

D'où viennent les relatives ?

Where do relative clauses come from?

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Abstract: Relative clauses (of the type ... *le livre qui est sur la table...*, *la lettre que tu as écrite...*) appeared in Latin by a shift from the correlative structure *quas litteras scripsisti, eae...* 'quelle lettre tu as écrite, elle...' to *litterae quas scripsisti...* 'la lettre que tu as écrite...': the *qu-* word *quas*, whose meaning was to express a variable (*quas litteras* = a letter *x*), and which was initially a determiner of N, became pronominalized and anaphoric of the N that became its antecedent. This structure underwent a great development in Latin and passed onto French, in spite of the morphosyntactic transformations which occurred in late Latin: the relative pronouns (having an antecedent N) separated from the other *qu-* words to constitute a heterogeneous paradigm, borrowing from several logical principles: casual opposition *qui* subject / *que* direct regime, reinforcement by the adverbs *où* 'where' and *dont* 'from where', Roman invention of *lequel*, late (17th c.) and partial return of the +/-H distinction after preposition. This heterogeneity does not prevent the extensive use of relative clauses in contemporary French.

Key words: relative (- clause), relative (- pronoun), Latin, variable, anaphora.