A historical note on the (in)declinable relative pronoun and its syntactic functions

Eric Hoekstra

Summary

The indeclinable relative particle of Old Germanic could be used for at least 3 syntactic functions: for the relativisation of (1) subjects, (2) objects and (3) prepositional complements, for example in Old English and Old Frisian. This is no longer the case in Modern English, Modern Dutch, Modern German or Modern Frisian. It is pointed out that the indeclinable relative particle retained all three functions in Frisian until around 1900, when it stopped being used for the relativisation of subjects and objects. All three functions were retained at least until the middle of the 20th century in the Dutch dialects of Marken and Volendam, which both border on the lake IJsselmeer as does the province of Fryslân. The indeclinable relative particle has been pushed back in Frisian by the declinable relative particle, a process which has its roots in Old Frisian. It is shown that the declinable relative particle (dy, dat in Frisian) has gradually taken over the function of subject and object relativisation. Historically, the indeclinable relative particle developed into the R-pronoun (Frisian dêr), and it is still used to relativize prepositional complements in Modern Frisian, thus retaining its third syntactic function.

1. Two types of relative pronouns

It is the purpose of this article to establish that, for centuries now, Frisian distinguishes between two types of relative pronouns. One type of pronoun does not decline for gender, the other type does. The declinable pronoun is used for relative clauses targeting the subject or the object, both in Modern Frisian and in Old Frisian. The indeclinable pronoun is used for relative clauses targeting the prepositional complement, both in Modern Frisian and in Old Frisian.

There is also a difference between Old Frisian and Modern Frisian: the indeclinable relative pronoun could also be used with subjects and objects in Old Frisian, whereas this is no longer possible in Modern Frisian. The same facts obtain in Modern Dutch. However, it will be shown that there are still some dialects of Dutch, in which the situation obtains that is characteristic of Old Frisian and Old Dutch, and Old English, for that matter: the indeclinable relative pronoun is used for subject, object and prepositional complement, unlike what is the case in Modern Frisian and Modern Dutch.

This article is limited in scope. It focuses on the short relativisation of subjects, objects and prepositional complements, that is, on direct and indirect arguments of the main verb of the relativised clause. This is mainly for practical reasons. The three types of relativisation mentioned (subject, object, prepositional object) are fairly frequent throughout the history of Frisian. As a result, many instances of it can easily be found. In contrast, it is much less easy to find examples of relative clauses targeting possessors or of long distance relative clauses. The latter type is exemplified by sentences like "The day which you knew [- would come]", in which the clause following the relative pronoun is not the clause in which the relative pronoun is interpreted. Furthermore, possessor relatives and long relatives often make use of a different type of relativisation than that which is used for short relativisation (see J. Hoekstra 2002 for an overview of relativisation in the various dialects of the Frisian languages). Another limitation is that the present article does not take into account relativisation based on wh-pronouns, that is, pronouns homophonous with (or containing) a question word. This type of relativisation was infrequent in Old Frisian, and, for Modern Frisian, it has been discussed elsewhere (J. Hoekstra 2002). Hence historical investigation of possessor relatives, long relatives and of wh-relatives must wait until another occasion.

2. *Modern Frisian*
(1) presents two relative clauses involving the declinable relative pronoun. Sentence (1a) targets the subject with an antecedent of common gender and (1b) targets the subject with an antecedent of neuter gender.[1]

(1a) Relative clause targeting a subject of common gender in Frisian
Se   ha   [de   man] sjoen [dy   't   de hûn útliet].
they have the.CG man   seen   REL.CG COMP the dog out.let
'They saw the man who took the dog out.'

(1b) Relative clause targeting a subject of neuter gender in Frisian
Se   ha   [it   bern] sjoen [dat   de   hûn   útliet].
they have the.NG child seen REL.NG   the dog   out.let
'They saw the child who took the dog out.'

(2) shows essentially the same, but now the relative pronoun targets the direct object.

(2a) *Dat   is   de man   dy   't   se   seagen.*
that is   the man REL.CG   COMP   they saw
'That is the man that they saw.'

(2b) *Dat   is   it bern   dat   se   seagen.*
that is   the.NC child REL.NG   they saw
'That is the child that they saw.'

The examples make it clear that the relative pronoun for subjects and objects declines for gender, yielding two different forms, just as the demonstrative pronoun with which it is homophonous. Examples of the demonstrative pronoun have been provided in (3):

(3a) Common gender
  dy: *dy man*
              that man 'that man'
(3b) Neuter gender
  dat: *dat bern*
              that child 'that child'

In addition, the demonstrative pronouns *dy* (CG) and *dat* (NG) function as topic pronouns in argument position. However, these pronouns are barred from the position of prepositional complement. Instead, R-pronouns must be used, which are homophonous to locative adverbs (for an overview, see Taalportaal (2015: http://taalportaal.org/taalportaal/topic/pid/topic-14158915524422828). The examples below exemplify this:

(4a) *Ik   ha   oer   dat   praat.*
    I   have about that.NG talked

(4b) *Ik   ha   dêr   oer   praat.*
    I   have that.R about talked
    'I talked about that.'

Prepositional complements can only be targeted with the relative pronoun *dêr*, which does not decline for gender. This relative pronoun is homophonous with the demonstrative pronoun as used with prepositions and with the locative adverb meaning 'there'. The following two examples exemplify the use of a relative clause targeting the prepositional complement. The (a) example involves a relative clause with an antecedent that has neuter gender, *famke* 'girl'. The (b) example involves a relative clause with an antecedent that has common gender, *man* 'man':

(5a) *It   famke   dêr   't   ik mei prate.*
     the girl.NG REL.R COMP I with talked
     'The girl that I talked with.'

(5b) *De   man   dêr   't   ik mei   prate.*
     the man.CG REL.R COMP I with talked
     'The man that I talked with.'

The following statements summarise relevant aspects of the use of relative pronouns in Modern Frisian:

(6) a. One type of relative pronoun declines for the gender of the antecedent.
     b. The other type of relative pronoun is not declinable.

(7) a. The declinable relative pronoun is used for subject and object relatives
     b. The indeclinable relative pronoun is used for relatives on the prepositional complement.

3. Old Frisian
Old Frisian relatives have been studied in Bor (1971: 33-37, 1986, 1987a,b,c, 1988). His examples make it clear that Old Frisian possessed two types of relative pronouns.
One type of relative is homophonous to the demonstrative pronoun. This relative pronoun declines for gender. OF exhibited a three way gender distinction, much like German still does today. The forms of the relative pronoun were (Bremmer 2009: 57): *thi* for the masculine gender (MSC), *thiu* for the feminine gender (FEM) and *thet* for the neuter gender (NEU), although there was, of course, a fair amount of spelling variation in OF. The examples given by Bor make it clear that the declinable relative pronoun was reserved exclusively for subject and object relatives.

168

An example of a subject relative is given below:

(8) Subject relative in Old Frisian with declinable pronoun
Saistet   riucht Allera fresena.   Thet tet god   and thi fiamanda
so it is right all.GEN Frisians.GEN that the good and the property.
MSC
'So it is the right of all Frisians that the possession and the common
property …'

mith riuchte and mith triuwem   gader   stonde.
with right and with agreement   together   stand
'… will stand together with justice and as agreed upon …'

thi   ther   mit triuwem   gadere   set se
REL.MSC   there   with agreement   together   set are
'… which has been brought together there according to an agreement.'
(Bor 1987b: 31)[2]

An example of an object relative is given below:

(9) Object relative in Old Frisian with declinable pronoun
And Magnus spreket hit mitha munde vt   ther   stena teula
and Magnus speaks it   with mouth out the.GEN.FEM stone table
'And Magnus recites from the stone tables …

thet   god her Moyses ief   vp tha birge to synai.
REL.NEU God lord Moses gave on the mountain at Sinai
'… which God had given Moses on the mountain at Sinai.' (Bor 1987b: 31)

Old East Frisian has the following forms of declinable relatives
homophonous to demonstrative pronouns: *thi, thet, tha, thera* (Bor 1987b:
30). Old West Frisian has the following forms in the manuscript Jus (Bor
1987c: 75): *dy, dat*.[3] The declinable pronoun was rarely used to introduce

---

2 Bor's translation as well as his discussion on the same page imply that *ther* must be
   analysed in (8) as an adverb of place, which is in keeping with the locational meaning
   of the verb.
3 The form of the relative pronoun was also declined for number and case, and thus
   one would expect that it could have any of the forms of the paradigm of demonstrative
   pronouns given in Bremmer (2009: 54), to which the relative pronoun was homopho-
   nous. Not all these forms are actually attested as relative pronouns. Bor (1987c: 75) also
   reports 2 examples in which the question word heads a relative clause.

relative clauses. However, if the declinable relative pronoun was used, it was used for subjects and objects, never for prepositional complements. This ties in with the situation found in Old English. Old English also had two types of relatives, one declinable, one indeclinable. The declinable relative was only used for subject and object relatives, it was never used for prepositional complements (Los 2015: 237). It is remarkable that the situation in Old English is so similar to that of Old Frisian and Old Dutch (Van der Horst 2008). All three languages possess an indeclinable relative pronoun and a declinable one, the latter one being homophonous to the demonstrative pronoun.

The indeclinable relative pronoun *der* was the form that was most frequently used in Old Frisian (Bor 1986, 1987b,c, 1988). It was used for subjects, objects and prepositional complements. One example of subject and object relatives each has been given below, and three examples of relatives on the prepositional complement.

(10) Subject relative with undeclinable pronoun (Bor 1971: 33)
    Di grewa   deer an freslande grewa   wessa schel.
    the count REL in Frisia   count   be   shall
    'The count who is to be count in Frisia.'

(11) Object relative with undeclinable pronoun (Bor 1971: 34)
    Dat gued   naemna der   hi seka   wil.
    the good   name   REL he search want
    'Name the goods which he wants to look for.'

(12a) Relative on the prepositional complement with undeclinable
    pronoun (Bor 1971:35)
    Di aesgha deer   dat stryd   mede bitinget is
    the judge REL the combat   with agreed is
    'The judge with whom the combat has been agreed upon.'

(12b) *Dat hi   also deen land heed deer dat flax oen woex*
    that he such   land had REL the flax on grew
    'That he owned such land which the flax grew on …'

(12c) *Ieftha da scheep   hede deer ma   dae wolle of scheer.*
    or   the sheep had REL one the wool of shaved
    '… or the sheep which they shaved the wool off from.'

The similarities between Old Frisian and Modern Frisian have been summarised below:

- There is a relative pronoun which declines for gender.
- The declinable relative is used for subject and object relatives but not for prepositional complements.
- There is an indeclinable relative pronoun.
- The indeclinable relative pronoun is used with prepositional complements.

A salient difference between Old Frisian and Modern Frisian is given below:

- The indeclinable relative pronoun is frequently used for subject and object relatives in Old Frisian, whereas it is never used with subject and object relatives in Modern Frisian.[4]

Of course, other things have changed in the time span between Old Frisian and Modern Frisian. For example, Old Frisian had a three-way gender system, Modern Frisian has a two-way gender system, but this does not seem relevant for relativisation.

The chief quantitative change with respect to relativisation is the rise of the *declinable* relative pronoun and the chief qualitative change is the restriction of the *indeclinable* relative pronoun to prepositional complements.

These changes are not specific to Frisian. The same process took place in Dutch (Van der Horst 2008, especially 171-181), though much earlier than in Frisian. It wasn't until the 19th century that Frisian gave up the subject and object function of the indeclinable relative pronoun (J. Hoekstra 2002: 69). The dialects of Dutch and Frisian testify to the same process of the rise of the declinable relative pronoun in subject and object function. However, two Dutch dialects are exceptional in this respect, and these will be discussed in the next section.

4. The 20th century dialects of Marken and Volendam

Marken and Volendam are old fishing villages situated on the coast of the IJsselmeer, close to the city of Amsterdam. The dialects of Marken and Volendam have been extensively described in the middle

....

4 We cannot just claim that *ther* can be used in all syntactic functions, since we excluded possessors from our investigation, for reasons discussed in section 1. However, Bor (1987c: 74-75) does in fact present examples in which *ther* is used to relativise a possessor, occasionally with the aid of a resumptive possessive pronoun.

of the 20th century in Van Ginneken (1954), together with the dialect of Monnickendam. The former two dialects still preserve an indeclinable relative particle which may be used to introduce relative clauses on the subject, the object and the prepositional complement (Van Ginneken 1954: 114-119). The relative particle will be orthographically represented as *deer*. It is pronounced with a mid high front vowel in Marken and with a mid low front vowel in Volendam. The following data are from these dialects. They are represented here in an orthography that is, for clarity, loosely based on Standard Dutch. The original notation of Van Ginneken is a somewhat idiosyncratic phonological one that is less accessible. The data below respectively involve subject relativisation, object relativisation and relativisation of the prepositional complement.
(13) Subject relatives from the Marken dialect of the mid 20th century.

(13a) *Luutje   deer   d'r   been   ebroken et.*
    Luutje REL her   leg   broken has
    'Luutje, who has broken her leg.'

(13b) *De vent   deer   me   eslegen   et.*
    the guy   REL me   hit   had
    'The guy who hit me.'

(14) Object relatives from the Volendam dialect of the mid 20th century.

(14a) *De mense   deer   we   guster   sage.*
    the people REL we   yesterday saw
    'The people whom we saw yesterday.'

(14b) *De man   deer   ik   guster   sag.*
    the man   REL I   yesterday saw
    'The man whom I saw yesterday.'

 (15) Relative on prepositional complement of the mid 20th century.

(15a) Marken:
    Dat mens   deer   ik   met   prote.
    the woman REL I   with   talked
    'The woman whom I talked with.'
(15b) Volendam:
    Ut kind   deer   ik   un sent   an   goiven   ew.
    the child   REL I   a cent   to   given   have
    'The child whom I gave a cent to.'

It is clear that these dialects, to some extent, still preserve the situation characteristic of Old West Germanic, in which a relative pronoun, indeclinable for gender, is used for relatives on the subject, the object and the prepositional complement alike.

5. Concluding remarks

Dutch lost the use of the indeclinable relative pronoun in subject and object function earlier than Frisian did, but it survived longest in the dialects of Volendam and Marken. It is unclear whether this is due to Frisian substrate, although the dialects of North Holland share significant similarities with Frisian (Hoekstra 2002 and the references cited there). This goes especially for the dialects spoken in Westfriesland, that is, the area between Heerhugowaard, Schagen and Enkhuizen. This area is quite close to the Volendam-Marken area, being less than 20 kilometer removed from it. However, the Volendam-Marken dialects should be studied in detail, including their onomastics, in order to find out whether they exhibit Frisian substrate.

From a theoretical point of view, it is interesting to note that the relative used for the prepositional complement does not feature a gender distinction, and that this is true throughout the history of Dutch and Frisian. Furthermore, Modern English relatives do not feature a gender distinction either, nor do English NPs in general. In this respect, Modern English is different from Old English and Old Frisian. The latter two languages feature a gender distinction on NPs in general but not on the relative pronoun *ther*. The generalisation on the basis of the facts reviewed in this article is that the absence of a gender distinction on the relative pronoun correlates with the pronoun's ability to target prepositional complements. In the same vein, Modern Frisian *dy* / *dat* feature a gender distinction and they may not be used to relativise prepositional complements. Thus there could well be a correlation between the presence or absence of gender on the relative pronoun and the pronoun's ability to target prepositional complements.

References

Bor, A. (1971) *Word-groups in the language of Skeltana Riucht. A Syntactic Analysis with occasional lexicological observations; followed by an inquiry into its punctuation and the possibility of the influence on the text of spoken language.* Dissertation, University of Amsterdam. Wageningen: H. Veenman.

Bor, A. (1986) Relative markers in Old Frisian. *Us Wurk* 35, 57-74.

Bor, A. (1987a) A vexed Question in Old East Frisian relative clauses. *Us Wurk* 36, 49-55.

Bor, A. (1987b) Relative markers in Old East Frisian. *Us Wurk* 36, 21-48.

Bor, A. (1987c) Relative markers in the Old West Frisian manuscript Jus Municipale Frisonum. *Us Wurk* 36, 71-90.

Bor, A. (1988) Relative markers in the language of Friese Brieven. *Us Wurk* 37, 52-67.

Bremmer Jr., R. H. (2009) *An introduction to Old Frisian. History, Grammar, Reader, Glossary.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Coetsem, F. van (1960) De Friese Relativa en Conjuncties met t. Enkele parallellen uit andere talen en dialecten. In K. Dykstra et al (1960, eds), 327-334.

Dykstra, K., K. Heeroma, W. Kok and H. T. J. Miedema (1960, eds) *Fryske Studzjes, oanbean oan Prof. Dr. J. H. Brouwer.* Assen: Van Gorcum.

Ginneken, J. van (1954). *Drie Waterlandse dialecten. Dl. I: Grammatica, phonologie, klankleer.* Bezorgd door A. Weynen. Alphen a/d Rijn: Samson. http://dbnl.nl/arch/ginn001drie01_01/pag/ginn001drie01_01.pdf

Hoekstra, E. (2002) Frisian Relicts in the Dutch dialects. In H.H. Munske in collaboration with N. Århammar, V. Faltings, J. Hoekstra, O. Vries, A. Walker and O. Wilts (eds). *Handbook of Frisian Studies.* Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 138-142.

Hoekstra, J. (2002) Relativisation in Frisian, in: Patricia Poussa (eds) *Relativisation on the North Sea Littoral.* LINCOM Studies in Language Typology 07. München: LINCOM EUROPA, 63-76.

Horst, J. van der (2008) *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse syntaxis.* Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven.

Los, B. (2015) *A Historical Syntax of English.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Taalportaal (2015) *The linguistics of Dutch, Frisian and Afrikaans online.* http://taalportaal.org/

Woude, G. van der (1960) Oer it gebrûk fan 't by bynwurden. In K. Dykstra et al (1960, eds), 335-343.

↑