Does ethnicity affect word choice?

Relativizer variation amongst Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic (BAME) London adolescents

Samantha Cooke – School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics – s.cooke1@ncl.ac.uk
Supervised by: Dr Heike Pichler – School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics – heike.pichler@ncl.ac.uk

Newcastle University

1. Introduction & Background

- A **relative clause** modifies a **head noun** and is introduced by a **relativizer** such as *that, who, which* or *what*. You can also use no relativizer: a *zero* relativizer.

- Relativizer constructions look like this: head noun relativizer relative clause

  > *"Yeh you do get...the black people that speak different to the white people..."*
  > Grant, 17, Hackney

- Relative clauses are crucial to **successful communication**; they specify exactly who or what a speaker is talking about (see §3).

- Previous studies have found that varieties of British English share some constraints on relativizer choice (e.g. Levey & Pichler 2017; Tagliamonte *et al.* 2005). However, these studies have focused exclusively on white speakers.

- Cheshire *et al.* (2013) found that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) adolescents in London lead relativizer innovations. But their study does not explore whether they share white speakers' constraints on relativizer choice.

2. Aims & Hypothesis

- This project fills a gap in knowledge of BAME relativizer use.

- **Research question:** do BAME speakers share white speakers' processing constraints on relativizer choice?

- **Hypothesis:** Despite BAME-led innovations in relativizer use (Cheshire *et al.* 2013), BAME speakers will share white speakers' processing constraints on relativizer choice. These constraints facilitate the interpretation of relative clauses and this may prevent miscommunication.

3. Data & Method

Data source – Linguistic Innovators Corpus (LIC)
- LIC is a collection of digitally recorded interviews with BAME adolescents aged 16–19 in the London boroughs of Hackney and Havering.

Data extraction – Restrictive relative clauses
- I extracted 1302 restrictive relative clauses from the corpus. These clauses restrict the definition of the head noun.

  > *"Then we give the little girl who brought the shoes a doll."*
  > Isabella, 17, commuter

- By using a restrictive relative clause, Isabella clearly identifies which of the little girls in the above illustration was given a doll.

Data analysis – What conditions variation?
- To establish constraints on relativizer choice, I examined each relative clause for its linguistic characteristics (see §4).

Data quantification – How is variation distributed?
- I quantified the distribution of relativizers across linguistic constraints, using chi-square to test for statistical significance.

4. Results

Percentages do not add up to 100%; results for low-frequency variants (which, what) are not shown.

4.1. Grammatical role of the relativizer
In a **subject** relativizer, the relativizer is the subject of the relative clause. For a **non-subject** relativizer, the relativizer is not the subject (but e.g. the object.)
"People that got kicked out of school go there."　SUBJECT RELATIVIZER　Will, 17, Hackney
"That was the price Ø I had to pay."　NON-SUBJECT RELATIVIZER　Tammy, 18, Hackney

SUBJECT		NON-SUBJECT	
Variant	Frequency (%)	Variant	Frequency (%)
THAT	69.7	THAT	41.3
WHO	21.7	WHO	3.0
ZERO	7.5	ZERO	53.0

Table 1. Frequency of relativizer variants across subject & non-subject relativizers ($p < 0.01$)

4.2. Sentence type
A **stative possessive** contains verbs that express possession (e.g. *get, have, have got*).
"You got a sister that might look just like you."　STATIVE POSSESSIVE　Chris, 17, Hackney
An **existential** asserts the existence of something and is usually introduced by *there*.
"There's plenty Ø you can say is slang innit."　EXISTENTIAL　Bisa, 17, Havering

STATIVE POSSESSIVE		EXISTENTIAL	
Variant	Frequency (%)	Variant	Frequency (%)
THAT	71.4	THAT	41.0
WHO	7.1	WHO	10.3
ZERO	14.3	ZERO	46.2

Table 2. Frequency of non-subject relativizer variants across stative possessives & existentials ($p < 0.01$)

4.3. Adjacency
A head noun is **adjacent** to its relativizer if there are no linguistic elements intervening between the relativizer and the head noun.
"...I didn't like the course Ø they gave me ..."　ADJACENT　Charlotte, 16, Havering
"Though not teachers, like, that you hated."　NON-ADJACENT　Nazma, 18, Hackney

ADJACENT		NON-ADJACENT	
Variant	Frequency (%)	Variant	Frequency (%)
THAT	38.3	THAT	63.5
WHO	2.1	WHO	9.5
ZERO	56.9	ZERO	24.3

Table 3. Frequency of non-subject relativizer variants across adjacent & non-adjacent head nouns ($p < 0.01$)

4.4. Clause length

SHORT		MEDIUM		LONG	
Variant	Frequency (%)	Variant	Frequency (%)	Variant	Frequency (%)
THAT	33.9	THAT	50.7	THAT	49.3
WHO	2.4	WHO	3.0	WHO	5.6
ZERO	60.7	ZERO	43.8	ZERO	42.3

Table 4. Frequency of non-subject relativizer variants across short (1–3 word), medium (4–5 word) and long (6+ word) relative clauses. ($p < 0.01$)

5. Discussion

The cross-variety comparisons below rely on data from Levey & Pichler (2017) and Tagliamonte et al. (2005) who analysed relativizer variation among white speakers across varieties in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Grammatical role of the relativizer
- Grammatical role affects the choice of relativizer variant among BAME speakers in London as it does for white speakers of other varieties.

- Subject relativizers prefer *that* and, to a lesser extent, *who*. Non-subject relativizers prefer *zero* and *that*.

Table 2: Sentence type
- For stative possessives, BAME speakers strongly prefer *that*, as is the case for white speakers in other varieties. For existentials, BAME speakers slightly prefer *zero* over *that*, which contrasts with white speakers outside of London.

- Across white and BAME varieties of British English, *that* is consistently correlated with stative possessives. For existentials, BAME and white speakers in London show different preferences to white speakers outside of London. This may be due to innovations in the London relativizer system (see §1).

Table 3: Adjacency
- BAME speakers prefer *zero* when the head noun is adjacent to the relative clause, and they prefer *that* when the head noun is non-adjacent to the relative clause. This is consistent with results reported for white speakers of other varieties of British English.

- Non-adjacent relative clauses are harder to process than adjacent relative clauses: use of *that* (rather than *zero*) facilitates this processing.

Table 4: Clause length
- *Zero* is preferred with short relative clauses, and *that* is preferred with medium and long relative clauses. Again, this pattern has been reported for white speakers of British English.

- Use of relativizer *that* (rather than *zero*) facilitates the processing of medium or long relative clauses, that are harder to process than short relative clauses.

6. Conclusion & Implications

- BAME speakers share some of the constraints on relativizer choice previously documented for white speakers of British English.

- Crucially, BAME speakers share those constraints which have been argued to facilitate the processing of complex relativizer constructions, e.g. those that are non-adjacent or long.

- These processing constraints are so pervasive that they seem to withstand the effects of recent innovations in the London relativizer system.

- An overriding principle governing relativizer choice may be to mitigate unsuccessful intra- and inter-ethnic communication.

Acknowledgements

References
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