzed within respective time periods containing *wh*-relatives and the *which*-relatives. Texts analyzed through CorpusSearch.

The period, ranging from 1250 - 1350, containing a word count of 146,603 words over five texts, provides the most complex evidence. Although there are six texts within the PPCHE originally written in this period, three only survive as manuscripts from later periods, between 1350 - 1500. Any evidence supporting or rejecting borrowing must be considered in light of not only the time of creation, but also the creation of the manuscript of each source. Among the six texts, three are both written and copied between 1250 - 1350, and all three texts provide evidence of *wh*-relatives. However, of the original three texts, one from year 1350 provides evidence of *the which*-relatives. The later periods, ranging from 1350 - 1420 and 1420 - 1500, provide extensive examples of both forms of relative clauses. The following timelines shown in Figure 3 display points in the literature when *wh*-relatives and *the which*-relatives were found.

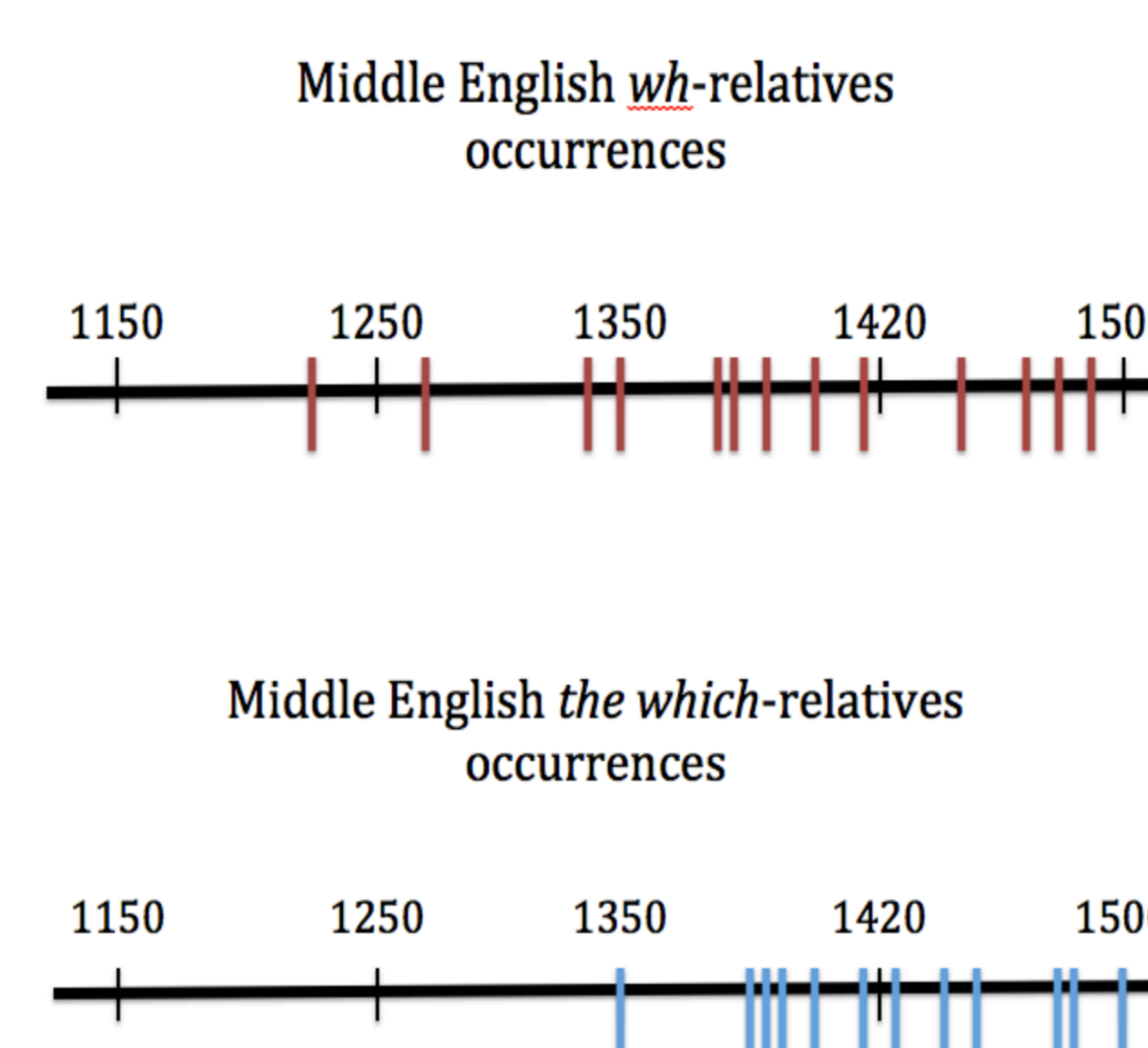


Figure 3. occurrences of *wh*-relatives and *the which*-relatives from texts dating between 1150 AD and 1500 AD.

### Acknowledgements

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### Methodology

The Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English (PPCHE) includes digitalized, syntactically annotated historical English text and can be used to compare *the which*-relatives and *wh*-relatives chronologically. The Middle English portion of PPCHE (PPCME2) includes a total of 1.2 million words from over 50 texts covering the period 1150-1500. Each text is labeled based on its original creation but also its earliest manuscript should the two dates differ. PPCHE makes it possible to search for specific syntactic structures via the CorpusSearch query language. After retrieving desired structures, each text is analyzed for both *the which*-relatives and *wh*-relatives. Results were recorded based on whether a text contained one, both, or none of the sought-after structures. The earliest example of each relative clause form represents its approximate introduction into the English language.

### CorpusSearch

```

/*#
+Tyse be-tenkyngge, an holy woman loke hy kepe wit al diligence and drede
+tilke precious tresour of maydenhood, which so profitable is ihad, and ilost
witoute rescouer.
(CMAELR3, 27-38)
/*#

```

wh-relative

Figure 4

```

/*#
affyr me is comen a man the wyche is maad byfore me,
(CMAYCSER, 346-2126)
/*#

```

the which-relative

Figure 5

Figure 4. Shows a CorpusSearch output for a *wh*-relative and the text example is extracted from.  
Figure 5. Shows a CorpusSearch output for a *the which*-relative and the text example is extracted from.

### Conclusion

Analysis of the earliest examples of each relative clause form provides sufficient support for the hypothesis of internal development, rejecting the notion of borrowing for this case study. Examples of *wh*-relatives appearing first in the literature, as early as 1230 and *the which*-relatives not appearing until 1350, suggest the earliest forms of the relative clause structure were not borrowed from the French *lequel*-relative construction. The results are relevant in regard to the patterns of language change and internal development. The introduction of *which* and other interrogatives into Middle English creates a syntactic structure that allows for the composition of *wh*-relatives clauses within larger clauses (Romaine, 1988). The evidence collected does not endorse constructional borrowing as a motor for change within the English language concerning the introduction of *wh*-relative clauses.

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