

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

Eric Fuß, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Abstract

This paper surveys the historical development of (headed) wh-relatives in German, 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. 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.

Similar to other languages, the use of wh-pronouns as relativizers was originally confined to free relatives with indefinite/generalizing readings in Old High German (OHG). In contrast to English, early cases of headed wh-relatives are not confined to wh-adverbials and oblique cases, but also include a number of examples introduced by the non-personal wh-form *was* 'what'. In general, headed wh-relatives keep a low profile up to the mid ENHG period (quasi non-existent in OHG, and still rare in MHG/early ENHG). 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' may not be used to introduce headed relative clauses.

The paper proposes an account of the historical facts that pays attention both (i) to the emergence of wh-relatives and (ii) 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 proposed 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'). When the originally semantically motivated division of labor between d- and wh-relativizers became opaque due to independent changes in the ENHG period, the distribution was reanalyzed as being governed by morphosyntactic properties (gender on D_{rel}), giving rise to the present-day situation. 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 headed relative clauses. 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.