

Who and Whom in Contemporary American English

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The usage pattern of the relative and interrogative pronouns *who* and *whom* in English has traditionally been termed a matter of prestige (AARTS 1994), indicating that *whom* is used in formal (that is, written) language whereas spoken language favors the use of *who*. With respect to the syntactic function, prescriptive grammar books clearly state when to use which forms: *who* is to be used when it functions as the subject of the sentence and *whom* is used in all other cases (AARTS 1994 and DE HAAN 2002). Hence we would expect that *whom* is used in formal language only and that it occurs in all positions but the subject one. However, previous research has shown that speakers overwhelmingly do not follow this norm (AARTS 1994, DE HAAN 2002 and IYEIRI AND YAGUCHI 2009). Instead, speakers seem to restrict their use of *whom* to relative clauses and only use it when it is directly preceded by a preposition (DE HAAN 2002 and IYEIRI AND YAGUCHI 2009). In line with previous findings this paper argues that while it is true that *whom* is used much less frequently than *who* in both written and spoken contemporary American English, speakers only show doubts in their usage when a preposition is absent. This is not to say that prestige or genre do not play a role, but that it is more likely that we are dealing with a form of constructionalization.

Data is obtained from the spoken part of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and in order to determine the collocational strength between the pronoun and its preceding element, a collocation analysis in the sense of GRIES and STEFANOWITSCH (2004) is conducted. The results clearly demonstrate that a preposition almost always triggers the use of *whom*, regardless of the genre it occurs in and irrespective of the syntactic function the pronoun fulfills. The data further suggest that speakers are insecure about their use of *who* and *whom* because we witness a lot of variations when there is no preposition present. Of course, insecurity is not synonymous with variation and can hardly be derived from corpus data alone. Nevertheless, more often than not, speakers opt for the uninflected form *who* while *whom* is clearly there. Therefore, it is likely that the use of *whom* in discourse is bound to specific (fossilized) constructions in the form of “preposition + *whom*”. The use and non-use of *whom* is then not so much a matter of prestige, but rather an instance of constructionalization. In order to empirically attest the influence of prestige, different newspaper genres, notably the sports and arts & leisure sections, are investigated and compared.

References:

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