

CONJUNCTIONAL/ADVERBIAL *WHICH*
IN SUBSTANDARD ENGLISH

GÖRAN KJELLMER

University of Göteborg

1. Writers who render spoken English from the 19th century frequently make use of a certain linguistic device in order to characterise a substandard variant of English. The device I am referring to is the use of *which* as a conjunction or an adverb. The following sentences illustrate the usage:

- (1) "Dear Joe, he is always right."
"Well, old chap," said Joe, "then abide by your words. If he's always right (*which* in general he's more likely wrong), he's right when he says this: ..." (Dickens: 380)
- (2) "See, Joe I can walk quite strongly. Now, you shall see me walk back by myself."
"*Which* do not overdo it, Pip," said Joe; (Dickens: 381)
- (3) The Rector: "Good morning, Mrs Smithers. How's the baby? Isn't it rather early to bring him to church? Don't you think he'll be restless?"
Mrs Smithers: "O, no, Sir, he'll be quiet, Sir, *which* we took him to the Methodis' Chapel last Sunday o' purpose to try him, Sir." (*Punch*, 28th Oct., 1871)
- (4) Parlour Maid (to Cook): "I knowed that Mr Smith wasn't no gentleman! *which* he never raised his' at to me when I let' im out at the' all door just now!!" (*Punch*, 10th July, 1875)
- (5) Counsel: "Do you know the nature of an oath, my good woman?"
Witness (with a black eye): "I did ought to, Sir! *which* my' usban's a Co-vin' Garden porter, Sir!" (*Punch* 92 (1887), p. 122)
- (6) I was walking in the park to-day, when I saw Mr. Howard, *which* I had no idea he was in London. (Krüger 1914-1917:1721.)

This use of *which* lives on into later English, as is shown by some examples from Partridge (1961), such as

- (7) I believe the gentleman acted with the best intentions, 'avin' now seen 'im, *which* at first I thought he was a wrong' un (1927).
- (8) So now they goes and dresses up as Sir Felix, *which* he were become a knight, and no one could tell them apart from one another... (1932).

It will appear from the sentences quoted that *which* is not here used in its conventional functions as a relative or an interrogative pronoun. Its function seems merely to be to connect two clauses or sentences, one of "blosse Anknüpfung", to quote Krüger (*ibid*), or to modify the contents of the whole clause. The passages in which it occurs suggest that it is best regarded as a conjunction or, occasionally, as an adverb.

Our *which* can be found in the *OED* under "Peculiar constructions", where it is described as "a mere connective or introductory particle" (s.v. *which* 14b). The illustrations come from the 18th (Swift), 19th and early 20th centuries and are labelled "vulgar use". Dickens uses the device a good deal, and Brook (1970: 94) records it as a conjunction under "Substandard Grammar". Partridge (1961 s.v.), who quotes the *OED*, gives the meanings for the uses of *which* that are not "wholly superfluous" as 'for, because; besides, moreover'; and (occasionally) 'although'.

The use of *which* as a conjunction or an adverb became almost a stock device with some 19th-century writers to characterise substandard speech, as the examples from Dickens and *Punch* testify — only a few examples out of a great number. To the speaker of modern Standard English the usage seems odd, to put it mildly. How did it come about?

2.a. English clauses can be thought of as being non-introduced or introduced. That is, a clause can either start abruptly with its subject or predicate and present its message straight away, as in

- (9) The President appeared on television last night,

or it can bolster the impact of the message by having it introduced in some way, by means of a conjunction, an intraclausal or extracausal adverbial (the extracausal adverbial being an adverbial clause) or some relative or interrogative word (non-subject), as in

- (10) When the President appeared on television last night...
- (11) Last night the President appeared on television...
- (12) As we all know, the President appeared on television last night.
- (13) The programme on which the President appeared last night...

It seems obvious from the above examples that introduced clauses are frequent in English. To find out just how frequent they are in relation to non-introduced clauses, a sample from the Brown Corpus, a corpus of written modern American English, was analysed and compared with another sample from the London-Lund Corpus, a corpus of spoken modern British English 600. complete finite clauses were taken from each corpus.¹ The result of the analysis can be seen in in Table 1.

Table 1. Complete finite clauses in the Brown and London-Lund Corpora

Text sample	Introduced by				Non-introduced	Total
	conjunctive (+adverbial)	intra-clausal adverbial	extra-clausal adverbial	other relative or interrogative word		
Brown D01	18	21	6	11	44	100
Brown D05	38	19	5	2	36	100
Brown D10	26	20	2	6	46	100
Brown N01	38	8	4	1	49	100
Brown N05	23	5	—	3	69	100
Brown N10	21	14	2	3	60	100
Brown total	164	87	19	26	304	600
Brown average	27.3	14.5	3.2	4.3	50.7	
LLC S. 1. 1	33	17	2	4	44	100
LLC S. 1. 2	38	9	—	7	46	100
LLC S. 1. 3	31	5	1	4	59	100
LLC S. 1. 4	25	13	—	2	60	100
LLC S. 1. 5	40	11	—	7	42	100
LLC S. 1. 6	22	18	—	3	57	100
LLC total	189	73	3	27	308	600
LLC average	31.5	12.2	0.5	4.5	51.3	

Judging from the table, it seems that roughly half of English sentences are introduced, as here defined, whether they occur in written or in spoken English. In actual fact, introduced clauses are a great deal more frequent in the spoken language if we allow for two very characteristic elements of that language form. First, the spoken language abounds with tag-questions, and with parenthetical set expressions of the type *you know, you see*, which are almost invariable in form. They have naturally been included among the "complete finite clauses" here, and so somewhat artificially swollen the ranks of the un-introduced clauses

¹ The Brown sample consisted of the first 100 clauses from each of D01, D05, D10, N01, N05 and N10, and the London-Lund sample consisted of the first 100 clauses from each of S. 1.1, S. 1.2, S. 1.3, S. 1.4, S. 1.5 and S. 1.6.

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in spoken English. Secondly, what have been counted as non-introduced clauses in the spoken sample are very frequently prefaced by some sort of vocal noise, rendered in Svartvik-Quirk 1980 as [ə] or [e:] or [ə:m], perhaps to give the speaker time to think, but perhaps also to take away some of the brusqueness a non-introduced clause might convey. Spoken clauses thus make use of and need introductory or linking devices to a large extent.² It is clear, then, that a "connective or introductory particle" (*OED*) such as our *which* has an important role to play in this connexion. But *which* seems an unlikely word to fill such a function. I believe that three aspects of *which* are relevant here to explain how this situation arose.

2.b. Relative clauses sometimes occur equipped with a pronominal copy of the relative pronoun inside the relative clause:

- (14) Irascible old gentleman: "Waiter: This plate is quite cold."
 Waiter: "Yes, Sir, but the chop is hot, Sir, which I think you'll find it'll warm up the plate nicely, Sir." (*Punch*, 19th May, 1866).

This is a situation referred to in the *OED* s.v. *which* 14, where the following example from Sterne 1768 is quoted:

- (15) The history of myself, which I could not die in peace unless I left it as a legacy to the world.

The occurrence of the two co-referential pronouns makes one of them redundant, and the *OED* suggests that this usage gave rise to the practice of introducing clauses other than relative with a redundant *which*.

2.c. Contrary to usage in Standard English, relative restrictive pronouns are often omitted in subject position in substandard speech. The phenomenon dates back to Old English times, and in Middle English and early Modern English its frequency is considerable.³ In contemporary English it is found in existential and cleft sentences, as in

- (16) There's table stands in the corner.
 (17) It's Simon did it.

See Quirk *et al.* (1985: 17.15), where sentences (16)–(17) are labelled "very colloquial." Wright (1905: 423) records omission of the subject relatives in the dialects. "This construction occurs in P[resent-day] E[nglish] in speech of a very informal kind, but rarely in writing (except in dialogue), and never in formal

² That the tendency is not limited to English can be seen from the frequency of clauses introduced by *Men...* ('but...') and *Men att...* ('but that...') in spoken Swedish.

³ Visser (1963–73: I. 18), Barber (1976: 220–221).

literary style," according to Barber (1976: 221). As there is a difference between standard and substandard speech in this report, hypercorrection can be expected. In other words, not only will substandard speakers insert a relative pronoun as a clause-opener where it is more or less obligatory in standard speech, viz. in subject position, they are also liable to insert it as a clause-opener in other positions, since the use of clause-opening *which* will be thought of as a mark of correctness generally. It is reasonable to suppose that clause-opening relatives thus come to be regarded as practically redundant elements, to be used at the speaker's discretion for stylistic purposes.

2.d. If we consider the function of non-restrictive relative *which* in Standard English for a moment, it is well known that *which* is often used to introduce a new sentence, as in the following instances:

- (18) There had been no money in the substitute valise. Which meant that Rickie had given it to someone. (LOB).
 (19) Burgess had to call the draft man twice in one day. (Which is understandable — if you've ever sampled...) (Brown)
 (20) They conformed to the rules... Which was just well. (*OED* s.v. *which* 1c)

These examples are typical in that the antecedent of *which* is the whole preceding clause. When used in this way, the *which*-clause is not very well integrated with the preceding clause but rather added as a kind of afterthought. Such a loosely connected *which* operates like a conjunction + a (personal) pronoun: 'and this'. In Standard English, one of the functions of *which* is thus to act as a sentence opener.

3. The aspects of modern *which* that we have been discussing can help to explain, I would suggest, the rise of the somewhat intriguing usage of *which* as a conjunction or an adverb in 19th- and early 20th-century substandard speech. As we have seen, most spoken English clauses contain an introductory element, perhaps for the sake of avoiding abruptness. The introductory elements are often conjunctive or adverbial in character. If clause-openers are thus regarded as natural in spoken English clauses in general, it is not surprising that *which* came to fill such a function in substandard speech, for two reasons. First, *which* was readily available, because it already occurred as a seemingly redundant introductory element in certain clauses (relative clauses with pronominal copies, restrictive relative clauses with *which* in subject position). Secondly, *which* was eminently suitable as a conjunctive introductory particle, because it already carried out the function of a clause-opening (and sentence-opening) conjunction + pronoun in non-restrictive relative clauses. The result can in any case be seen in the use of *which* as a conjunction or an adverb

in 19th- and 20th-century substandard speech. Conversion, that very common English phenomenon where a word comes to belong to a new word class, has struck again.

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