

LSA.376: Whichthat

Fowler's Rule on Language Log:

GP, 5/17/04: More timewasting garbage, another copy-editing moron:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000918.html>

[one section]

GP, 9/17/04: Sidney Goldberg on NYT grammar: zero for three:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001461.html>

GP, 9/19/04: *Which* vs. *that*? I have numbers:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001464.html>

ML, 9/20/04: *Which* vs. *that*: a test of faith:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001467.html>

ML: 9/23/04: *Which* vs. *that*: integration gradation:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001484.html>

AZ, 5/3/05: Don't do this at home, kiddies!:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002124.html>

AZ, 5/7/05: The people from the CCGW are here to see you:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002138.html>

[one section]

AZ, 5/10/05: What I currently know about *which* and *that*:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002146.html>

AZ, 5/22/05: Five more thoughts on the That Rule:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002189.html>

AZ, 5/29/05: Smokin' too much Fowler:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002205.html>

AZ, 7/4/05: That's American:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002291.html>

AZ, 7/10/05: Still more Declaration of Independence:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002313.html>

ML, 10/7/05: Ann Coulter, grammarian:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002523.html>

ML, 10/8/05: Grammatical indoctrination at law reviews:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002525.html>

AZ, 10/31/06: If they do it too much, they should be told not to do it at all:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003721.html>

[one section in the middle]

AZ, 3/4/07: Foolish hobgoblins:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004268.html>

[one paragraph in the middle]

AZ, 5/14/07: The unfab four:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004495.html>

Notes:

1. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926) was the vector for the spread of the "rule" (accelerated by Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, which has been very influential in the U.S.), but the treatment in *MEU* follows the earlier discussion in

Fowler, Henry W. & Francis George Fowler. 1907. *The King's English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Garner's Modern American Usage observes that similar suggestions had been made by many writers during the 19th century.

2. The reasoning favoring *that* over *which* in restrictives ought to apply to other WH relativizers: *who(m)*, *where*, *when*, *while*, *why*. A fair number of usagists – but not Garner – insist that *that* should not be used with reference to human beings; see the discussion in MWDEU. So *which* and *that* are often not treated in parallel fashion. I don't know of any extension of Fowler's Rule to the remaining WH relativizers. It strikes me that *that* is usually ok, but WH is often better, and *that* is sometimes disallowed.

3. Relativizer *that* is not a pronoun (while *which* is an anaphoric definite pronoun); CGEL classifies it with complementizer *that*, the *for* marking non-finite clauses, infinitival *to*, *whether*, and *if*, as a "subordinator".

Since it's not a pronoun, it's not a NP, and cannot participate in constructions that require a NP, in particular

3.1. P+NP: the only case of *which*/**that* I have direct knowledge

3.2. Possessive NP: an idea whose/**that*'s time has come

[Note the wrinkle here: *which* – like demonstrative *that* and *this* and expletive *there* – lacks a possessive form (**which*'s); *whose* serves in its stead.]

CGEL (1052f.) notes these restrictions on *that*, plus several more that are very much less general:

3.3. *that* is not available as an alternative to *where*, except with a very general noun as antecedent:

the place where/(that) I found it
the house where/**that*/* \emptyset I found it

3.4. *that* is not available as an alternative to *in which* when the antecedent noun is *manner*:

the way in which/(that) you handled the situation
the manner in which/**that*/* \emptyset you handled the situation

3.5. *that which* and *all who* do not allow *that* for *which/who*

4. On the other hand, there are constructions that disfavor or disallow *which*:

4.1. First, an oddity from CGEL (1053): *which* is not available as an alternative to *that* when the antecedent noun is path or manner *way*:

the way (that)/*which you came

the way (that)/*which you handled the situation

Instead, the WH alternative to *that* uses a P:

the way by which you came

the way in which you handled the situation

[cf. 3.4 above]

4.2. Also from CGEL (1053f.): *which* is disfavored (or, in some cases, disallowed) when the antecedent is an indefinite non-personal “determiner-head” (*all, much, most,...*) or compound (*anything, everything, nothing,...*):

All (that)/*which I did was to ask a question.. [*all*-pseudocleft; belongs in 4.5]

Much that/*which I did displeased them. ‘Much of what I did displeased them’

Anything (that)/??which I did pleased them.

[CGEL notes that the disfavoring varies from head to head. That would be worth studying in some detail.]

4.3. Also from CGEL: in superlatives, *which* is strongly disfavored:

That's the fastest dog (that)/?*which I have ever seen.

That was the first book (that)/?*which I read.

4.4. Also from CGEL: ascriptive predicative complements strongly disfavor *which*:

He's not the friend (that)/?*which he was in those days.

4.5. Not in CGEL: *which* is disfavored in a variety of pseudocleftoid constructions:

The thing that/??which bothers me is that...

The only/one thing (that)/*which I did was to...

That's/This is/Here's/There's the (kind/sort of) thing that/??which bothers me.

4.6. Not in CGEL: *which* is strongly disfavored in degree relatives:

The more (that)/*which you eat, the happier (that)/*which you'll be.

4.7. Not in CGEL: *which* is somewhat disfavored in existentials:

There was one proposal that/?which I really liked.

Does anything unite 4.2-4.7?

And how does *who(m)* compare to *which*? They're roughly similar, but it looks like there are some differences in detail.

5. Other factors:

5.1. Style: many people feel that *which* is more formal than *that*. That cuts both ways: use *which* to convey seriousness; or use *that* in striving for a “plain style” and avoiding pretentiousness.

5.2. Phonology: *which* usually bears more accent than *that*, so it’s “weightier” and is likely to call attention to itself. Again, that cuts both ways, depending on whether you want this effect or want to avoid it.

5.3. Distance: the phonological difference would make *which* good for separated relatives, indicating that the relative links back to something earlier and is not just attached to an adjacent N. From CGEL 1054: “Increasing the distance between the relative clause and the head noun, notably by adding other post-head modifiers, favours the *wh* type...”

5.4. “Clarity”. This is the virtue of *that* touted by its proponents. The idea is that following Fowler’s Rule marks the restrictive/non-restrictive difference in two ways – by punctuation (or prosody) and by choice of relativizer – so that text (or speech) that follows the rule should be easier to process. (I know, I know, many of these same people are quick to point out instances of “redundancy” and “pleonasm” as stylistic flaws, even though many of the cases they complain about serve to make meaning and/or structure clear.)

This is, in principle, a testable claim. But not an easy one to test. For one thing, different people obviously have different attitudes towards restrictive *which*. Some people might have internalized the rule so thoroughly that it does indeed guide their processing. Certainly, I’ve had adherents of the rule tell me that they notice occurrences of restrictive *which* and that each one slows them down. (This impression might be accurate for some but not others.) But self-reports like this are notoriously unreliable; we need some real experiments.

On the other hand, there are those of us who unreflectingly use restrictive *which* some of the time and are not conscious of noticing occurrences of it in others. The claim about clarity would predict that there would be a processing difference between *which* and *that* even for us.

Or it might turn out that there was no difference for anybody, once you’ve drawn people’s attentions away from the point you’re testing.

Or it might turn out that there was a difference only for True Believers, which would be a much less interesting result.