

The Last Survivor: Further Decay of the Interrogative WHOM in Prepositional Phrases

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Abstract

This is a corpus-based diachronic study of the interrogative WHOM/WHO alternation in the construction [prep WHOM/WHO?]. Previous studies show that the accusative pronoun WHOM has been almost completely replaced by the nominative WHO, and that the regular use of WHOM is now limited to the place in which it is preceded by prepositions (e.g., *To whom/*who are you referring?*). When the prepositional phrase stands alone (e.g., *To whom/who?*), however, the use of WHO becomes acceptable in informal style. The present study provides empirical evidence from corpus (COHA) that the expansion of WHO in place of WHOM in this construction has been in progress over the last 100 years, and that the proportion of WHO has now overtaken that of WHOM. A multivariate analysis confirms that text genre and type of preceding preposition also contribute to a more detailed account and prediction of the selection of WHO over WHOM. This suggests the possibility that the decay of the “last surviving” interrogative WHOM in prepositional phrases will consequently be accelerated.

Keywords: whom/who alternation, interrogatives, case

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Aim

This study aims to exam whether and to what extent the shift from interrogative [prep WHOM?] toward [prep WHO?] is in progress, based on the corpus-based variationist approach (Szmrecsanyi, 2017). It is a well-known statement that the accusative WHOM is now almost completely replaced by the nominative WHO. As a consequent, the main place in which WHOM is still surviving is where it functions as complement of a preposition (de Haan, 2002). However, this place is no longer a “safe haven” for WHOM because the informal use of WHO is acceptable when the prepositional phrase stands alone (e.g., *To whom/who?*) (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002).

The present study discusses the environments where the WHOM/WHO alternation is mainly observed and identify the place where the competition is potentially active. The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) (Davies, 2010) is utilized to see the distribution of WHOM and WHO across time, genres, and types of preceding preposition. It provides a multivariate model that accounts for the selection of WHO over WHOM and predicts how the shift toward WHO, or decay of the “last surviving” interrogative WHOM, has been, and will be progressed.

1.2 The WHOM/WHO Alternation

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002), the alternation between the accusative WHOM and the nominative WHO is acceptable when the interrogative pronoun functions as object of a verb or preposition (1–4). It shows that, in addition to the normal use of WHO with subjective functions as in (1a-b), the use of WHO in place of WHOM is acceptable when the pronoun functions as object of a verb as in (2a-c) or as fronted object of a standard preposition as in (3). The expansion of WHO, however, has not reached the cases in which the pronoun functions as object of a preceding preposition as in (4). This suggests that WHOM still survives in prepositional phrases (PP) despite its broader decline in contemporary English.

(1) Subject or (subjective) predicative complement

a. *Whom/Who wrote the editorial?

b. *Whom/Who could it be?

(2) Object of a verb

a. Whom/who did you meet?

b. He didn't say whom/who he had invited.

c. Who is going to marry whom/who? (in post-verbal object position)

(3) Fronted object of a standard preposition

Whom/who are you referring to?

(4) Object of a preceding preposition

To whom/*who are you referring?

It is noteworthy that, in informal style, there is a tendency for the nominative WHO to become acceptable when the prepositional phrase stands alone as in (5a). It includes the cases in which the prepositional phrase is in post-verbal position as shown in (5b). The “grammaticality status” of WHO in place of WHOM in this environment is closer to that in (3) than to that in (4) (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). It implies that the use of WHO is expanding further to the environment in which the use of WHO is regarded as “unacceptable” in the grammar today.

(5) Object of a preceding preposition (with PP standing alone or in post-verbal position)

a. A: You should give them away. B: To whom/who?

b. Who said what to whom/who?

1.3 Distribution in Corpora (Previous Studies)

The statement that the replacement of the accusative WHOM by the nominative WHO is now almost complete is supported by corpus-based approaches. Biber et al. (1999) shows that the proportion of WHOM as opposed to WHO is 5–10% for relative pronouns and is less than 5% for interrogative pronouns. The accusative WHOM, nevertheless, is not “dead” (de Haan, 2002) and is surviving

in limited environments: (i) as relative pronoun rather than interrogative pronoun; (ii) as prepositional complement rather than direct object; and (iii) as object of a preceding preposition ([prep WHOM]) rather than fronted object of a standard preposition ([WHOM...prep]), with the construction [quantifiers/numerals + *of whom*] (e.g., *all of whom*) being one of the most typical patterns. The previous corpus-based studies above imply that the last surviving WHOM can regularly be found when the pronoun is preceded by prepositions (henceforth, the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction), and that a competition between WHOM and WHO as interrogative pronoun¹ is potentially promoting further decay of WHOM.

In terms of style, WHOM is generally described as formal whereas WHO as informal/neutral. The interrogative WHOM sounds “even more formal” (Quirk et al., 1985) than the relative WHOM. This observation is probably attributed to the fact that the use of interrogative WHOM is rarer than that of relative WHOM (de Haan, 2002). Biber et al. (1999) implies the influence of genre and register, with the proportion of (interrogative) WHOM as opposed to WHO getting smaller in informal style: approximately 33% in academic prose; 14% in newspapers; 7% in fiction; and virtually non-existent in conversation.

1.4 Research Question and Prediction

Based on the findings from previous studies, it is worth exploring variation regarding the last surviving area for the interrogative WHOM, in which the expansion of WHO appears to be in progress as against the prescriptive norm for contemporary English. The focus is on the environment where the pronoun is immediately preceded by a preposition, and where the prepositional phrase stands alone or in after-verbal position as shown in (5a-b) (henceforth, the [prep WHOM/WHO?] construction).

The research question of this study asks whether the decay of WHOM due to the expansion of WHO in this construction is indeed in progress, and, if so, how far the change has progressed by now. Provided that the decline of WHOM in the target construction is in progress, the prediction is that the replacement of WHOM by WHO is more advanced in informal style, as previous studies suggest. In the present study, the ongoing shift from WHOM to WHO is shown to be progressing at different speeds across genres/registers.

2. Data

2.1 Corpus

The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) (Davies, 2010) is utilized to observe a development of the expansion of WHO against WHOM across different genres. The corpus consists of approximately 475 million words covering the 200 years from the 1820s to the 2010s. Since de Haan’s (2002) analysis is based mainly on data from the 1960s–1990s and Biber et al.’s (1999) from the 1980–1990s, COHA allows us to extend previous research with

more recent data (up to the 2010s) as well as that from previous time periods (dating back to the 1820s).

The component of the corpus by genre is summarized in Table 1. There are five genres, with some genres having a shorter time coverage: fiction (FIC), popular magazines (MAG), newspapers (NEWS, 1860s–), non-fiction books (NF/ACAD), TV/Movies (TV/MOV, 1930s–). It is noted that NEWS lacks data until the 1850s, and TV/MOV only covers data in the 1930s onward. Since the difference in time coverage across genres may affect the result, the influence of genre should be separated from that of time in the multivariate analysis (See Section 3).

FIC includes stories from books, movie/play scripts, and literary/children’s/popular magazines. It accounts for the largest part (46.8%) of the corpus. NF/ACAD consists of text from nonfiction books including that from academic journals. TV/MOV, consisting of text taken from TV/movies subtitles, was added in the 2021 corpus update. Davies (2020) describes these subtitles as being as (highly) informal as actual spoken data and being more informal than data in COHA overall. This allows its users to access language data more colloquial than traditional written genres such as books, magazines, and newspapers.

Genres in COHA	Proportion
Fiction (FIC)	46.8%
Popular Magazines (MAG)	22.4%
Newspapers (NEWS) 1860s–	9.5%
Non-fiction Books (NF/ACAD)	12.9%
TV/Movies (TV/MOV) 1930s–	8.4%
475 million words in total	100%

Table 1: The component of COHA by genre

2.2 Tokens

Table 2 shows the distribution of any occurrence of WHOM/WHO preceded immediately by a preposition (prep WHOM/WHO) during the 200 years from the 1820s to the 2010s, in comparison with that of WHOM/WHO in all circumstances (all WHOM/WHO). It shows that the proportion of all WHOM is as small as 8.9% but that it increases to 90.1% when it is limited to the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction. This adds supporting evidence to de Haan’s (2002) claim that the chief function of WHOM is that of prepositional complement.

	WHOM	WHO	Total
All WHOM/WHO	109,019 (8.9%)	1,121,577 (91.1%)	1,230,596 (100%)
Prep WHOM/WHO	61,551 (90.1%)	6,782 (9.9%)	68,333 (100%)

Table 2: The distribution of WHOM/WHO by construction (COHA)

¹ It is noted that, as relative pronoun, WHOM and WHO are also competing with THAT and ZERO relativiser. The 80–90% of selected human head nouns (e.g., *person*, *people*, *woman*, etc.) with non-subject gaps is relativized by ZERO for both written and spoken registers (Biber et al., 1999). This suggests that for relative

pronouns we need to take these four variants into account. Although relative WHOM as opposed to the other variants is also an interesting topic to be explored, this issue needs to be discussed separately.

Figure 1 compares the above two constructions in the proportion of WHOM as opposed to WHO by decade. In both constructions, WHOM shows a consistent decrease during the 200 years covered by the corpus. The decline of all WHOM appears to enter its final stage in an S-shaped curve by the 1820s and falls below 5% in the 2010s. The decline of WHOM in the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction stays very gentle until the beginning of the 20th century and falls to around 60% by the 2010s. It indicates the possibility that WHOM in the prepositional phrases will be further decay in the future.

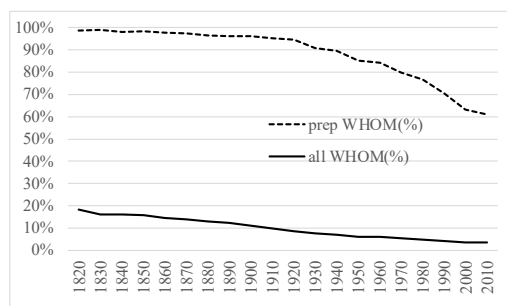


Figure 1: Diachronic change in the proportion of WHOM by construction (COHA)

It should be noted that the tokens of the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction in Table 2 and Figure 1 includes all cases in which WHOM, whether as interrogative or relative pronoun, follows a preposition. For example, (6a–c) are tokens of WHOM that functions as object of a preceding preposition but is not in competition with WHO as discussed with (4)². In addition, there are many cases in which WHO is preceded by a preposition but has a subjective function as shown in (7a–c)³. In this environment WHO is not in competition with WHOM. For a more rigid analysis of the WHOM/WHO alternation, tokens in which the two variants are not truly in competition, such as (6a–c) and (7a–c), are excluded from further discussion.

(6) Tokens of WHOM as object of a preceding preposition (WHO is unacceptable in principle)

- "To whom does this gold belong?" asked Percival. (FIC 1825 Rebels Boston Before) (cf. (4))
- it is difficult to decide to whom the greatest share of blame rightfully belongs. (FIC 1928 Church In Wilderness)
- The young man to whom we have so often referred, was a graduate at Oxford, ... (FIC 1824 Hobomok)

(7) Tokens of WHO as subject of a verb (WHOM is unacceptable in principle)

- However, the problem revolves about the question of who had the latest orders from Washington, Kearny or Stockton. (FIC 1943 Human Comedy)

² In some very rare cases, the interrogative WHO appears in sentence-initial position despite that it is against the prescriptive norm. The following is an example from COHA: "To who did he do harm?" (1968 FIC Herman Had Two Daughters)

- Except for the blunt humor of such a chance of who she was, I did not want to know. (FIC 1932 I James Lewis)

- I'm more interested in who you are, pretty lady. (TV/MOV 1971 Mission: Impossible)

2.3 The [prep WHOM/WHO?] Construction

In order to focus on tokens of interrogative WHOM/WHO as prepositional complement as shown in (5a–b), the analysis is limited to the surface structure [prep WHOM/WHO?], i.e., tokens ending with a question mark. Collected tokens are typically those in PP that stands alone (8a) or those in PP in post-verbal position (8b), but they also include those in PP after a noun (8c) or predicate adjective (8d). The limitation of this method is that tokens of [prep WHOM/WHO] without a question mark in sentence-final position (indirect question) as in (9a) or in sentence-medial position as in (9b) were not collected.

(8)

- Are you going back to her? - To whom? (TV/MOV 1936 My Man Godfrey) (cf. 5a)
- "Christy's married to whom?" (FIC 2008 Manning Brides) (cf. 5b)
- "Marriage! Marriage to whom?" says Adle, ... (FIC 1866 Doctor Johns Being)
- They're too dangerous. - Too dangerous to whom? - To you. (TV/MOV 1998 Star Trek)

(9)

- And then I got married; you know to who. (FIC 1975 Last Valley)
- Write to who about the bases? (FIC 1973 Great American Novel)

The distribution of tokens of WHOM/WHO in the [PREP whom/who?] construction is shown in Table 3. The proportion of WHOM here drops to 64.0%, indicating a greater expansion of WHO in this construction compared with that in the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction (i.e., 90.1%) shown in Table 2.

	WHOM	WHO	Total
No. of Token	1,215	682	1,897
Proportion (%)	64.0%	34.0%	100%

Table 3: The distribution of WHOM/WHO in the [prep WHOM/WHO?] construction (COHA)

2.4 Multivariate Analysis

Based on the variationist approach, the present study utilizes a binary logistic regression analysis to identify important predictors that account for the selection of WHO over WHOM. The dependent variable is the case selection of a pronoun as prepositional complement: either unmarked

³ For a similar discussion, de Haan (2002) points out that, in the occurrence of WHO as prepositional complement, there are a fair number of cases in which a preposition and WHO that follows it "do not make up a single constituent" as follows: "The number depends on who is talking at the moment" (Brown E32 1290)

accusative WHOM (as reference category) or “marked” nominative WHO. Independent variables include: (i) year (numerical), (ii) genre (categorical), and (iii) type of preceding preposition (categorical).

3. Results

3.1 Distribution across Time (YEAR)

Figure 2 shows the distribution of WHOM/WHO in the [prep WHOM/WHO?] construction by decade. The proportion of WHOM shows a sharp decline in the 20th century, reaching 30–40% by the 2010s. We can see that the decline is more dramatic than that in the [prep WHOM/WHO] construction: the proportion of WHOM in the same period is around 60% (see Figure 1). This suggests that the current target construction shows a more active competition between WHOM and WHO. There is a reverse in the position of WHOM and WHO in the 1990s.



Figure 2: Distribution of WHOM/WHO (%) across time (COHA)

3.2 Distribution by Genre (GENRE)

Figure 3 shows the distribution of WHOM/WHO in the [prep WHOM/WHO?] construction by genre. The shift toward WHO is most advanced in TV/MOV followed by FIC, MAG, NEWS, NF/ACAD.

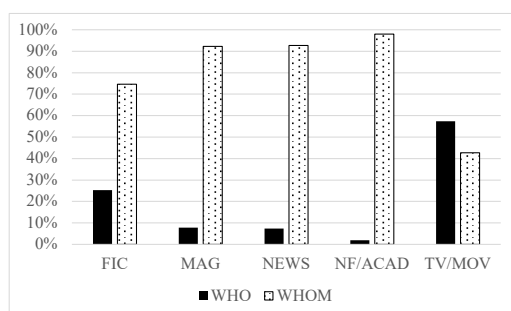


Figure 3: Distribution of WHOM/WHO (%) by genre (COHA)

This pattern is maintained when the differences in time coverage across genre are concerned (Figure 4). It is noteworthy that WHO wins the majority only in TV/MOV (in the most recent period: the 1970s–2010s), indicating that the change is most progressed in this genre. The shift in FIC is a bit gentler than that in TV/MOV. There is no sharp change in MAG, NEWS, and NF/ACAD, indicating that WHOM is still in regular use in these text genres.

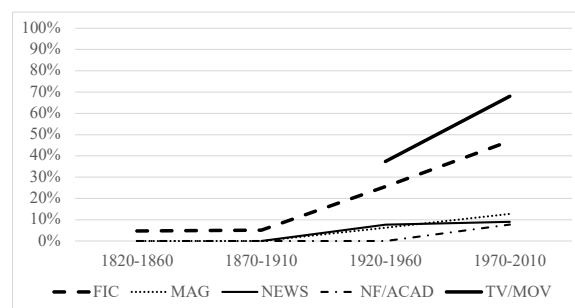


Figure 4: Diachronic distribution of WHO (%) by genre (COHA)

3.3 Distribution by Type of Preceding Preposition (PREP)

Figure 5 shows the distribution of WHOM/WHO by type of preceding preposition. There are 29 prepositions preceding WHO/WHOM, but the prepositions of which sample is less than 10 are grouped into the category “others”. The preposition BY has the largest number of tokens (87 WHOs + 301 WHOMs = 388) and its proportion of WHO is 22.4%. Compared with BY as reference category, all the other prepositions show a higher proportion of WHO. With the prepositions AT, LIKE, and ABOUT, the proportion of WHO accounts for over 50%.

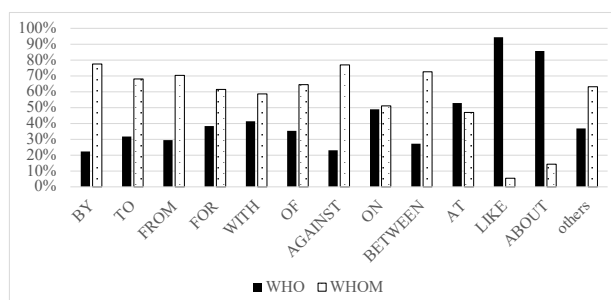


Figure 5: Distribution of WHOM/WHO by type of preceding preposition (COHA)

3.4 Logistic Regression Analysis

A binary logistic regression is done with case selection (either WHOM=0 or WHO=1) as dependent variable, and with (i) YEAR, (ii) GENRE (FIC as reference category), and (iii) PREP (BY as reference category) as independent variables (Forward Stepwise, Wald). The result is shown in Table 4. A positive coefficient (B) means that the variable promotes the selection of WHO over WHOM. If it is a categorical variable, a positive coefficient means that the category in question favors WHO more strongly than its reference category (REF).

The selection of WHO over WHOM based on the regression analysis is accounted for as follows: (i) the probability of WHO becomes higher as YEAR increases; (ii) the probability of WHO is higher in TV/MOV and is lower in the rest of the genres (compared with its reference category FIC); (iii) all prepositions except for FROM,

AGAINST, BETWEEN show a higher probability of WHO than BY (the reference category).

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
YEAR	0.025	0.002	182.393	1	<.001	1.026
GENRE _{REF=FIC}			101.381	4	<.001	
MAG	-1.889	0.461	16.756	1	<.001	0.151
NEWS	-2.240	0.644	12.107	1	<.001	0.106
NF/ACAD	-3.081	1.170	6.936	1	0.008	0.046
TV/MOV	0.878	0.124	50.344	1	<.001	2.407
PREP _{REF=BY}			122.506	12	<.001	
TO	0.525	0.191	7.563	1	0.006	1.691
FROM	0.225	0.209	1.155	1	0.282	1.252
FOR	0.872	0.202	18.695	1	<.001	2.390
WITH	0.876	0.206	18.067	1	<.001	2.402
OF	1.395	0.300	21.581	1	<.001	4.033
AGAINST	0.393	0.441	0.793	1	0.373	1.481
ON	1.757	0.387	20.576	1	<.001	5.796
BETWEEN	0.384	0.794	0.234	1	0.628	1.468
AT	1.928	0.588	10.745	1	0.001	6.873
LIKE	4.388	0.542	65.449	1	<.001	80.501
ABOUT	3.424	0.815	17.638	1	<.001	30.707
Others	2.059	0.464	19.692	1	<.001	7.839
Constant	-51.567	3.717	192.506	1	<.001	<.001

Nagelkerke R² = 0.447

Table 4: Result of logistic regression analysis

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Findings

The shift toward WHO in the [prep WHOM/WHO?] construction is in progress despite that the change is against the prescriptive norm. The expansion of WHO in place of WHOM in this construction has progressed to the extent that WHOM has now become the minority. The decline of WHOM in this specific construction is in progress at a rate more rapid than that in the [perp WHOM/WHO] construction. This suggests the possibility that the decay of the “last surviving” interrogative WHOM will consequently be accelerated in the future.

The multivariate model shows that the ongoing change is most advanced in the genre TV/MOV. Given that language in TV/MOV is characterized as informal as actual spoken data (Davies, 2020), the distribution supports the claim of previous research that the occurrence of WHO, generally, is more acceptable as informal usage. This shows the possibility that the shift from WHOM to WHO is progressing as “change from below” (Labov, 1972), the change occurring from below the level of social awareness.

The model also shows that the probability of occurrence of WHO is lowest with the preposition BY, which has the largest number of tokens. Although there are some exceptions, WHO is generally preferred more strongly in collocation with other preceding prepositions, of which frequency of use is lower than BY. It may be attributed to

the general tendency that less frequent collocation is more vulnerable to language change.

4.2 [WHO prep?]: A Variant Older than [prep WHO?]

As another possible variant of [prep WHOM?], Fowler (1965) mentions the trend in favor of the verbless [WHO prep?] construction at that time:

If a writer given to the verbless sentences now so popular writes *Who from?* as one, his flouting of grammar will be more in keeping with modern idiom than *Whom from?*⁴ or *From whom?* (Fowler, 1965: 708)

Hornby (1976) also points out the use of *Who to?* in place of its formal and rare variant *To whom?* Judging from the fact that the [perp WHO?] construction is not mentioned in these grammar books and the [WHO prep?] construction is not mentioned by more recent grammar books (e.g., Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), [WHO prep?] appears to be a variant older than [perp WHO?].

As shown in Table 5, 219 tokens of [WHO prep?] are additionally taken from COHA. As opposed to [prep WHOM?] and [prep WHO?], [WHO prep?] accounts for 10.3% overall. Figure 6 illustrates, however, that the occurrence of [WHO prep?] peaks in the 1920–1960s and begins to fall toward the 1970s–2010s in every genre (note that NEWS and NF/ACAD have no matching tokens). A diachronic distribution of [WHO prep?] as opposed to [prep WHOM/WHO?] suggests that the use of [WHO prep?] in place of [prep WHOM?] was a small trend around the first half of the 20th century, but that it has given way to [prep WHO?] in recent decades.

	prep WHOM ?	prep WHO ?	WHO prep?	Total
No. of Token	1,215	682	219	2,116
Proportion (%)	57.4%	32.2%	10.3%	100%

Table 5: The distribution of [WHO prep?] as opposed to [prep WHOM/WHO?] (COHA)

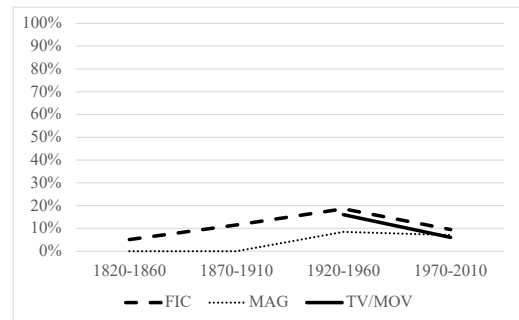


Figure 6: Diachronic change in the proportion of [WHO prep?] as opposed to [prep WHOM/WHO?] by genre (COHA)

⁴ There are only three tokens of this [WHOM prep?] construction in COHA with *against*, *from*, *with* in the 1840s, 1850s, 1860s, respectively.

4.3 Future Study: Microscopic and Macroscopic Perspectives

The present study has extended previous research by providing more recent empirical evidence of the ongoing shift from WHOM toward WHO. Differences in distribution in WHOM/WHO across genres needs to be discussed further in terms of informality of the text, by searching for factors that are associated more directly with informality or colloquialism than genre (cf. Kuya, 2025). Diachronic distribution of the [WHO prep?] construction as a third variant will be another issue to be discussed further in relation to this variation. It is also interesting to look at minor but potential variants of the current variation, e.g., the sentence-initial [prep WHO?] (see Footnote 2) and [WHOM prep?] (see Footnote 4). These microscopic views will enable us to map development so far and predict the future progress of the current variation more accurately.

From a macroscopic perspective, connections with a broader context of the WHOM/WHO alternation need to be addressed in a future study. First, attention needs to be paid to WHOM/WHO distributions outside the current target construction, including those of interrogative WHOM/WHO as shown in (9a–b), interrogative WHOM/WHO as direct object of a verb (2a–c) or fronted object of a standard preposition (3), and relative WHOM/WHO with functions equivalent to those of interrogative WHOM/WHO.

Second, looking at connections with the relevant ongoing change in personal pronouns will be also useful. The author has conducted research on the shift from the nominative I to the accusative ME in the following constructions: [it is I/ME] (Kuya, 2021), [it is I/ME who] (Kuya, 2024a; Kuya, 2025); [than I/ME] in comparative sentences (Kuya 2024b); and the accusative/nominative alternation in the construction [between you and ME/I] (Kuya, 2026). All cases above show consistent tendencies, and the current variation is no exception: (i) “variation occurs mostly in the context which abounds in conversation/quasi-conversation” (Kuya, 2021); (ii) a prescriptively unacceptable variant gains popularity; and (iii) the change spreads into text genres or constructions that are generally described as informal/colloquial⁵, and then into those regarded as more formal. The correlation between informality/colloquialism and the preference for the prescriptively unacceptable forms in these constructions implies that these ongoing changes can be all characterized as change from below (Labov, 1972).

Both microscopic and macroscopic perspectives on the variation targeted in the present study, as well as those on relevant variations in a broader context, will lead to a more comprehensive description of the alternation between WHOM and WHO.

5. Acknowledgements

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⁵ In COHA the typical genre characterized as informal is TV/movie scripts (TV/MOV). Colloquialism can be seen in the case of a construction with a contracted form, as in *it's me* rather

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than *it is me*. This is one of the typical environments in which the change is ahead (Kuya, 2021; Kuya, 2024a; Kuya, 2025).