Syntactic Functions of Relative Clauses in English

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ABSTRACT
The article explores the syntactic functions 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 and their prominent functions which include subject, direct object, indirect object after preposition, time and place, and possession.
KEYWORDS: relative clause, syntactic functions.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Relative clause is a subordinate clause that links with the main clause by a relative pronoun. Relative pronouns in English consist of who, whom, which, whose and that as a connective device between clauses in complex sentences. Relative clauses can also be known as adjectival clauses as they are the subordinate clauses to modify or explain 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.

From the linguistic approach to relative clauses, foreign studies can be divided into such research categories as studies on syntactic features of relative clauses in the native language, studies on processing and understanding relative clauses, studies on the acquisition of relative clauses in teaching and learning a foreign language and studies on contrastive analysis of relative clauses among different languages.

Vietnamese researchers have also conducted some in-depth studies on analyzing relative clauses in exploring different aspects of the language. However, there has not been any works in Vietnamese that confirms the presence of relative clauses in Vietnamese so far. Therefore, most studies of researchers in Vietnam focus on exploring relative clauses in a foreign language. Unlike the foreign studies, Vietnamese researchers mainly study relative clauses under linguistic approach with such perspectives as analyzing relative clauses in a foreign language and finding out the equivalent expressions in Vietnamese, studies on applied linguistics exploring relative clauses in teaching and learning foreign languages and studies on translating relative clauses from a foreign language into Vietnamese.

The research is conducted with the aim to study and describe relative clauses under syntactic perspective. The author then summarizes the structure of relative clauses in English as a premise for comparing and contrasting with Vietnamese expressions.

II.   RESEARCH METHODS

The article utilizes the descriptive method combining quantitative and qualitative by such techniques as statistics, description of syntactic structure of relative clauses in the data.

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. In arranging and sorting by forms of relative pronouns, the researcher analyzes the relative clauses to exploring the syntactic functions of relative pronouns in the clauses. In this article, the author only analyzes some relative pronouns with highest frequency in the data.

III.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Relative pronouns

Relative clauses are one of the most fundamental and distinctive clauses in English. A relative clause is usually introduced by a relative pronoun. It functions as a modifier to a noun or a pronoun in the clause before it, namely, antecedent.
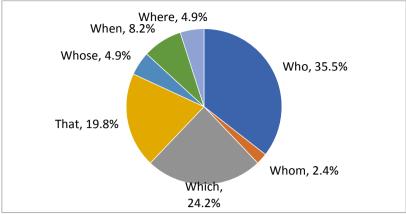

Figure 1. Distribution of relative pronouns

3.1.1. Relative pronoun "who"

Figure 1 presents the typical frequency of relative pronouns used in the 3 literary works under study. It can be seen that relative pronoun "who" take the lead with the presence in 151 clauses to replace a noun or pronoun denoting person. As the three works under research are all taken from the daily life contexts, nouns or pronouns denoting person have the highest frequency. Therefore, the percentage of relative pronoun "who" account for 35.5% of the research sample.

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**.*

In Example 1, it is clearly seen that relative pronoun "who" is used twice to replace their antecedents which are nouns denoting person "a preacher" and "passers-by" with the aim to add more information, detailed description of the person, making the sentence more figurative and apparent. From that, readers can have more detailed image on the people described in the context. This example also shows the flexible usages of relative pronoun "who" as it is not limited in the number of uses in one sentence, depending on the number of clauses in the sentence.

3.1.2. Relative pronoun "which"

As can be seen from Figure 1, relative pronoun "which" is also used frequently in the data with 24.2%. It is justifiable that the main feature of literary genre is to present the content in the creative, figurative, implicit and colorful manner. Thus, the use of relative pronoun "which" to replace things accounts for the relatively high frequency.

Example 2:

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

In Example 2, relative pronoun "which" is used to replace the antecedent denoting things "spectacles" with the specific aim to extend the sentence, supplement the clause to describe "spectacles" to trigger the interests of readers.

Moreover, relative pronoun "which" also has a function to replace the preceding clauses or sentences. In this case, it is imperative to put "," before relative pronoun "which" as a marker for readers to realize the special function of the relative 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 writer uses relative pronoun "which" in this examples to replace the whole preceding clause "I would like it very much" in order to give further explanation to the information given in the preceding clause in a compact way to make good impression on readers and ensure the smoothness of the reading instead of splitting it into a separate sentence.

3.1.3. Relative pronoun "that"

The frequency of relative pronoun "that" ranks third in the total number of clauses with relative pronouns with 19.8%. Relative pronoun "that" is used to replace both person and things, which represents its flexibility in the usages of this pronoun. It is also the reason why relative pronoun "that" is used so frequently in the data.

Example 4:

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

In Example 4, relative pronoun "that" is used to replace a noun denoting things before it, like "which". As a relative pronoun, "that" is also utilized to explain the antecedent "the fresh grass outside" in a compact, cohesive and impressive expression to readers.

3.2. Syntactic functions of relative pronouns in English

In English, the Subject-Verb modifying a noun or a pronoun is named determinant and the Subject-Verb determinant of a noun is introduced to nominal clauses by a system of relative pronouns. The usage of one pronoun or another largely depends on the requirement of the syntactic structure, specifically the functions it has in the subordinate clause and its relation with the verb of the subordinate clause.

The syntactic function of relative pronouns in English can be considered under two levels: sentence and clause level. At the sentence level, relative pronouns take a vital function of connecting subordinate and main clauses by antecedents. At the clause level, like other pronouns, relative pronouns play the role of representation and replacement, so they can be subject, direct object, words denoting time, place and possession.
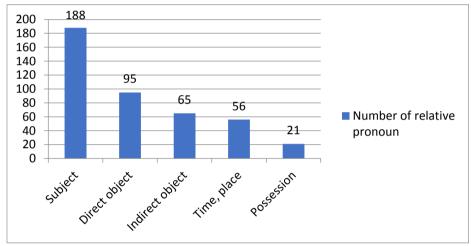

Figure 2. Syntactic function of relative pronouns

3.2.1. Subject

As mentioned above, with the features of a clause, relative clauses also have a subject and a verb. Therefore, in English, relative pronouns function as a subject including "who" to replace a noun or pronoun denoting person, "which" to replace a noun or pronoun denoting things and "that" to replace a noun or pronoun denoting person or things. As a subject, relative pronouns are required to be present in the relative clauses and agree with the number and person of the antecedent it replaces.
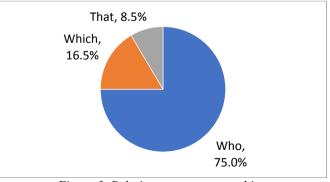

Figure 3. Relative pronoun as a subject

Figure 3 presents the percentage of relative pronouns with the function of a subject by three pronouns "who, which, that". Accordingly, relative pronoun "who" accounts for the highest percentage of 75%, which can be justified that in the research data, relative pronoun "who" mainly functions as a subject while the other two pronouns only account for a modest percentage with "which" (16.5%) and "that" (8.5%). Therefore, it can be

concluded that in the research data, the writers prioritize relative pronoun "who" to replace antecedents as a subject of the relative clauses, perhaps to clarify the agent of actions or describe the nature and characteristics of the nouns or pronouns denoting person so as to provide figurative description and draw the attention of the readers.

Example 5:
Someone **who had been driving a little behind us** *confirmed this and the policeman turned away.* (S + who + V' (+ O') + V + O)
In Example 5, relative pronoun "who" functions as a subject of the clause with the predicate "had been driving …" and replace a noun denoting person "Someone".
Example 6:
Her hand, **which dangles over the side***, sparkles cold with jewels.* (S + which + V' (+ O') + V + O)
In Example 6, relative pronoun "which" is the subject of the clause with the predicate "dangles" and replace a noun denoting things "her hand".
Example 7:
At first, I couldn't find the source of the high, groaning words **that echoed clamorously through the bare garage***.* (S + V + O + that + V' + O')
In Example 7, relative pronoun "that" is the subject of the clause with the predicate "echoed" and replace a noun denoting things "words".

3.2.2. Direct object
In English, relative pronouns are used to replace noun objects or object pronouns. Traditionally, relative pronoun "whom" was utilized to replace objects denoting person. However, the direct object denoting person has been replace by both "whom" and "who". It is possible to use "which" to replace objects denoting things and "that" for both things and person. These pronouns do not change their forms regardless of the number or person they replace.
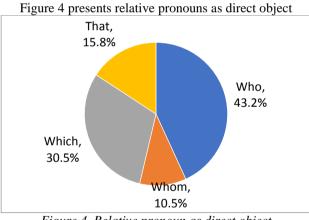
Figure 4 presents relative pronouns as direct object

Figure 4. Relative pronoun as direct object

Based on Figure 4, it is easy to see that the rate of "who" is really high in the research data, showing that the pronoun "who" is gradually replacing "whom" in the role of a direct object in English grammar. In modern English, "which" accounts for the second highest proportion with 30.5% to replace nouns/object pronouns with direct object function, after verbs, "whom" only accounts for a rather modest proportion of 10.5%, which shows that in the research data, the writers use a descriptive, narrative style, expressing common views because "whom" has a more formal meaning than "who" and is suitable for formal writing.
Example 8:
There was nobody **whom she reverenced** *as she reverenced him.* (S + V + O + whom + S' + V')
In Example 8, relative pronoun "whom" replaces direct object "him/ her" in the following clause, so it is possible to omit the direct object "him/her".
Example 9:
Less than two weeks later we found a whole package of chewing gum, **which we enjoyed***, the fact that everything on the Radley Place was poison having slipped Jem's memory.* (S + V + O + which + S' + V')
In Example 9, relative pronoun "which" replaces direct object "it" in the clause, so object "it" can be omitted.

Example 10:
*Although his back was to us, we knew he had a slight cast in one of his eyes **that he used to his advantage***. (S + V + O + that + S' + V')

    In Example 10, relative pronoun "that" replaces direct object "it" in the clause, so it can be omitted.
It is noted that in English, it is common to omit a relative pronoun replacing a direct object without any effects on the syntax and semantics of the sentence.
Example 11:
    *It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest J.P. court in the land, or this honorable court **you serve***. (S + V + O + S' + V')

    In Example 11, relative pronoun "which" or "that" as a direct object of the clause can be omitted without leading to grammatical errors or distortion of meaning. The sentence meaning is presented clearly and comprehensively.

3.2.3. Indirect objects

    When the verb in the relative clause collocates with a preposition, the object following the preposition is the indirect object. Relative pronouns "whom, which, that" used to replace those also function as indirect objects in the relative clauses.
The percentage of relative pronouns "whom, which, that" with indirect object function is represented in Figure 5.
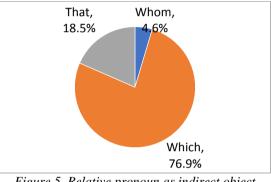

Figure 5. Relative pronoun as indirect object

    According to the data in Figure 5, 76.9% of indirect objects are replaced by the pronoun "which", "that" accounts for 18.5% and "whom" is only 4.6%. This shows that, in the research corpus, the writers prioritize using verbs with prepositions to add more information to nouns/object pronouns, nouns/person pronouns are very limited, from which it can be inferred that the objects affected by the action are mostly things. The relative pronoun "whom" is used to replace the object denoting person after a preposition.
Example 12:
    *Then came the fearless Colonel Maycomb, **for whom the county was named***. (S +V + O + preposition + whom + S' + V')

    In Example 12, the verb "name" has a collocated preposition "for", so "whom" functions as an indirect object of the preposition "for"
    With objects of noun/ pronouns denoting things, relative pronouns "which" or "that" are used to replace indirect objects after the preposition.
Example 13
    *As if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society **to which she and Tom belonged.*** (S +V + O + preposition + which + S' + V')

    In Example 13, the verb "belong" goes with a preposition "to", so "which" has a function of indirect object of the preposition "to"
    In daily conversation and intimate writing style, the prepositions in the relative clauses are generally put at the end of the clause. When the prepositions can be moved backward, it is possible to used "which" or "that". Regardless of the singular or plural nouns, it is "which" (after the preposition) and "which" or "that" (before the preposition) that are utilized.
Example 14:
*…, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment **which its gloom or radiance rests upon**, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss.* (S +V + O + which + S' + V'+ preposition)

In Example 14, the verb "rest" goes with the preposition "upon", so "which" can function as an indirect object of the preposition "upon"

Therefore, when relative pronouns take the function of indirect object (after the preposition), it is typical to have different expression depending on the formality of the writing.

3.2.4. Time and place

In English, relative pronoun "when" is used to replace time phrases and relative pronoun "where" to replace phrases denoting place or location.

Example 15:

*For it was extraordinary to think that they had been capable of going on living all these years **when she had not thought of them more than once***. (S + V + O + time phrase + when + S' + V')

In Example 15, relative pronoun "when" is used to replace the time phrase "these years", therefore, it is not necessary to repeat the phrase in the following relative clause.

Example 16:

*But Maycomb would have been closer to the river had it not been for the nimble-wittedness of one Sinkfield, who in the dawn of history operated an inn **where two pig-trails met**, the only tavern in the territory.* (S + V + noun denoting place + where + S' + V')

In Example 16, relative pronoun "where" is utilized to replace the noun denoting place "an inn", so it is not necessary to repeat the word in the following relative clause.

It is noticeable that relative pronouns "when" and "where" in English never go with preposition as they already replace the whole phrase, including prepositions of time and place.

3.2.5. Possession

To express possession, in English, there are relative pronoun "whose" (mainly used for person) and relative pronoun "of which" for things.
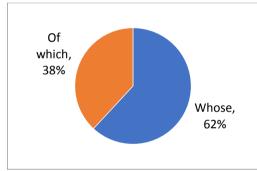

Figure 6. Relative pronoun as possession

Figure 6 shows that relative pronoun "whose" is used more frequently than "of which" as in the three literary works, the writers mostly describe the possession of people rather than things.

Example 17:

*I received a letter and a snapshot from him. The letter said he had a new father **whose picture was enclosed**, and he would have to stay in Meridian because they planned to build a fishing boat.* (S + V + O $_{(person)}$ + whose + S'$_{(possession of O)}$ + V')

In Example 17, relative pronoun "whose" is used to link the possession "picture" with its possessor "father" before it.

Example 18:

*A curious contest, **the nature of which eluded me**, was developing between my father and the sheriff.* (S $_{(things)}$ + N'$_{(possession of N)}$ + of which + V' + V + O)

In Example 18, relative pronoun "of which" is used to link the possession "nature" with its possessor "contest" before it.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research is conducted with the purpose of surveying and describing the relative clauses in English in terms of syntax, through which a summary of syntactic 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.

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