

The Restrictive Relative Pronouns *That* and *Which* in BrE

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Abstract The objective of this study was to investigate how the use of the relative pronouns *that* and *which* has changed in BrE over the past several years in such areas as nursing, physical therapy, and occupational therapy, and news. The result of my investigation implies that, overall, in BrE, over the past several years in a restrictive use the relative pronoun *that* has shown a marked increase, whereas the relative pronoun *which* has shown a marked decrease.

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1. Introduction

In 1997, a total of 20 articles published in the U.K. in 1997 were examined: 10 articles in *The Lancet* (23 Aug., 30 Aug., 13 Sept., 20 Sept., 27 Sept., 18 Oct., 8 Nov. 1977) and 10 articles in the *British Medical Journal* (15 Nov., 22 Nov. 1997). This time, in 2004, to clarify how the use of the relative pronouns *that* and *which* has changed since 1997, a total of 23 articles published in the U.K. in 2004 were examined: seven articles in *The Lancet* (1 May, 8 May, 15 May 2004) and 16 articles (abridged versions) in the *British Medical Journal*. Table 1 gives the number of instances of the restrictive relative pronouns *that* and *which* that occurred in these journals in 1997 and 2004.

Table 1

	1997	2004
That	Total 48 (67%) (<i>The Lancet</i> 34) (<i>BMJ</i> 14)	Total 51 (96%) (<i>The Lancet</i> 29) (<i>BMJ</i> 22)
Which	Total 24 (33%) (<i>The Lancet</i> 11) (<i>BMJ</i> 13)	Total 2 (4%) (<i>The Lancet</i> 2) (<i>BMJ</i> 0)

Table 1 suggests that, compared with 1997, in 2004 in restrictive relative clauses the relative pronoun *that* shows an increase of 30 percentage points, and, contrastively, the relative pronoun *which* shows a decrease of 30 percentage points. But of course the register is limited here and it is doubtful whether this kind of trend can be observed in other areas as well. Thus it would be necessary to discover the extent to

which the relative pronouns *that* and *which* that introduce restrictive relative clauses are now being used in the U.K. in disciplines other than medicine: nursing, physical therapy, and occupational therapy, and news.

2. The Restrictive Relative Pronouns *That* and *Which* in Nursing, Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy

Although the *Nursing Studies* may not be representative of the journals in the area of nursing in the U.K., let's take a look at this journal just for reference to investigate how the relative pronouns *that* and *which* are currently used.

Both of these pronouns are used to introduce restrictive clauses in the *Nursing Studies*:

(1) a... the different factors *that* are fundamental and specific to particular features....

(*Nursing Studies*, Feb. 2004)

b... a broad philosophy *which* aims to promote.... (Ibid.)

In 2000, 15 articles in the *Nursing Studies* published in the U.K. in 2000 (Aug., Oct., Dec. 2000) were examined to see how frequently the relative pronouns *that* and *which* were being used in restrictive clauses. In 2004, six articles in the *Nursing Studies* published in the U.K. in 2004 (Feb., Mar. 2004) were examined to determine how the use of these relative pronouns has changed since 2000. Table 2 shows the number of occurrences of the relative pronouns *that* and *which* in a restrictive relative clause in these articles.

Language would not normally change in just four years. Table 2 informs us that in 2004, in nursing the

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Table 2

	2000	2004
That	124(37%)	41(39%)
Which	214(63%)	63(61%)

relative pronouns *that* and *which* that are used to introduce restrictive clauses are used almost as often as in 2000.

In physical therapy, in a restrictive relative clause *that* and *which* are used like the following:

- (2) a. Low back pain is a disabling condition *that* is responsible for a considerable amount of health service expenditure.

(*Physiotherapy*, June 2004)

- b. Well-accepted and commonly used diagnostic categories were used *which* were also classified by their presenting severity (mild, moderate or severe). (Ibid.)

In 1998, 10 articles in the *Physiotherapy*, which were published in the U.K. in 1998 (Apr., May, June 1998), were examined to learn how the relative pronouns *that* and *which* were used to introduce restrictive clauses. This time, in 2004, seven articles in the *Physiotherapy*, which were published in the U.K. in 2004 (June 2004), were examined to determine how the use of *that* and *which* has changed for the last six years. Table 3 shows the number of occurrences of *that* and *which* in a restrictive use in these articles.

Table 3

	1998	2004
That	70(48%)	24(65%)
Which	75(52%)	13(35%)

Table 3 indicates an increase of approximately 20 percentage points in *that* and approximately 20 percentage points in *which* during a period of six years.

In occupational therapy the relatives *that* and *which* are used restrictively like this:

- (3) a. This may account for the number of occupations *that* the participants categorised as leisure

(*The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, June 2004)

- b. ... a complex concept *which* they incorporated into a flow chart.... (Ibid.)

In 1998, 10 articles, which were published in *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy* in the U.K.

in 1998 (May, June 1998), were investigated to find out how often the relative pronouns *that* and *which* were used to introduce restrictive clauses. And again in 2004, to determine how the use of these relative pronouns has changed for the past six years, four articles in the same journal (June 2004) were referred to. Table 4 shows the number of instances of *that* and *which* in these articles.

Table 4

	1998	2004
That	112(65.5%)	49(83%)
Which	59(34.5%)	10(17%)

Interestingly, as in physical therapy, in occupational therapy *that* also shows an increase of approximately 20 percentage points, while *which* also shows an decrease of approximately 20 percentage points during a period of six years. And today, in occupational therapy, *that* is used approximately in 80% of the instances, and *which* in about 20% of the instances.

All of this study concerning three areas related to medicine means that except in nursing, where the restrictive relative pronoun *which* appears to be prevalently used even now, in the other two areas, physical therapy and occupational therapy, there has been some change over the past six years, and as a result, in 2004, compared with in 1998, *which* is being used less often and *that* is being used more often.

3. The Restrictive Relative Pronouns *That* and *Which* in News and Other Registers

Although it cannot be said that *The Economist* is representative of news magazines in the U.K., to learn how the relative pronouns *that* and *which* are used in a restrictive relative clause in news, let's take a look at *The Economist* just for reference.

In *The Economist*, *that* and *which* are used in a restrictive clause like the following:

- (4) a. It is a view *that* has the virtue of simplicity.

(*The Economist*, July 3rd–9th 2004)

- b. ... the goods and services *which* are offered for sale in their classified advertising. (Ibid.)

To find out how often the use of the relative pronouns *that* and *which* has changed in about 100 years, three issues of *The Economist* were examined, which were published on the following dates: 1st Jan.1910, 7th Jan.1950, and July 3rd 2004. Table 5 gives the number of appearances of the relative pronouns *that*

and *which* that were used to introduce restrictive clauses in *The Economist*.

Table 5

	1910	1950	2004
That	33 (36%)	31 (20%)	138 (86%)
Which	58 (64%)	124 (80%)	23 (14%)

In 2004, *that* is used in 86 percent of the instances and *which* in 14 percent of the instances, which, on the whole, coincides with the trend in medicine, or physical therapy, or occupational therapy. Although the situation was somewhat different in 1950, in about 100 years the use of *that* has increased by approximately 50 percentage points, while that of *which* decreased by approximately 50 percentage points. *The Economist* is believed to be one of the highly conservative newsweeklies, and Table 5 shows that even in this newsweekly a remarkable change can be seen.

A glance at the following Table 6 may further reinforce this argument. Table 6 gives the number of occurrences of the restrictive relative pronouns *that* and *which* in the U.K. between 1931 and 1991. The materials used in this investigation include weeklies or monthlies published in the U.K. in each year.

Table 6

	1931	1961	1971	1981	1991
That	122 (24%)	243 (49%)	211 (41%)	220 (51%)	194 (65%)
Which	379 (76%)	252 (51%)	305 (59%)	213 (49%)	106 (35%)

The situation changed completely in about 60 years. In 1931 it was *which* that was used most often, whereas in 1991 it was *that* that came to be used more often.

4. Reasons for the Increase in the Use of *That* in BrE

According to the *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989 : 894-95), roughly, the relative pronouns *that* and *which* have developed as follows. *That* is the oldest relative pronoun, and this relative pronoun was prevalent in early ME. *Which* began to be used as a relative pronoun in the 14th century. By the early 17th century *that* and *which* were being used pretty interchangeably. During the later 17th century *that* fell into disuse but it made its reappearance in the early 18th century. As for the usage, formerly *that* was used to introduce nonrestrictive clauses as well as

restrictive ones, but this use of *that* to introduce non-restrictive clauses continued to diminish. This is what the *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* tells us.

With regard to the distinction between *that* and *which*, a large number of people believe that it was H. W. and F. G. Fowler who first suggested that *that* be used restrictively and that *which* be used nonrestrictively. But the *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989 : 894-95) and Garner (1998 : 648-49) say that grammarians had already alluded to such a distinction by the end of the 19th century, well before the Fowler brothers did. For example, in 1894, a grammar had already referred to the distinction (Garner 1998 : 649):

- (5) The relative *who* or *which* may, and theoretically does, introduce a new fact about its antecedent; its office is, therefore, to head a coordinate clause, as may be shown by using its equivalent *and he*, *and it*, *and they*. The relative *that* is used only to introduce subordinate clauses necessary to define or restrict or complete our thought of the antecedent.... There are cases where, for the sake of euphony or clearness, *who* or *which* has to be used though the meaning is restrictive. Such cases ought to be studied; and wherever that will go smoothly, use it. Do not be so careless in this respect as some writers are.

John F. Genung, *Outlines of Rhetoric* 94-95
(1894)

Thus it follows that the Fowler brothers enlarged upon the idea, following in the footsteps of their predecessors.

The Fowler brothers were British and so were the grammarians who had first referred to the distinction between *that* and *which* in a restrictive relative clause. As we have already noted in this article, *that* has recently begun to be increasingly used in BrE, but nevertheless the use of *that* is not so conspicuous in BrE compared with that in the U.S., where *that* is almost exclusively used now to introduce restrictive relative clauses. Thus it is ironical that although this distinction between *that* and *which* can be traced back to BrE, it is now more firmly observed in AmE rather than in BrE.

Yet when it comes to the reasons why in recent years in BrE *that* has started to prosper and why *which* has started to decline, it is not easy to pinpoint them. One of the reasons may be due to an influence of AmE, where change is much faster. Or it may be attributed to the education in the U.K. Or it may be

ascribed to fashions like girls' hemlines, since, as Bryson (1990 : 98) says, after all, language has a strong resemblance to fashion. Bryson says:

- (6) Language, never forget, is more fashion than science, and matters of usage, spelling, and pronunciation tend to wander around like hemlines. People say things sometimes because they are easier or more sensible, but sometimes simply because that's the way everyone else is saying them.

It may be one of these reasons, or it may be a combination of these.

Although in BrE the restrictive relative pronoun *which* has come to appear less often than before, it is still used by some, as can be seen particularly in nursing. Garner (1998 : 647) says that today there are those who ignore the distinction between *that* and *which*, and who believe that *which* is more formal than *that*. Garner adds further that those who do not care about the distinction probably do not write well. He says:

- (7) You'll encounter two schools of thought on this point. First are those who don't care about any distinction between these words (i.e. *that* and *which*), who think that *which* is more formal than *that*, and who point to many historical examples of copious *whiches*. They say that modern usage is a muddle. Second are those who insist that both words have useful functions that ought to be separated, and who observe the distinction rigorously in their own writing. They view departure from this distinction as "mistakes."

Before reading any further, you ought to know something more about these two groups: those in the first probably don't write very well; those in the second just might.

5. Conclusion

The fact that in medical journals in the U.K. the relative pronoun *that* has begun to be prevalently used to introduce restrictive clauses in recent years does not seem to be the case in nursing. Yet it is the case to some extent in physical therapy and occupational therapy, and in news. In these areas, during a short period of time *that* has come to be used in more cases. But this is an observation taken as a whole. There are individual preferences: there would be some who use *which* more often than *that* in their articles, and vice versa. With regard to the number of journals studied

here and the periods during which language change was observed here, these may not have been sufficient enough. Thus, further studies are needed that are based on a much larger number of journals and weeklies, and a longer time frame. It will be also necessary to see how the use of the relative pronouns *that* and *which* that are used to introduce restrictive clauses will change in the future.

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