

“of which...” vs. “(which)... of.” –

A Corpus-based Study of Pied-piping Usage in Hong Kong English

LAM Chin Hang

(Supervisor: Prof. Gerald Nelson)

Abstract

The struggle between descriptive and prescriptive grammarians, or that between commoners and prescriptivists, is a centuries-old one. Those who advocate prescriptive grammar often believe that a certain usage, instead of its alternative(s), is the only correct way of saying things. One such disputed usage concerns the struggle between the stranded preposition structure (e.g. “(which)... of.”) and the pied-piping construction (e.g. “of which...”), which are alternatives of each other when a prepositional phrase exists in certain relative clauses. While prescriptivists insist that the pied-piping construction is the only “correct” usage, others may often find it strange to the ear, and in many cases do people embrace the more common and “natural-sounding” stranded version of a relative clause. This paper, taking light from this tensely-debated struggle, investigates the reasons behind people’s using (and also their not using) pied-piping construction by means of a corpus study. The Hong Kong sub-corpus of the International Corpus of English (ICE-HK) is made the chief source, limiting the scope of focus to be on the use of English as a second language (i.e. by ESL learners) in Hong Kong.

While it is a rather prevalent assumption that the pied-piping construction is used for the sake of formality, the results from this research, which takes an empirical approach, suggest otherwise; users’ drive for professionalism and the preparedness of individual discourses are identified as the vital factors behind the use of pied-piping construction. Several learner issues, which also tangentially add to the idea that pied-piping is facilitated by a high level of preparedness in the discourses made,

provide insights into how learners' mind processes certain types of relative clauses, from which ways to improve learners' ability to formulate grammatically correct relative clauses can be proposed.

Reflection

It is often said that university is a place which nurtures critical thinking, and it cannot be a truer thing to exclaim when I look back at this project. You hear, or from some sources get to "know", that pied-piping is a highly formal feature of English, but can you simply terminate all thought processes upon "knowing" so? No, or else you never get to truly *know* it can turn out to be a totally different issue behind. My sincerest gratitude hereby goes to my supervisor, whose grammatical course has caught me into an endless journey of thinking and re-thinking about the phrases, clauses and sentences in my life, for without his detailed and dedicated guidance it would not have been possible to conduct such a sound grammatical study with the use of corpus. This capstone project shall then remain one of the most unforgettable memories of my fruitful days in university, one that I shall ever feel pleasure to look back to, revisit, and be nostalgic at.