

SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIVE CLAUSES IN ENGLISH

Nguyen Thi Xuan Phuong
Thuongmai University
VIET NAM

ABSTRACT

The article explores the semantic characteristics of relative clauses in English. Through the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the research results clearly show the frequency of use of relative pronouns in English as well as the key semantic functions of relative clauses in English such as the semantic characteristics of head nouns or inter-clause.

Keywords: relative clause, semantic characteristics.

1. INTRODUCTION

A subordinate clause, known as a relative clause, is conjoined to the main clause through the use of a relative pronoun. English relative pronouns function as a means of linkage between clauses within complex sentences, and commonly include who, whom, which, whose, and that. Relative clauses are also referred to as adjectival clauses, as they are subordinate clauses employed to modify or elaborate upon their antecedents. Relative clauses is a special expression in different languages from different countries, therefore, it has been a topic of interest for many researchers and scholars in the world and in Vietnam as well.

Through the linguistic lens of relative clauses, overseas investigations can be categorized into various research domains, including but not limited to examinations of the syntactic properties of relative clauses within one's home language, investigations into the processing and comprehension of relative clauses, analyses of the acquisition of relative clauses in foreign language teaching and learning, and comparative assessments of relative clause structures across diverse languages.

Several Vietnamese scholars have conducted comprehensive research aimed at analyzing relative clauses in order to explore diverse aspects of the language. To date, no scholarly research conducted in the Vietnamese language has verified the existence of relative clauses within said language. As such, the majority of investigations conducted by scholars in Vietnam center around the examination of relative clauses within a non-native language. In contrast to the foreign literature on the topic, Vietnamese scholars primarily examine relative clauses through a linguistic lens, encompassing various perspectives such as the analysis of relative clauses in foreign languages and its corresponding counterparts in Vietnamese, investigations on applied linguistics concerning the incorporation of relative clauses in the instruction and acquisition of foreign languages, and explorations on the translation of relative clauses from foreign languages into Vietnamese.

The purpose of this investigation is to examine and provide a comprehensive analysis of relative clauses from a semantic viewpoint. The author provides a succinct overview of the organization of relative clauses in the English language as a fundamental premise to facilitate the juxtaposition and distinction of such structures in relation to their Vietnamese equivalents.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The present article employs a descriptive approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies through the use of various techniques, including statistical analysis and the examination of the semantic structures of relative clauses in the dataset.

On the data from 3 classic, renowned and award-winning works, including “To Kill a Mocking Bird” by Harper Lee, “The Great Gatsby” by Scott Fitzgerald and “To the Lighthouse” by Virginia Woolf, the author collects 425 expressions with relative clauses using relative pronouns by descriptive statistics. Through the process of organizing and categorizing according to forms of relative pronouns, an examination is conducted by the author on the relative clauses for the purpose of investigating the semantic features of the relative pronouns within the clauses. The present article exclusively scrutinizes certain relative pronouns that display a preponderance of usage within the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Description of Relative Pronouns

Relative clauses hold a pivotal position as one of the foremost and discernible clauses in the English language. A clause that modifies a noun by providing additional information and is commonly initiated by a relative pronoun is known as a relative clause.

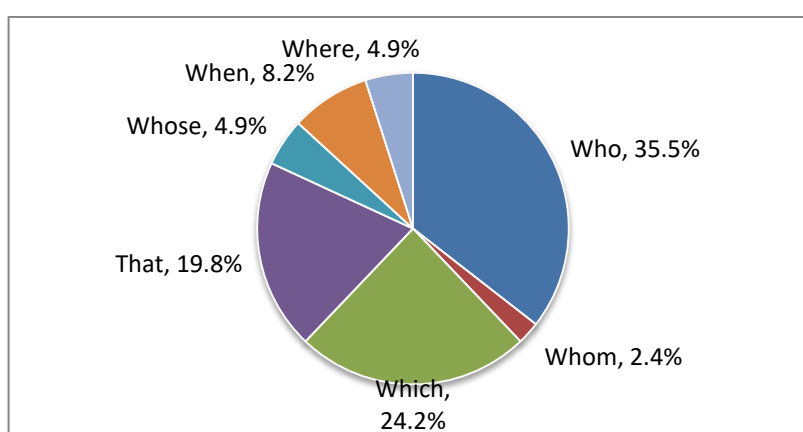


Figure 1. Frequency of relative pronouns

3.1.1. Relative pronoun “who”

Figure 1 depicts the customary frequency of relative pronouns employed in the three literary works under examination. The prevalence of the relative pronoun “who” in replacing a noun or pronoun denoting a person is evident in the observation that it appears in 151 clauses. Given that the three pieces being investigated are derived from everyday life contexts, the use of nouns or pronouns referring to individuals is the most prevalent. Hence, the relative pronoun “who” constitutes 35.5% of the sample under investigation.

Example 1:

*When Uncle Jack caught me, he kept me laughing about a preacher **who hated going to church so much that every day he stood at his gate in his dressing-gown, smoking a hookah and delivering five-minute sermons to any passers-by who desired spiritual comfort.***

Example 1 unmistakably evinces the usage of the relative pronoun "who" twice to substitute their antecedents, specifically nouns signifying the individual "a preacher" and "passers-by," in order to augment the level of information conveyed and provide a more elaborative description of the individual. This serves the purpose of rendering the sentence more illustrative and lucid. Consequently, the readers may acquire a more intricate depiction of the individuals portrayed within the given context. The aforementioned instance exemplifies the versatile applications of the relative pronoun "who," as it is unconstrained by a specified quantity of usages within a singular sentence, instead adapting to the quantity of clauses that constitute said sentence.

3.1.2. Relative pronoun "which"

The data presented in Figure 1 reveals that the relative pronoun "which" exhibits a considerable degree of frequency, accounting for 24.2% of the total occurrences. The principal characteristic of a literary genre may be deemed as legitimizable when it is regarded as a mechanism for effectively presenting the substance in a manner that is imaginative, symbolic, tacit, and vibrant. The relatively high frequency of usage of the relative pronoun "which" as a substitute for objects can be accounted for.

Example 2:

*They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles **which** pass over a nonexistent nose.*

Example 2 employs the relative pronoun "which" to substitute the preceding noun pertaining to objects, namely "spectacles," with a particular intention of expanding the sentence's length and embellishing the clause to portray the "spectacles," thereby inciting reader curiosity. The aforementioned grammatical structure imparts a sense of academic writing.

In this instance, it is crucial to include a comma prior to the relative pronoun "which" in order to serve as a discernible indicator for readers of the unique function of said pronoun.

Example 3:

*I said I would like it very much, **which** was a lie, but one must lie under certain circumstances and at all times when one can't do anything about them.*

The utilization of the relative pronoun "which" by the author serves to substitute the entire antecedent clause "I would like it very much," thereby offering additional elaboration to the antecedent clause's information in a succinct manner, aimed at impressing the readers and ensuring a seamless reading flow, instead of employing a standalone sentence.

3.1.3. Relative pronoun "that"

The relative pronoun "that" exhibits a frequency that takes the third position among all clauses utilizing relative pronouns, with a percentage of 19.8%. The relative pronoun "that" exhibits a versatility in its capacity to replace both animate and inanimate referents, thereby evidencing its flexible usage within discourse. The frequent usage of the relative pronoun "that" in the data can be attributed to this cause.

Example 4:

*The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside **that** seemed to grow a little way into the house.*

Example 4 illustrates the application of the relative pronoun "that" as a substitute for a noun signifying objects antecedent it, akin to the function of "which". The relative pronoun, "that," is employed to clarify the antecedent, "the fresh grass outside," in a succinct, coherent, and impactful manner to the intended audience.

3.2. Semantic characteristics of relative clauses in English

From a semantic perspective, a relative clause encompasses a proposition wherein one of its components exhibits identical reference to the noun that is being modified by the clause. Typically, a sentence containing a relative clause is understood to comprise two distinct clusters of subject-predicate components, which stand in a main-subordinate relationship to one another.

In the English language, the grammatical construct of relative clauses may be bifurcated into two distinct types known as defining relative clauses and non-defining relative clauses. A defining relative clause which includes a proposition deemed familiar or readily available to the audience, does not constitute novel or confrontational information. Non-defining relative clauses serve to impart additional thematic context to the listener, which can be deemed valuable by the speaker through a range of perspectives.

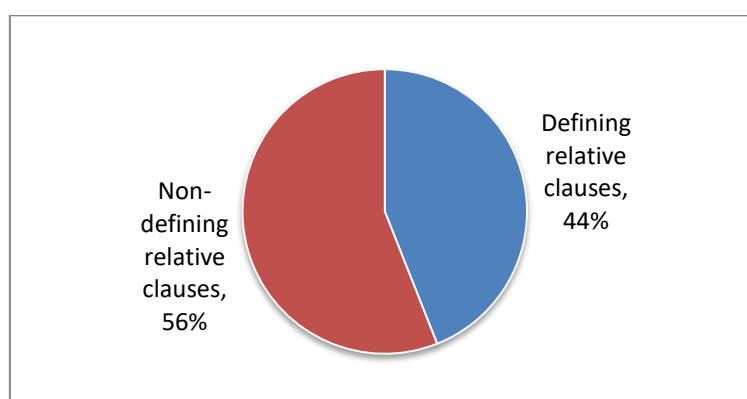


Figure 2. Types of relative clauses

The findings in Figure 7 illustrate the ratio between two distinct forms of relative clauses, namely definite and non-defining relative clauses, as observed within the research corpus. The data indicates that non-defining relative clauses constitute the majority of propositions, accounting for 56% of the total proportion. The primary objective of investigating the relationships within the three works appears to be centered on furnishing supplementary details and elaboration related to the modified elements. Furthermore, these relative clauses have the capacity to omit certain propositions while preserving the overall meaning of the text. It is necessary to utilize appropriate language conventions when crafting academic writing. Both types of relative clauses possess the ability to modify both specific nouns and those with indefinite reference, thereby participating in the formation of semantic attributes of relative clauses.

3.2.1. Semantic features of head nouns

By analyzing the semantic features of the head noun within the context of a relative clause, the present study aims to shed light on the salient linguistic properties of this syntactic

construction. Through an investigation of the research corpus, the findings of this inquiry can yield notable conclusions.

3.2.1.1. Reference of head noun modified by non-defining relative clauses

Non-defining relative clauses are structures that modify nouns whose reference has been defined for both the speaker and the listener.

Example 4:

Gloucester was one of Mr. Bankes' favorite cities. It was a hustle and bustle town, which was filled with luxury high-street shops and modern skyscrapers.

In this example, the reference of the word "town" to the city "Gloucester" has been predefined for the receiver of the utterance, so the relative clause behind it is not defining.

Example 5:

Atticus stepped into a small trattoria, which was filed with delicious scent and ordered lunch.

In this example, the word "trattoria" is mentioned for the first time in the context, so the relative clause has the function of providing some more identifying information to the noun.

3.2.1.2. Reference of head noun modified by defining relative clauses

A defining relative clause is a syntactic structure utilized to modify a noun in order to unequivocally elucidate the object under discussion to the reader or listener. The potential for referentiality is observed in modified nouns. The reference may variably denote singular entities, such as a person, object, or phenomenon, contingent upon contextual circumstances. The aforementioned is applicable within a given context or pertains exclusively to one among many individuals who possess identical attributes.

The English language exhibits article-noun correspondence, whereby 'a' or 'an' constitutes the indefinite article, 'the' corresponds to the definite article, and the absence of article indicates zero article. The application of the definite article "the" extends to both singular, plural, and non-countable nouns. When conjoined with singular and non-countable nouns, it suggests that the noun at hand is referencing the sole individual, object, occurrence or idea within the surrounding context.

Example 6:

The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel which was now getting considerable attention from half a dozen curious chauffeurs.

The aforementioned context exclusively encompasses "the detachment of the wheel" as the sole event, without any other concurrent occurrences. The usage of the definite article "the" pertains to its reference to nouns that possess a distinct and established identity acknowledged by both the speaker and the listener.

Conversely, the usage of the indefinite article "a/an" is restricted to singular countable nouns, signifying the quantity of "one". Its function is to designate a particular individual within a given category that has not been specified.

Example 7:

One time he killed a man who had found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil.

In this example, the article "a" is deployed when the singular countable noun is initially referred to. In this context, the author provides a piece of information intended to inform the

reader regarding the classification of the new referencing style. The relative clause in the aforementioned example functions solely to describe and provide additional characteristics of the person mentioned, without serving an identifying function for the reader. General nouns are those nouns that have an indefinite reference in the form of plural countable nouns accompanied by the article "zero" which bears a generalizing and inclusive aspect to a whole class of entities.

Example 8:

*They bore cream-colored envelopes **which were stuffed with cash as bridal gifts, no checks.***

In the aforementioned example, the term "cream-colored envelopes" lacks specificity and is utilized to denote a generalized concept, wherein it represents an indeterminate plural set of envelopes. The author does not intend to encompass all cream-colored envelopes brought to the wedding.

The co-reference of nominal entities in defining relative clauses may not always be present. The aforementioned term may refer to a hypothetical individual.

Example 9:

*"Anybody **who went up to the house once** oughta not to still run every time he passes it," I said to the clouds above.*

3.2.2. Inter-clause semantic characteristics

The current context provides an opportunity to explore the semantic distinctions between a main clause and a subordinate clause. Regarding the semantic linkage, only a non-defining clause exhibits a certain connection with the main clause. Predominantly, this concerns the semantic relationship that indicates a causal link.

Example 10:

*The Dodger, **who were not ready to attract public attention by running down the open street,** had nearly lost their conscience.*

In terms of the relationship between logic and semantics, the relationship between a non-defining relative clause and a main clause constitutes an extensional relationship, whereby details are elaborated. Similarly, the relationship between a definite relative clause and a main clause constitutes an intensional relationship, whereby further details are specified. Within the discourse of specification, the aforementioned clause serves to delineate or particularize the meaning conveyed by the clause in question. The subordinate relative clause serves to provide further specification and refinement for the already established content, without adding new elements. It achieves this by utilizing alternative terminology to re-identify the content, explicitly clarifying its nature, or supplementing descriptive characteristics or observations.

Example 11:

*She told it to the baker's wife, **who told it to the cook.***

The relationship between defining clause and main clause is commonly referred to as appositive construction, whereby the clause is integrated as an internal component of the structure of a phrase, which in turn becomes an element of the clause. The function of it is to concretize the members of a class from the medication designated by the noun in question. In the following example, the phrase "who was with him" explicitly identifies the "girl".

Example 12:

*The girl **who was with him** got into the papers too because her arm was broken.*

Thus, a relative clause serves solely as a detail enhancer for a noun, fulfilling a single logical and semantic function. The use of defining relative clauses is deemed a crucial element in providing comprehensive semantic coherence to a sentence. Meanwhile, non-defining relative clauses are deemed non-essential.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research is conducted with the purpose of surveying and describing the relative clauses in English in terms of semantics, through which a summary of semantic characteristics of relative clauses in English is made. The result of this research is the premise for the comparative and contrastive studies with similar expressions in the Vietnamese language, which may bring beneficial contributions for the future research.

REFERENCES

1. Harper, L. (2010), *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.
2. Jakobson, R. (1959), *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, *On Translation*, Harvard University Press.
3. Larson, L.M. (1984), *Meaning – based translation*. University Press of America.
4. McArthur, T. (1992), *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford University Press
5. Scott Fitzgerald, F. (2021), *The Great Gatsby*, Clydesdale.
6. Woolf, V. (1981), *To the Lighthouse*, Harvest Books.