

The ins and outs of using 'then' and 'than' in our language

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@sarchant.co.uk

Than was originally the same word as then, the time adverb. How it came to develop its modern usage in phrases like "This is bigger than that" is not clear, but it might have been via expressions such as "this is big, than that (is next biggest)". But we don't know because that all happened 2,000 years ago in our parent West Germanic language. Our sister language Dutch also has the construction "Dit is groter dan dat." Dutch dan means both then and than.

In today's English, than is a conjunction - it joins two parts of a sentence, as in "He can speak English better than she can speak Greek".

But some people think than can only be a conjunction. They believe we should say "He is taller than she" because that is an abbreviation of "He is taller than she is", with than being a conjunction linking the two parts of the sentence. And they reckon it is wrong to say "He is taller than her".

It is true that some people do occasionally say things like "He is better than I", and "They are cleverer than we", which sounds strange to most of us. More people write such sentences than say them, particularly Americans, but in my view



■ Wes Hoolahan of Norwich City in action - some authors writing about his skills in a formal style might say 'Wes Hoolahan, than whom no one is more skilful', explains our columnist. Picture: PAUL CHESTERTON/FOCUS IMAGES

these forms are not normal English.

The fact is that such people have got their grammatical analysis wrong. Yes, than is a conjunction. But it is also a preposition. After prepositions in English, we use the object forms of pronouns, not the subject forms. We don't say "from I, to she, with we, for they"; we say "from me, to her, with us, for them". In exactly the same way, we don't say "bigger than I, than she, than we, than they". In normal English, speakers say "bigger than me, than her, than us, than them".

Than is a preposition in many other languages as well. In Danish, the word for than, "end", is also a preposition taking an

object pronoun: better than me is "bedre end mig".

You can also tell that than is a preposition in English from the way in which, in very formal styles, some authors use the object pronoun whom after than: "Our best player is Wes Hoolahan, than whom no one is more skilful".

If you meet someone who believes that than is not a preposition, please say you know better than them.

■ Prof Trudgill's latest book is *Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language*, a collection of his EDP columns, published by Cambridge University Press.