

Discretionary Use of Relative Pronouns

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1. Introduction

The grammatical choice of the relative pronouns “who,” “that,” or “which” is one of the largest concerns for non-native speakers. As these pronouns similarly function with a few non-restrictive use exceptions and a few specific uses for “that,” non-native speakers tend to follow the preferred native speaker use when writing academic papers in English.

Due to adjustments in the Japanese foreign language curriculum, the time given to teaching the prescriptive grammatical rules for relative pronouns has been significantly reduced. Therefore, students are being encouraged to acquire these in active learning environments, which requires more delicate instructions as classroom activities that stress learner autonomy demand that students use their discretion when choosing relative pronouns; however, tests that measure learner achievements demand some level of skill and knowledge. For instance, oral communication allows speakers to freely select either “which” or “that” for inanimate restrictive use heads; however, only one choice is correct in computer-scored tests even when under the same condition. In advanced-level classes, because students are taught that “which” has a more limited function than “that” (“which” should be used for an inanimate head), the use of “which” and “who” can reveal how well learners understand relative pronouns. Biber (2002) claimed that it is a fundamental rule in prescriptive school grammar that “which” is “usually considered more formal” and “that” is “usually considered less formal” (p. 287). Therefore, the relative pronoun “that” is not discretionally used by non-native speakers because their understanding is only passively gained from readings. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan’s (henceforth MEXT) curriculum guidelines for relative pronouns states that they are to be taught in middle school, and specifically states that the “basic use of ‘that,’ ‘which,’ and ‘who’ is for the subject gap and ‘that’ and ‘which’ is for object gap restrictive relative clauses” (Gakushu Shido), which suggests that the status of relative pronouns is still solidifying in Japanese education.

This paper investigated how these relative pronouns are used in written texts. The written texts chosen were about a recent anthropological finding of the oldest hominin skeleton, which was nicknamed “Ardi.” While common internet data is generally considered to be as reliable as paper-based descriptions, there is a slight difference in formality because internet data are easier to revise and edit and may be more similar to news in terms of promptness. Therefore, this study

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hypothesized that if internet data is in an intermediate register between news and paper-based texts in terms of formality, a review of internet data and paper-based data registers would reveal the degree to which the relative pronoun “that” is alternated with “who,” “whom,” and “which” in formal writing. Therefore, intending to improve non-native writing, the purpose of this paper was to investigate the degree to which the relative pronoun “that” is accepted in formal writing and how it is used in internet-based articles.

2. Hypothesis

This study assumed that internet-based texts were less formal than paper-based texts; therefore, the hypothesis was that the relative pronoun “that” is used more frequently in internet-based texts than in paper-based texts. It was also hypothesized that “that” is mostly used as an alternative to “which” and less frequently as an alternative for “who” and “whom.”

The selected topic was the discovery of ancient human fossils for two reasons. First, it was a very popular topic at the time of this study as worldwide researchers had joined an excavation team, of which one of the author’s university professors was the main member. The second reason was an interest in how ancient skeletons are described, that is, whether they are treated as animate or inanimate. It was anticipated that if writers intend to convey an objective message, both “which” and “that” would be used for the inanimate grammatical head. Conversely, when the writer was attempting a dramatic description, “who” would be used to personify the relic. Therefore, if a text type were categorized as a factual report, it was expected that there would be a slight difference in the written expression depending on the writer’s intention.

Eight paper-based articles and ten internet-based articles from October 2009 to July 2020 were collected from back issues in the university library, microfilms, online research databases (LexisNexis Academic, Newspaper Source), and the Google news archives. As *The Science* was the only academic journal consulted, the article in *The Science* was analyzed to determine the rate for the use of “that” in formal writing.

When collecting the data, it was discovered that the assumption about paper-based articles not being the same as the internet versions was not correct as some of the paper-based and internet-based newspaper and journal articles were the same, that is, the three collected microfilm articles from *The Independent*, *the New York Times*, and *the San Francisco Chronicle* were the same as on the respective websites, most of the other collected paper-based articles were also included in the online research database LexisNexis Academic, and the paper-based texts from *Nature* were all available on the website. However, not all the internet-based texts had paper-based versions, which indicated that internet-based articles were more frequent than paper-based articles. The preliminary investigation also revealed that most news media use their own editorial stylebooks, such as *The Associated Press Stylebook 2015* and *the Briefing on Media Law*.

Two methodological strategies were used to count the number of relative pronouns for the four conditions of use in each article; the correlations between the heads and the relative pronouns used in certain contexts. The four usage conditions examined for the use of relative pronouns were: 1) relative pronouns used for the subject gap; 2) relative pronouns used for the object gap, 3)

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relative pronouns used with prepositions, and 4) relative pronouns used in non-defining clauses. Prescriptive school grammar states that “that” should never be used with a preposition or in a non-defining relative clause; therefore, these two conditions were chosen to reveal whether “that” was used more frequently than “who” and “which.” The possessive gap was not considered because there is no alternative in the “that” category for “whose” or “of which.” Relative pronouns in

		Who/whom				Which				That				zero
		S	O	w/P	ND	S	O	w/P	ND	S	O	w/P	ND	
	Science	5			9			2	8	19(4)	2			
	Subtotal	5	0	0	9	0	0	2	8	19(4)	2	0	0	0
	Daily Kent Stater	1								3				
	Guardian	3								3(1)				1
	Independent	1				1		2		6(1)				1
	Nature			1				1	2	3				
	New York Times	2		1				2	5	2	1		(1)	2
	San Francisco Chronicle	4								2(2)				1
	Times							1	3	1	1			
	Washington Post	4						1	(1)	3(1)	2(2)			
	Subtotal	15	0	2	0	1	0	5	12(1)	23(5)	4(2)	0	0(1)	5
	CBC	1			1				1	5				
	FOX				1				2	1				
	Kent State	1							4(1)	5	3			
	Mail Online				1	4			3	1				1
	MSN	1			1	1			1	3(2)				3
	National Geographic	3							5	1				
	Nature				1				5					1
	NPR		1						1	3(2)	(1)			
	Science Centric	1			2				3(1)	6			(1)	4
	Science News								3	3	1			1
	Subtotal	7	1	0	7	5	0	0	28(2)	28(4)	4(1)	0	0(1)	10
	Total	27	1	2	16	6	0	7	48(3)	70(13)	10(3)	0	0(2)	15

S: subject gap; O: object gap; w/P: with preposition; ND: non-defining relative clause; zero: zero relativizer. The numbers in parentheses refer to relative pronouns in quoted speeches.

quoted speech, however, were counted but were excluded from this study to avoid ambiguity.

3. Results

3.1 General Remarks

The chart developed for *The Science* formal writing sample had a clear distribution, with only six relative pronoun types used: “who” in defining and non-defining relative clauses; “which” with a preposition or in a non-defining relative clause; and “that” for a subject gap or an object gap in a defining relative clause. This distribution indicated that “who” had the relative pronoun role for an animate head and, “which” was alternated with “that” when both were used.

The analysis of the subject gap relative pronoun distribution revealed an interesting tendency. In *The Science*, each distribution was completely distinct, and the use of “that” in the paper-based articles was distinct with one exception for “which” in *The Independent*. In the internet-based articles, “which” was used a few times, but “that” was more generally used with the same function as “which.” In less formal writing, such as the internet-based articles, the usage pattern was not consistent whereas, in the academic writing, it was consistent, that is, as the degree of formality decreased, there was a greater incidence of inconsistent usage. Therefore, these results indicated that internet-based texts are less formal than paper-based text, paper-based texts are less formal than academic articles, and “that” is a sub relative rather than a main relative pronoun.

The analysis of the object gap distribution revealed that “that” was used frequently, but “whom” and “which” were uncommon as zero relativizers tended to be used, which was found in fifteen examples. When a relative pronoun appeared with a preposition in a non-defining relative clause, “that” was never used except in conversation.

Consequently, the analysis revealed that “that” was used mostly for a subject gap or for an object gap in defining relative clauses, “which” was used most frequently in non-defining relative clauses, and “who” was used the most in defining relative clauses.

3.2 Special Remarks

The ancient skeleton discovery topic allowed for unique relative pronoun usage patterns depending on whether the skeleton was being treated as an animate or an inanimate head.

a. Human/ Nonhuman

Of the fourteen “who” relative pronouns used in *The Science*, twelve were used to introduce the research members participating in the fossil investigation; for example, “Most researchers, who have waited 15 years for the publication of this find,” (p. 37), with the other two “who” relative pronouns used for the skeletons. The first “who” was used to refer to the skeleton “Lucy,” and the second was used to refer to the skeleton “Ardi.” The author used “that” for both inanimate grammatical heads and for distinguishing between non-humans and humans, as shown in the following classification.

1: The skeleton, nicknamed “Ardi,” is from a female who lived in a woodland, stood about 120

centimeters tall and weighed about 50 kilograms. She was thus as big as a chimpanzee and had a brain size to match (p.37).

- 2: Some researchers have thought that the ancient African ape Bauplan was more primitive, lately citing clues from fragmentary fossils of apes that lived from 8 million to 18 million years ago (p. 40).

The above relative pronouns were followed by the same verb to convey the same meaning “lived.” The different relative pronoun usages within the same contexts implied that “who” is used for a human ancestor and “that” is used for non-humans such as apes.

b. Specific Skeleton/ Technical Terms

The author used the relative pronoun “who” for specific skeletons but used “that” or “which” for technical terms, even if these terms referred to human ancestors, as follows.

- 3: These include about 300 specimens from seven species of hominins, from some of the first members of the human family, such as 5.8-million-year-old *Ar. ramidus kadabba*, to the earliest members of our own species, Homo sapiens, which lived here about 160,000 years ago (p.41).
- 4: So far, the team has found just one species of hominin – Au. Garhi – that lived at this time in the Middle Awash,[...] (p.43).

In quotation 3, “which” is used in a non-defining relative clause, and in quotation 4 “that” is used for a defining relative clause. It is obvious from the underlined sections in the above two quotations that both are discussing human ancestors, with the only difference between quotations 3 and 4 being whether it is a specific skeleton or a technical term for a group. In other words, there was a difference between the singular and the plural.

c. “Who” for dramatic reporting

Of the other 18 articles, which included both paper-based and internet-based texts, nine articles used “who” or “whom” for a human ancestor. It is possible that these were used for dramatic effect; however, it was not possible to interpret each writer’s intention because of the small number of samples. The only article that revealed the writer’s intention was from *The Independent*, in which “who” was used just once: “Meet the human ancestor who walked Earth 4 million years ago; Bones found in East Africa add a new chapter to the story of man’s evolution, says Steve Connor” (Appendix p.3). This title takes a quoted speech structure; however, when the writer refers to the human skeleton in the text, neither “who” nor “whom” is used, that is, the “who” in the title was a device to attract the readers’ attention.

Conclusion

Why do writers prefer to use “that” rather than “which” ? When Newbrook (1998) referred to scholarly arguments, specific mention was made of the use of the relative pronoun “that,” and it

was claimed that as the relative pronoun “that” originated from the pronominal “that,” it should be treated as a complementizer. The pronominal and complementizer both possibly have the same functions as the relative pronoun “that,” that is, to add information. Therefore, the reason for the wide use of “that” may be convenience. It is thought that as native speakers believe that all the functions of “that” are similar, they employ them depending on the situation. The fact that “that” is treated as the main relative pronoun was the most important finding in this investigation, which could assist non-native speakers by revealing that “that” can be used in informal occasions when relative clauses enable learners to develop multilayered contexts and in formal occasions such as testing and evaluations.

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