That which survives? Relatives in written and formal spoken Canadian English

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Variation in English relative markers, as in (1), has seen considerable study in both formal speech and writing (see for example Ball 1996, Sigley 1997, Tottie 1997, Romaine 1982) and vernacular speech (Tagliamonte, Smith & Lawrence 2005, D’Arcy & Tagliamonte 2008).

(1) a. …if there's one man on earth that ought to be paid on a preference, it's the man who prints a newspaper. [Macleans/1906/a]
   b. I'm pleased to be part of a government which is rebuilding acute care capacity […] a government that's moving forward with an 8.1% increase in the number of acute care beds. [Hansard/2006/x]
   c. The more money that came in […] the more money Ø went out in advertising. [Macleans/1906/a]

This study focuses on cross-register differences in variation and change. Restrictive relative clauses were extracted from two Canadian English registers, Maclean’s magazine (N=357) and Ontario Hansard parliamentary transcripts (N=390) spanning 1906–2006. Following quantitative variationist methodology, tokens have been coded for a variety of previously attested factors conditioning variant choice, including function (i.e. subject, object) and type of antecedent.

The Canadian English results are consistent with Ball’s (1996: 249) findings for standardized British and American English: which, once favoured over that for non-human antecedents in subject relatives, has begun to lose ground to that for this function in the 20th century. Journalistic prose appears to be leading this change over the formal spoken register.

Ball (1996: 251) notes that it has been “suggested that the relevant factor [for which] is level of formality” and that “the story of which in the written data may simply involve stylistic change,” although “the stylistic value of linguistic features cannot be assumed to remain constant over time”. Indeed, these results indicate that while this variable does mark particular situational contexts (i.e. registers), the notion of “formality” in spoken language does not necessarily equate to that of the standardized written language.

References