

# *If* and *Whether* in Indirect Speech

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**Abstract** When *if* or *whether* follows a transitive or an adjective and precedes a noun clause, these subordinators are interchangeably used except in some cases. Of *if* and *whether*, which is more preferably used in current American English and British English? How did the people's preference for these conjunctions change in about a hundred years 1900-1994? In order to clarify these, 24 weeklies or monthlies were made use of here.

To be very brief, in American English in 1994, *if* is more preferably used than *whether*, while around 1900 in American English, *if* was used almost as frequently as *whether*. In British English in 1994, *whether* is more frequently used than *if*, and the situation was much the same around 1900.

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**Key Words** : *If*, *Whether*, American English, British English.

## 1. Introduction

It is the objective of this paper to examine the frequency in current American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) of *if* and *whether* that follow transitives or adjectives and precede noun clauses, and to see at the same time what kind of change about a hundred years 1900-1994 brought to the frequency of these subordinators. In order to see the change minutely, the period 1900-1994 was divided into four: 1900, 1930, 1960 and 1994, and three weeklies or monthlies published in the United States and Britain in each of these years were selected. These magazines may not be the most representative ones in the United States or Britain, yet they will be of some use in grasping the general trend.

The materials made use of here are as follows:

AmE:

*Harper's*, Sept. 1994 (HA)/ *The New Yorker*, Aug. 1, 1994 (NY)/ *The Reader's Digest*, Aug. 1994 (RE)/ *Newsweek*, Apr. 4, 1960 (NE)/ *Harper's*, May 1960 (HA)/ *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1960 (AT)/ *American Mercury*, Jan. 1930 (AM)/ *Harper's*, Jan. 1930 (HA)/ *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 1930 (AT)/ *The Dial*, Apr. 1, 1900 (DI)/ *Harper's*, Apr. 1900 (HA)/ *The Atlantic Monthly*, Apr. 1900 (AT).

BrE:

*The Spectator*, Aug. 13, 1994 (SP)/ *The Economist*, Aug. 13, 1994 (EC)/ *Tatler*, Aug. 1994 (TA)/ *Blackwood's Mag.*, Apr. 1960 (BL)/ *The Economist*, Apr. 2, 1960 (EC)/ *New Statesman*, Apr. 2, 1960 (NS)/ *Blackwood's Mag.*, Jan.

1930 (BL)/ *The Economist*, Jan. 11, 1930 (EC)/ *The English Review*, Jan. 1930 (EN)/ *The Gentleman's Mag.*, Apr. 1900 (GE4)/ *The Gentleman's Mag.*, May 1900 (GE5)/ *Blackwood's Mag.*, 1900 (BL).

## 2. The interchangeability of *if* and *whether*

Partridge (1973:149) says that when *if* or *whether* follows a transitive or an adjective and they precede a noun clause, these conjunctions are not interchangeable.

*If* for *whether* is always wrong and often ambiguous, but the mixture of the two is wrong, ambiguous — and amusing. "She was wondering if Rupert [her husband] would like an heir, and whether it was time that they moved from the doll's house in Bourdon Street ...." In that good writer and erudite scholar Sir Maurice Bowra's Sophoclean Tragedy, we notice this lapse: "(Contemporaries) would catch his hints and suggestions, and know if he intended to surprise them with a paradox or to expose some familiar way of thought." (Many American grammarians grant the use of *if* for *whether* in informal style if the tag *or not* is omitted.)

However, almost all the grammarians today agree that *if* and *whether* are interchangeable in indirect speech except in some cases in BrE as well as in AmE. In fact, the instances of these two subordinators used in this way are to be seen already in the OE period. The *OED2* cites instances of *if* and *whether* that date back to the OE period.

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The instance of *if* can also be seen in Shakespeare:

How shall know if I do choose the right? —  
*The Merchant of Venice* (1597)<sup>1)</sup>

In addition, there is a famous instance of *if* from the King James Bible of 1611.

Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. — Genesis 8:8

This is the only instance of *if* that is used in indirect speech in Genesis. However, *whether* is used more frequently in Genesis: there are as many as six instances of *whether* in this use in Genesis in the King James Bible (18:21, 24:21, 37:14, 37:32, 42:16, 43:6), although nobody seems to have pointed it out. This might roughly show that *whether* was a more general form of expression than *if* in indirect speech in those days. Be that as it may, the following are two of those instances of *whether* from Genesis:

- a. I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it .... — 18:21
- b. And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not. — 24:21

In this way, *if* and *whether* are generally interchangeable when they follow transitives or adjectives, yet there are some cases where *if* and *whether* are not interchangeable. Such instances need to be excluded here in comparing the frequency of the two subordinators. The instances in the following (A)(B)(C)(D) include cases where *if* and *whether* are not interchangeable. The fact that in a large number of instances where *whether* is possible, *if* cannot take the place of *whether* may show that originally *whether*, and not *if*, led a leading role in this use.

(A) Syntactically, in the following (1)(2), *whether* cannot be replaced by *if*:

- (1) a. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. (*SP* 1994)
- b. \*I don't know if to laugh or cry.
- (2) a. Whether the leopard was still sitting over his supper I do not know. (*BL* 1930)
- b. \*If the leopard was still sitting over his supper I do not know.

(B) Also syntactically, in the following (1)(2), *whether* is preferred to *if*, and they are not

interchangeable, although *if* is also possible in these cases (*cf.* Swan 1995:620):

- (1) a. We'll be told tomorrow whether we are needed or not. (*OALD5*)
- b. We'll be told tomorrow if we are needed or not.
- (2) a. How can he tell whether a new book may or may not be useful to him? (*AM* 1930)
- b. How can he tell if a new book may or may not be useful to him?

(C) Semantically, there are sometimes cases like the following (1abc) in which an *if*-clause denotes desire or expectation on the part of the speaker. A *whether*-clause can also show such desire or expectation on the part of the speaker like the following (2), yet compared with the instances of *if*, those of *whether* seem to be highly limited<sup>2)</sup>. In my materials, there are 12 instances of *if* and one instance of *whether* in this use in AmE and BrE. Thus, this use is highly lopsided in favor of *if*, which makes it necessary to eliminate those instances altogether:

- (1) a. Swiss Red Cross asked him if he would serve for six months in the Cambodian capital. (*RE* 1994)
- b. I asked John D. Whittier and asked him if he would address such an audience as ours. (*AT* 1930)
- c. Peter asked if he could get himself a fresh drink of water. (*AT* 1930)
- (2) I asked whether we could play mixed doubles. (*TA* 1994)

(D) Alexander (1988:346) says that either *if* or *whether* is used with certain verbs and adjectives. In these cases *if* and *whether* that follow these verbs and adjectives are interchangeable. He also says that certain verbs are used with *whether* and not with *if*. In these cases *whether* and *if* are not interchangeable. Verbs and adjectives that can be used with either *if* or *whether* are *agree, ask, care, (not) certain, check, decide, doubt, find out, forget, gather, guess, inquire, know, learn, matter, mind, notice, record, say, see, show, (not) sure, understand, want to know, wonder*. Verbs that are used with *whether* are *choose, confess, confirm, discuss, explain, prove, teach, think*. The instances that have these verbs must be excluded here. However, of these verbs, *discuss, care, and matter* need some elucidation.

Alexander (1988:294, 346) says that *discuss* can

be used only with *whether*, and not with *if*. However, Swan (1995:620) says that *discuss* can be used with *if*, but that *whether* is more normal:

After some verbs, *whether* is preferred to *if*.  
*We discussed whether we should close the shop.*  
 (More normal than *We discussed if....*)

Although there is thus a difference in opinion with regard to *discuss*, it is certain that when *discuss* is used, *whether* is preferred. This makes it necessary to exclude the instances where this verb is used, together with other instances where such other verbs as *choose*, *confess*, *confirm*, etc. listed above are used.

What about *care*? *Care* is used like the following:

- a. Roger and Hammerstein don't care if any of "The Sound of Music" is played on any station. (NE 1960)
- b. They do not care whether it is a fact or not. (HA 1900)

*Care* cannot be used transitively; it can be used only intransitively. Therefore, the *if*- or *whether*-clause following *care* is not a noun clause but a concessive adverb clause that is "used to say that something will or will not happen whatever the situation is" (LDOCE3). Hence, *care* cannot be treated in the same category with other verbs like *choose*, *confess*, etc. as Alexander does. The instances of *care* must be excluded here when it is followed by *if* or *whether*. What about *matter*? *Matter* is used like the following:

- a. In truth, it wouldn't matter if Packer became the next Mother Teresa. (TA 1994)
- b. ... it did not really matter if bilgewater did slosh round them occasionally. (BL 1960)

In the instances above, the *if*-clauses are concessive, and they do not act as object of *matter*. Here confusion is also seen in Alexander. Hence *matter* must also be excluded.

### 3. The frequency of *if* and *whether*

Tables 1 and 2 show the actual figures of the occurrences of *if* and *whether* in AmE and BrE from 1900 to 1994 that appear in the instances where the two subordinators are interchangeable.

Tables 1 and 2 reveal some facts of interest.

First of all, in AmE, in 1994, when *if* and *whether* are interchangeable, *if* is used more frequently than *whether*: *if* is used in little less

Table 1 AmE

	<i>If</i>			<i>Whether</i>	
1900	DI	1	19 (54%)	0	16 (46%)
	HA	7		14	
	AT	11		2	
1930	AM	14	26 (58%)	3	19 (42%)
	HA	7		8	
	AT	5		8	
1960	NE	3	12 (46%)	6	14 (54%)
	HA	4		4	
	AT	5		4	
1994	HA	6	26 (67%)	7	13 (33%)
	NY	9		4	
	RE	11		2	

Table 2 BrE

	<i>If</i>			<i>Whether</i>	
1900	GE4	0	3 (23%)	4	10 (77%)
	GE5	2		1	
	BL	1		5	
1930	BL	4	4 (20%)	6	16 (80%)
	EC	0		3	
	ER	0		7	
1960	BL	10	16 (50%)	7	16 (50%)
	EC	4		4	
	NS	2		5	
1994	SP	1	5 (25%)	5	15 (75%)
	EC	1		2	
	TA	3		8	

than 70 percent of the instances, and *whether* a little more than 30 percent of the instances. The situation is the reverse in BrE: in BrE, in 1994, *whether* is used more frequently than *if*. *Whether* is used in 75 percent of the instances and *if* in 25 percent of the instances.

In AmE *if* was used a little more frequently than, or almost as frequently as, *whether* from around 1900 to around 1960, yet in 1994 *if* predominates. In BrE generally *whether* was used more frequently than *if* during the period 1900-1994, although it seems to have been used almost as frequently as *if* around 1960.

A hundred years seems to have brought some change to AmE. *If* rose from 54 percent of 1900 to 67 percent of 1994. It is a 24 percent increase. *Whether* declined from 46 percent of 1900 to 33 percent of 1994. It is a 28 percent decrease. On the other hand, a hundred years has not brought any change to BrE. In BrE, in 1900 *if* was used in 23

percent of the instances; in 1994 it is used in 25 percent of the instances. In 1900 *whether* was used in 77 percent of the instances; in 1994 it is used in 75 percent of the instances. Evidently BrE is more conservative than AmE.

What is the reason for the gradual increase of *if*, and conversely the gradual decrease of *whether* in AmE? There may be a number of reasons for it, such as a person's likes or dislikes, or euphony of a sentence, but I suspect that the informalization of AmE is one of the main reasons, for *if* is generally considered informal and *whether* formal.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

When *if* or *whether* precedes a noun clause and follow a transitive or an adjective, *if* is used approximately twice as frequently as *whether* in AmE in 1994, while in BrE in 1994 *if* is used almost as frequently as *whether*. In AmE a hundred years has brought some change to the frequency of *if* and *whether*: compared with those in 1900, the instances have increased in AmE in 1994. In BrE a hundred years has brought no significant change to the frequency *if* and *whether*: in 1994 *if* is used almost as frequently as in 1900 in BrE.

#### Notes

- 1) Quoted in Gilman, E. Ward, ed., *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1989), p.520.
- 2) Cf. K. Sonoda, "The Expressions of Expectation and Desire in *If*- and *Whether*-Clauses," *English Usage and Style* 12 (1995): 22-28.

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## 間接話法における *If* と *Whether*

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要 旨 名詞節を導く *if* と *whether* が現在の英米語ではどちらが多く使われているかをみ、またその理由を考えてみた。現在での状況をより良く把握するために現在までの100年間におけるこれらの接続詞の英米における使用頻度の変化もみてみた。

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