

Relative clauses in Australian English: A cross-varietal diachronic study

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Research on grammatical change in the Late Modern English period has concentrated almost exclusively on British and American English. This study traces developments in the category of relative clauses in Australian English, seeking to determine whether historical exonormative ties with the ‘Mother Country’ are still in evidence and, if not, whether there is evidence of any alignment with American English, the current centre of gravity in English world-wide. Data derived from two recently compiled Australian corpora, COOEE and AusCorp, which together cover the period of approximately two centuries from the foundation of the first British colony in Australia in 1788 to the present day, are compared with that from ARCHER, a diachronic corpus of British and American English. The results indicate that in developments such as the rise of *that*-relatives and decline of *wh*-relatives, Australian English patterns closely with innovative American usage, eschewing the conservatism of its colonial parent.

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1. Introduction

By comparison with the sustained volume of research on Australian English (AusE) phonology and lexis, dating back to the pioneering monographs of the mid-1960s by Mitchell & Delbridge (1965) and Ramson (1966), scholarly interest in the grammatical features of AusE is a relatively new development, and includes recent work on the uptake of widely used syntactic variables originating in the USA (Rodríguez Louro 2013). The most comprehensive contribution thus far is Peters, Collins & Smith (2009) a volume that throws some light on the divided normative allegiances of AusE grammar. While some chapters find evidence of a continuing association with British grammatical norms (such as Hundt's finding of an Australian preference for plural concord with collective nouns that aligns it with British rather than American practices), other chapters find evidence of American influence (such as Peters' finding of an Australian endorsement of the mandative subjunctive that aligns it more with American than British usage). This variability in grammatical allegiances is not surprising: the severing of Australia's cultural, political and linguistic ties with Great Britain had arguably not gained any significant momentum before the 1970s, when an emerging sense of linguistic identity was bolstered by expressions of cultural self-assurance and nationalist sentiment (Moore 2001). We might thus expect that the use of some grammatical categories would continue to reflect the traditional dependence of AusE on the external norms of British English (BrE), or 'exonormativity'; others might reflect the more recent consolidation of AusE-internal norms, or 'endonormativity' (see further Schneider 2007: 118-127). At the same time as British influence was waning, a new historical development was taking place which one might also expect to have had ramifications for the grammar of AusE, the emergence of American English (AmE) as the new centre of gravity for linguistic change in English world-wide (see Rohdenburg & Schlüter 2009).

Most of the grammatical studies of AusE conducted thus far (including those in Peters et al. 2009) are based on synchronic data, resulting in a limited capacity to identify historical developments in the grammar of AusE. This situation in turn reflects the unavailability hitherto of suitable resources for analysing diachronic change in AusE. The two best known representative AusE corpora – the Australian Corpus of English (ACE) and the Australian component of the

International Corpus of English (ICE-AUS) – have sampling dates that are less than one decade apart (1986 for ACE, and the early 1990s for ICE-AUS), rendering them unsuitable for diachronic study as a pair. Fortunately, the recent compilation of diachronic Australian corpora has opened up new possibilities for studying historical developments in AusE. Covering the period 1788-1900, we now have Clemens Fritz’s COOEE (‘Corpus of Oz Early English’), while AusCorp – which Xinyue Yao and I assembled in 2012 (see Collins & Yao forthcoming) – covers the twentieth century: see Section 3 below.

This study uses data derived from COOEE and AusCorp to examine developments in the grammatical category of relative clauses – exemplified in (1) and (2) below – in nineteenth and twentieth century AusE, systematically drawing comparisons with BrE and AmE based on data derived from ARCHER (‘A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers’: see Section 3 below). Relative clauses were selected on the grounds of their susceptibility to historical change in Late Modern English, as discussed in Section 5 below, and evidence of significant divergences between British and American patterns of usage in Present-Day English (see for example Leech et al. 2009: 226-233).

- (1) ... and then they turned to things *which more nearly interested them* [COOEE 1850-99 3-243]
- (2) It is one of those things *that no one is expected to understand*. [COOEE 1850-99 4-124]

2. Corpus-based research on grammatical change in AusE

The corpus-based diachronic study of grammar is a quite recent development in research on AusE. Some studies have been based on apparent-time rather than real-time data (see Labov 1994: 43-72 for discussion of the apparent-time construct). For example Collins (2009) draws apparent-time inferences relevant to the modals and quasi-modals from a comparison of the spoken and written subcorpora of various ICE corpora, justifying them on the basis of research

indicating that grammatical changes tend to spread from the spoken to the written word (Leech et al. 2009: 12, 116). The apparent-time implications of the age-graded responses in questionnaire-elicited data are explored in Elsness's (2009) study of the perfect aspect in AusE and other varieties. The first real-time diachronic studies were conducted by Fritz (2004; 2007) – following his pioneering compilation of the first diachronic corpus of AusE – focusing on a range of morphosyntactic topics such as the progressive aspect and the mandative subjunctive.

Changes in selected categories of the verb phrase in AusE are analysed in a recent study by Collins and Yao (forthcoming) that was based on data from the same corpora that are used in the present study. Collins and Yao found AusE to be developing in the same direction as BrE and AmE – in for example its increasing use of the progressive and declining use of the present perfect – but at the same time their findings provide evidence of 'colonial lag' (the alleged conservatism of postcolonial varieties), with AusE developing more slowly than the two longer-established 'supervarieties'. One motivation for the present study is to test whether the traditional concept of colonial lag can be applied in comparing patterns of diachronic development for a quite different kind of grammatical category, nominal rather than verbal.

3. Corpora and methodology

3.1 *The corpora*

In the interests of generic consistency I decided to restrict the study to the category of fiction, fiction being the only genre apart from news that is common to all three corpora. The main reason for selecting fiction was that it has a reputation for being more informal than news, particularly fictional texts in which the dialogic recreation of speech looms large (see further Biber et al. 1999). Fiction thus provides relevant data for examining one of the most dramatic recent developments in English relative clauses, the largely colloquialisation-driven rise in the popularity of *that*-relatives (see for example Leech et al. 2009: 229-230). It goes without saying that fictional data is not the

same as naturally-occurring conversational data, and in the absence of the latter in the historical corpora used in the study, this should be borne in mind in interpreting all results presented.

(i) COOEE

COOEE comprises texts written between 1788 and 1900, from more than a hundred different sources, including books, letters, diaries, proclamations, and newspaper reports (for corpus information see Fritz 2004; 2007). In order to match the half-century periods in ARCHER, the study was restricted to texts produced in the period 1800-1899. The genre of fiction is readily available in COOEE, represented by the category ‘narratives (novels and short stories)’.

(ii) AusCorp

AusE data for the 1900-1999 period was taken from AusCorp, a corpus of twentieth century AusE comprising news, fiction and scientific text samples organised in ten year periods. The fiction section comprises around 120,000 words and is slightly biased towards the late twentieth century. Text-extracts are taken from two sources: anthologies of Australian literature such as *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Jose 2009); and the *Digital Archive of Colonial Australian Popular Fiction*, an online collection of Australian fiction produced during the period spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see <http://www.apfa.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/>).

(iii) ARCHER

The source of the British and American data is ARCHER (version 3.2). ARCHER is a multi-generic historical corpus divided into 50-year periods starting from 1600 (for BrE) and 1750 (for AmE) till the end of the 20th century.

Table 1 summarises the word counts for the fiction categories used in the present study, from COOEE for AusE 1800-1899, AusCorp for AusE 1900-1999, and ARCHER for BrE and AmE 1800-1999:

	AusE	BrE	AmE
1800-49	11826	40534	42554
1850-99	40980	35544	39186
1900-49	45035	39931	46280
1950-99	74464	37008	37928

Table 1. Word counts for the fiction categories in COOEE, AusCorp and ARCHER (derived by the ‘wordlist’ function of WordSmith Tools 4.0)

3.2 The methodology

The search routine involved identifying all instances of the main overt relativisers in standard varieties of English (*that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and *whose*). ‘Zero’ relativisers (as in *The girl we met was studying law*) were excluded on the grounds of the practical difficulty of automatically extracting tokens. Manual post-editing was then required to weed out irrelevant tokens (including interrogative *wh*-pronouns, subordinator *that* and demonstrative *that*).

In order to compensate for the different sizes of the 50-year categories raw frequencies were normalised to tokens per million words (pmw). The frequency counts thus obtained were found to be a less insightful measure for analysing diachronic change than the calculation of ‘proportional variants’. The latter type of approach is argued by Aarts, Close & Wallis (2013) to be sounder than that based simply on normalised frequency counts on the grounds that it reduces the possibility that changes over time could be due to a variety of extraneous factors. The proportional method is particularly relevant to the analysis of *that* and *which* – relativisers which represent alternatives in restrictive relative clauses (despite the efforts of prescriptive commentators to eradicate the use of *which*: see Section 7 below) – where it addresses the possibility that diachronic changes could be due to shifts in the frequency of relative clauses generally.

4. Relative clauses

Relative clauses are so called because they are related to an antecedent, which determines the interpretation of the anaphoric element that they contain within their structure. In example (1) above the pronoun *which* is anaphoric to *things*. A traditional analysis of *that* as a relative pronoun in example (2) above would interpret it as similarly anaphoric to *things*, but on the analysis favoured by many contemporary grammarians of *that* as a subordinator in relative clauses (2) would lack an overt relativiser and instead contain a gap representing the understood object of *understand*.

Two grammatical distinctions that were subjected to quantitative analysis in the study were that between ‘integrated’ and ‘supplementary’ relatives, and that between ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ relativisers, as explained below.

4.1 *Integrated versus supplementary relatives*

The distinction between integrated and supplementary relatives overlaps with, but is not equivalent to, the more familiar distinction between ‘restrictive’ and ‘non-restrictive’ relatives (see further Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1034-35). By contrast with integrated relatives, which present their content as integral to the meaning of the clause, supplementary relatives are non-integrated, presenting their content as a separate, parenthetical piece of information. The relative clauses in (1) and (2) above are both of the integrated type and, furthermore, in both cases serve semantically to restrict the denotation of the antecedent expression: for example in (1) the relative clause restricts the denotation of *things* to the subset of ‘things which more nearly interested them’. However there are exceptions, non-prototypical cases such as (3) below (in which the integrated *that* relative does not serve to restrict the denotation of *gin cases*, but nevertheless presents information about the gin cases that is integral to the sentence).

- (3) Phoebe cast another mournful glance at the gin cases *that did duty as hives*, then slipped down on to the grass beside her sister. [COOEE 1850-99 4-373]

Example (4) contains a supplementary relative clause, *which is that of a seventy-three-year-old man*, which serves not to identify the referent of the antecedent, the NP *my second corpse*, but rather to supply extra information about it.

- (4) It is not until twenty-eight years later that I see, through eyes this time dry and polished as glass, my second corpse, *which is that of a seventy-three-year-old man*. [AusCorp 1963 PORTER *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*]

While an integrated relative usually functions as an NP modifier, accordingly forming a syntactic constituent with the antecedent NP head, supplementary relatives have a less determinate syntactic structure as a result of their loose incorporation within the sentence. In the clearest cases in written English commas are used, or occasionally dashes or brackets, to mark off supplementary relatives. However, this process is by no means systematic, as can be seen from the occurrence of examples of the type in (5) (where there is no comma after *Mary Hatton*, even though the *who*-clause must be supplementary, since the antecedent is a proper noun and thus fully defined).

- (5) Mary Hatton *who wrote weird poetry about old maids nursing poodles and repressions*, and wore a hibiscus over her ear [AusCorp 1943 TENNANT *Ride on Stranger*]

4.2 Simple versus complex relativisers

The ‘simple’ single-word relativisers in the examples thus far may be contrasted with ‘complex’ relativisers where *which*, *whom* and *whose* combine with one or more other elements, as in:

- (6) On its mainly magenta sofa leans a magenta velvet cushion *on which three padded white velvet arum lilies poke out their yellow velvet phalli*. [AusCorp 1963 PORTER *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*]
- (7) They were well known to me, particularly Mr Frumkin, *with whom Father had for so long dealt*. [AusCorp 1952 WATEN *Making a Living, Alien Son*]

5. Brief historical overview

Historically, *that* (and zero) were the original relativisers, the *wh*-pronouns beginning to appear in Early Modern English, spreading from more formal to less formal styles, and achieving dominance in Late Modern English (Ball 1996; Dekeyser 1984; Johansson 2006; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2002). The *wh*-forms were first established in less common functions in the clause, rarely replacing *that* in subject position. The appearance of *whom* and *whose* predates that of *who*, their earlier development most likely due to the absence of accusative and genitive forms with *that*. By Late Modern English *which* and *that* had all but lost their capacity to take a human antecedent (a capacity exemplified in the familiar opening line of the The Lord's Prayer, 'Our father, which/that art in heaven ...'). In the late twentieth century, as Leech et al. (2009: 226-8) show, a reversal of the trend towards greater use of *wh*-relativisers in written English – spearheaded by AmE – has taken place. *That* is undergoing a (largely colloquialism-driven) re-expansion, and after a long period of dominance the *wh*-relativisers are declining.

6. The five relativisers

Normalised frequencies and percentages for the five relativisers, in the four half-centuries and the three regional varieties, are presented in Table 2, while percentage changes in the frequency of relativisers across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (determined by calculating the difference between the average frequencies for the two centuries as a percentage of the former) are presented in Table 3.

Overall, as Table 2 indicates, the three varieties have a similar number of relative clauses over the two centuries (with an average of approximately 8000-9000

tokens per million words for each half-century: AusE the highest with 8959, AmE the lowest with 7896, and BrE in-between with 8337). It can be inferred from the percentage change figures in Table 3 that relative clauses have plummeted in popularity from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, most dramatically in AusE (-51.3%, compared to -30.2% in BrE and -39.5% in AmE). To the extent that NP postmodification generally is associated more with writing (and particularly information-dense registers) than with speech, this trend may reflect more broadly the colloquialisation of written English (and specifically of fictional writing in this case): see Biber et al. 1999: 606-608.

Table 3 indicates that the *wh*-relativisers have been consistently declining in all three varieties over the two centuries, with *who* resisting the attrition more successfully than *which*, *whom* and *whose*. However in terms of sheer frequency *that* has had mixed fortunes: a mild decline in AusE and AmE, and – somewhat surprisingly in view of Leech et al.’s (2009: 229) finding that AmE leads BrE in the rise of *that* – an increase in BrE. Interpretation of the data from a proportional perspective yields a quite different picture. Relative to the other four relativisers, in AmE *that* increases its relative popularity amongst the overt relativisers from an average 19.6% in the nineteenth century to 31.6% in the twentieth, a rise of +61.2%. By contrast BrE undergoes a milder rise of +47.3% (from 18.8% to 27.7%). AusE is closely aligned with AmE, with a rise of +59.8% (from 20.4% to 32.6%). The story is similar with *which*, with AmE in the lead and AusE aligned more closely with it than with BrE: AmE records a fall of -41.8%, BrE of -13.2%, and AusE of -34.9%. By the final half-century the relative popularity of *that* has surpassed that of *which* in AmE (30.8% vs 26.4%) and AusE (32.2% vs 30.2%), but not in the more conservative BrE (23.8% vs 42.6%).

Variety	Period	<i>that</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>who</i>	<i>whom</i>	<i>whose</i>	TOTAL
AusE	1800-1849	2114 14.8%	7526 52.7%	3298 23.1%	930 6.5%	423 3.0%	14291 100%
	1850-1899	2538 25.9%	3587 36.6%	2953 30.1%	317 3.2%	415 4.2%	9810 100%
	1900-1949	2554 33.0%	2154 27.9%	2620 33.9%	200 2.6%	200 2.6%	7728 100%
	1950-1999	1289 32.2%	1209 30.2%	1276 31.9%	67 1.7%	161 4.0%	4002 100%
	Avg	2124 23.7%	3619 40.4%	2537 28.3%	379 4.2%	300 3.3%	8959 100%
BrE	1800-1849	2294 20.4%	5724 51.0%	2170 19.3%	567 5.1%	469 4.2%	11224 100%
	1850-1899	1435 17.1%	3460 41.1%	2785 33.1%	338 4.0%	394 4.7%	8412 100%
	1900-1949	2329 31.6%	2905 39.5%	1828 24.8%	150 2.0%	150 2.0%	7362 100%
	1950-1999	1513 23.8%	2567 40.4%	1648 25.9%	270 4.2%	351 5.5%	6349 100%
	Avg	1893 22.7%	3664 43.9%	2108 25.3%	331 4.0%	341 4.1%	8337 100%

AmE	1800-1849	2444 23.6%	4418 42.6%	2702 26.1%	305 2.9%	493 4.8%	10362 100%
	1850-1899	1455 15.6%	5640 60.5%	1710 18.4%	204 2.2%	306 3.3%	9315 100%
	1900-1949	1901 32.4%	1988 33.6%	1621 27.4%	194 3.3%	216 3.7%	5920 100%
	1950-1999	1846 30.8%	1582 26.4%	2320 38.8%	79 1.3%	158 2.6%	5985 100%
	Avg	1912 24.2%	3407 43.1%	2088 26.4%	196 2.5%	293 3.7%	7896 100%

Table 2. *Relativisers in fiction (tokens per million words)*

	<i>that</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>who</i>	<i>whom</i>	<i>whose</i>	Total
AusE	-17.4%	-69.7%	-37.7%	-78.5%	-56.9%	-51.3%
BrE	+3.0%	-40.4%	-29.8%	-53.6%	-41.9%	-30.2%
AmE	-3.9%	-64.5%	-10.7%	-46.4%	-53.2%	-39.5%

Table 3. *Percentage changes in the frequency of relativisers across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*

Consider next the remaining *wh*-relativisers. Of these, *whom* and *whose* are infrequent and in decline across all three varieties. The percentages for *whom* in the second half of the twentieth century (BrE 4.2%; AusE 1.7%; AmE 1.3%) and for *whose* (BrE 5.5%; AusE 4.0%; AmE 2.6%) indicate that in these trends AmE is the most advanced, BrE the most conservative, and AusE is in-between. *Who* is the only *wh*-relativiser whose relative popularity does not systematically fall across the two centuries. This may be because it has become the only relativiser that can be freely used with a human antecedent (apart from the inflectionally marked

whom). Once again we find AmE in the lead, with an increase across the two centuries of +48.4%, BrE with a conservatively mild decrease of -3.1%, and AusE in between (+23.7%).

7. *That* versus *which*

Leech et al. (2009: 309-310), in their study of the three-decade period from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, report complementary trends of a rise for *that* and a fall for *which*, with AmE recording the more pronounced shifts of the two varieties (*that* +73.1% and *which* -34.4%; as opposed to BrE *that* +15.3% and *which* -9.4%). A relevant factor here is colloquialisation, as argued by Leech et al. (2009: 228) in the light of independent evidence that *which* is associated with formality and *that* with informality (see Sigley 1997). The more accentuated nature in AmE of the rise of *that* and fall of *which* is plausibly attributed by Leech et al. to prescriptive traditions in the USA: see below.

The findings presented in Figure 1 are broadly in line with the proportional findings for *that* and *which* presented in Table 2 above, confirming the contrast between American innovation and British conservatism in the complementary trends of an increase in the relative popularity of *that* and a decrease in that of *which*. Selective statistical testing on *that* and *which* in Table 2 indicated that in the first half-century the difference between AusE and AmE was significant ($\chi^2=6.48$, $p<0.05$), but not AusE vs BrE ($\chi^2=1.59$, $p>0.05$); in the final half-century that between AusE and BrE was significant ($\chi^2=6.53$, $p<0.05$), but not AusE vs AmE ($\chi^2=0.08$, $p>0.05$). In Figure 1, the percentage for *that* in AmE in the final half century (53.8%) surpasses the percentage for *which* (46.2%), following an increase for *that* of +81.7% from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. However in BrE the final percentage for *that* (37.1%) is well short of the percentage for *which* (62.9%), following an increase for *that* of +43.4% from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In AusE *that* overtakes BrE strongly in the second half of the nineteenth century, and maintains a lead over BrE parent thereafter. The Australian pattern is more like the advanced American than the conservative British pattern, with a similar percentage for *that* (51.6%) in the final half century, following an increase of +68.8%.

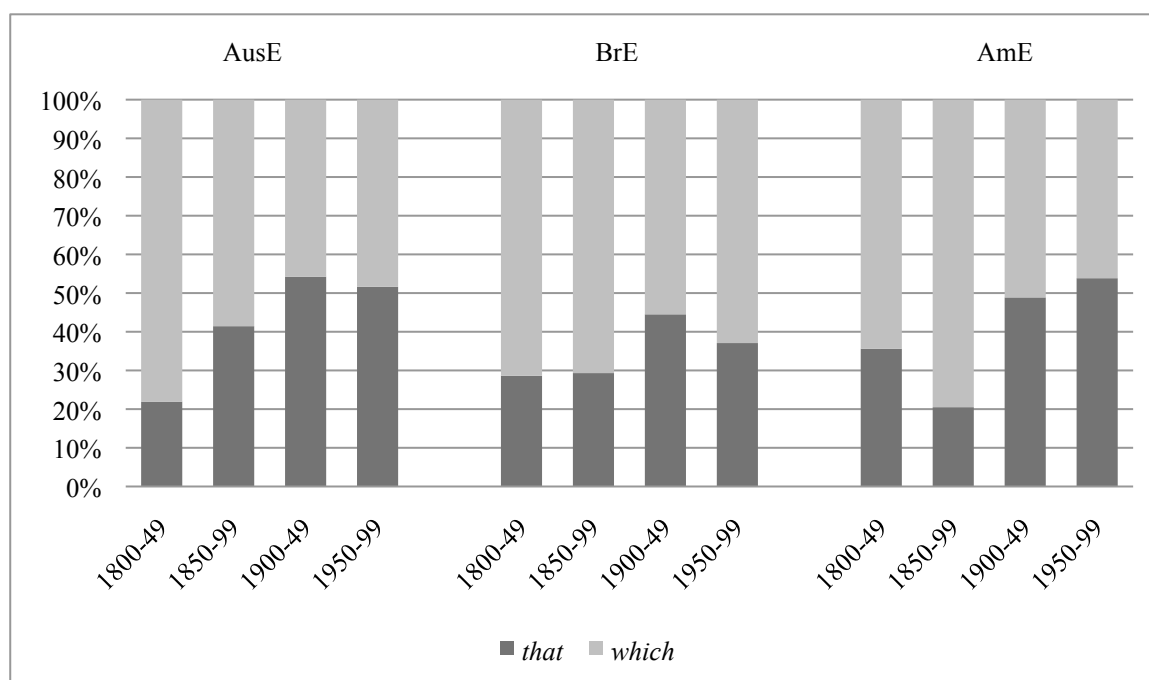


Figure 1. Relativiser *that* versus *which*

Prescriptivism has undoubtedly played a role in the complementary fortunes of relative *that* and *which*. According to Leech et al. (2009: 230), there is “a strong prescriptive tradition in the US of rejecting *which* as an introducer of restrictive relative clauses [one that] has not been prevalent in usage guides in the UK”. While there has been prescriptive opposition to the use of *that* rather than a *wh*-pronoun in formal written language since the eighteenth century, the prescriptive censure of integrated *which* that has been particularly strong in the USA is a more recent development (see further Hundt, Denison & Schneider 2012; Szmrecsanyi 2012; Tottie 1997). While the American ‘*which* hunt’ has not been a feature of British or Australian style guides, it has since the 1990s “influenced countries throughout the world, including the UK, through its incorporation in internationally marketed word processors and grammar checkers” (Leech et al. 2009: 230).

The frequencies for integrated *which* that are presented in Table 4 are compatible with the prescriptivism-hypothesis. Integrated *which* undergoes a bigger decline in AmE (from an average 3054 in the nineteenth century to 1013 in the twentieth, or -66.8%) than in BrE (from 2596 to 1834, or -29.4%). In AusE the decline is extreme, and perhaps influenced by AmE (3392 to 971, or -71.5%). Further

evidence – albeit very mild – comes from shifts in the proportion of integrated *whichs* to all *whichs*: in AmE there is a decrease from 60.5% in the nineteenth century to 56.9% in the twentieth, which is marginally bigger than that in AusE (58.8% to 56.5%), while BrE differs with a rise from 55.0% to 66.5%, seemingly oblivious to prescriptive pressure.

Variety	Century	Avg frequency pmw	% change	Avg % of all <i>which</i>
AusE	19 th	3392	-71.5%	58.8%
	20 th	971		56.5%
BrE	19 th	2596	-29.4%	55.0%
	20 th	1834		66.5%
AmE	19 th	3054	-66.8%	60.5%
	20 th	1013		56.9%

Table 4. *Percentage changes in the frequency of integrated which across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*

Finally, consider the ratios for simple versus complex relativisers (*which* and *whom*) averaged across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The findings arguably provide some evidence of Australian endonormative independence from the two supervarieties, in the relatively stronger support found in AusE for complex over simple relativisers.

	<i>which</i>	<i>whom</i>
AusE	2.0:1	0.5:1
BrE	2.3:1	0.9:1
AmE	2.3:1	1.1:1

Table 5. *Ratios for simple versus complex relativisers averaged across the two centuries*

8. Conclusion

This study has used data extracted from the fiction categories of the recently compiled corpora COOEE and AusCorp, to examine historical developments in relative clauses over the past two centuries, at the same time drawing comparisons with BrE and AmE using data derived from the ARCHER corpus.

Proportional analysis indicates that in all three varieties *wh*-relatives as a set have been in decline for the past two centuries, and substantially so for all items except *who*, while by contrast *that*-relatives are increasing. The most direct comparison involves the commonly mutually substitutable relativisers *which* and *that*, with AusE aligned closely with AmE in the complementary falling and rising trends for these two items, and rejecting the relative conservatism of the parent variety, BrE. What this finding may indicate is that in this case AusE, rather than attaining normative independence, has switched its normative orientation away from its colonial parent to the new super power in Global English.

It is suggested that prescriptive pressure has played a role in the decline of *which*, with particularly strident opposition to its use in integrated relatives being voiced in the USA, and that colloquialisation has been a factor in the rising popularity of *that*, with AmE adhering to its reputation for leading the way in promoting the spread of informal speech-friendly features (compare for example AmE innovation in the rise of the quasi-modals: see Collins 2009). Finally, the relatively stronger support in AusE than in the two reference varieties for complex over simple relativisers is suggestive of Australian endonormative independence.

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