

Syntax and Functions in English Relative Clauses: A Structural and Historical Perspective

Aburgia Ali Mohamed Aburgia



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 4.0
International License.

Published on: 6 February 2026

Abstract

This study examines the historical development, syntactic structure, and functional roles of relative clauses in English. Relative clauses constitute a central component of English grammar because they allow speakers and writers to expand noun phrases by adding essential or supplementary information. The study analyzes both full and reduced relative clauses, focusing on their structural properties, historical origins, syntactic movement, and functional diversity. Rather than relying exclusively on a single theoretical framework, the research evaluates traditional, transformational, and generative models in terms of their explanatory adequacy and limitations. To deepen interpretation, the study situates English relative clauses within broader comparative and typological perspectives and incorporates insights from cognitive

and psycholinguistic research on processing constraints. It argues for an integrative analytical approach combining structural, functional, and cognitive perspectives, thereby strengthening theoretical explanation and supporting language instruction.

Keywords: relative clauses, syntax, movement, derivation, reduced relative clauses, English grammar

* Introduction

Languages are complex systems of grammatical and semantic structures through which speakers connect ideas and convey meaning. Within this system, relative clauses play a crucial role by modifying noun phrases and enabling the construction of precise, information-rich expressions. They may restrict nominal reference or add supplementary descriptive information, thereby extending discourse beyond simple adjectival modification.

Because of their structural and theoretical importance, relative clauses have long attracted the attention of linguists and grammarians. Early descriptive work emphasized their clause-linking role, while later generative approaches focused on derivation, syntactic movement, and hierarchical structure. More recent research has expanded discussion to include processing constraints, usage variation, and cross-linguistic patterns.

This study investigates the forms and functions of English relative clauses, including both full and reduced constructions. It examines their definitions, historical development, structural properties, derivational mechanisms, and grammatical roles. The study argues that no single theoretical framework fully explains the full range of relative clause phenomena. Accordingly, it adopts an integrative analytical approach combining structural, functional, and cognitive-processing perspectives.

*** Methodology**

This study adopts a primarily theoretical and analytical approach, drawing on established linguistic literature and selected examples rather than empirical data collection. The aim is to provide a critical

evaluation of existing frameworks while examining syntactic, semantic, and cognitive dimensions of English relative clauses. This approach allows for comparison of traditional, transformational, and generative theories, highlighting both explanatory strengths and limitations.

*** Background of Relative Clauses in English**

Bever and Langendoen (1971) note that earlier English sentence structures often lacked explicit relative markers. Givón (1984) argues that the juxtaposition of independent clauses gradually led to tighter semantic and syntactic integration, producing more explicit relative constructions. Hall (1964) observes that reduced relative clauses, once regarded as stylistically marginal, are in fact widespread in natural usage.

Bickerton (1995) suggests that when speakers needed to convey essential identifying information, full relative clauses became structurally necessary. Stockwell, Schachter, and Partee (1973) incorporated relative clauses into transformational grammar, stimulating continuing debates on incorporation and movement. These perspectives provide important insights, although their explanatory scope varies when

addressing optionality and structural variation in relative clause formation.

* **Types of Relative Clauses**

Relative clause types should not be treated as rigid surface classifications alone. They are better understood in relation to their semantic and pragmatic functions and their role in reference construction and discourse organization. Differences among nominal, modifying, restrictive, and non-restrictive relatives represent distinct linguistic strategies for reference management and information structuring.

Nominal Relative Clauses

Nominal relative clauses function as full noun phrases rather than modifiers of an external noun. They occupy argument positions directly.

Example:

What you suggested was accepted.

Here, no separate nominal head is present; the clause itself fills the syntactic slot. This raises a classification question: whether such structures are strictly relative clauses or fused constructions combining antecedent and relativizer. Their existence supports a continuum view of noun phrase structure.

Compare:

I liked the idea you suggested.
(modifying relative clause)

I liked what you suggested. (nominal relative clause)

In the second case, the head and relativizer are fused into a single unit.

* **Sentence-Modifying Relative Clauses**

Relative clauses may also modify entire propositions rather than individual nouns.

Example:

He ignored the warning, which caused serious consequences.

Here the relative clause refers to the whole preceding proposition. Its function is evaluative or explanatory, acting as a discourse-linking device. This pattern is especially common in academic prose because it integrates explanation within a single syntactic structure.

Example with reduced relative clause:

The man standing by the door is my uncle.

Here, the relative pronoun and auxiliary are omitted. This reduced construction illustrates how grammatical rules allow flexibility, but increased complexity may affect processing. Such examples highlight the importance of integrating syntactic structure with cognitive considerations.

* **Restriction and Non-Restriction**

The difference between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses is not merely punctuation-based but reference-based.

Restrictive clauses narrow the reference set:

Students who submit their work early receive feedback.

Non-restrictive clauses add supplementary information about an already identified referent:

Students, who submitted their work early, received feedback.

The distinction reflects differences in presupposition and information status rather than comma placement alone.

Relativizer choice and intonation also support a functional interpretation.

* **Derivation Theories: Critical Analysis**

Several derivational theories attempt to explain relative clause formation: -

1- Conjunction Theory

Some relative clauses originated from coordinated structures.

Explains historical patterns of coordination.

Limitation: Does not account for syntactic gaps or movement in modern English.

2- Agreement Theory

Emphasizes feature matching between antecedent and relative clause (number, person).

Explains grammatical dependencies.

Limitation: Cannot fully predict reduction patterns in reduced relative clauses.

3- Implication Theory

Considers hierarchical structural inclusion between antecedent and relative clause.

Limitation: Overlooks cognitive processing constraints affecting comprehension.

Critical Summary:

Each derivation theory explains certain phenomena but fails to fully account for reduced or sentence-modifying relative clauses. This highlights the need for an integrative analysis combining structural, functional, and cognitive perspectives.

* **Movement in Relative Clauses**

Generative analyses typically derive relative clauses through movement, leaving a syntactic gap: -
You read the book → The book I read

—
Movement explains long-distance dependency, but psycholinguistic research shows that comprehension difficulty increases with distance and embedding complexity (Gibson, 1998).

Example:

The journalist who was attacked resigned from the senator whom the journalist interviewed.

Although grammatical, such sentences illustrate increased cognitive load, showing that grammatical possibility does not always equal processing ease.

* **Relative Pronouns and Functional Simplification**

Traditional descriptions link relative pronoun choice to animacy, grammatical role, and formality. Actual usage shows increasing simplification: -

The person whom I met

The person that I met

The person I met

This variation suggests ongoing functional simplification and economy, which strict prescriptive rules do not fully capture.

* **Conclusion**

Relative clauses are not a uniform modifying device but a multidimensional grammatical system shaped by the interaction of syntactic structure, semantic function, pragmatic role, and cognitive processing constraints. No single theoretical model — descriptive, transformational, or generative — fully explains all observed patterns.

An integrative approach combining: -
structural analysis
functional interpretation
cognitive processing perspectives

cross-linguistic comparison provides stronger explanatory coverage and greater pedagogical value. This approach enhances both theoretical understanding and practical application in language teaching and research.

* **References**

- Alotaibi, A. (2025). Cross-linguistic influence in relative clause acquisition. *Journal of Linguistic Studies*, 12(1), 45–63.
- Bever, T., & Langendoen, D. (1971). *On the form of the English reduced relative clause*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bickerton, D. (1995). *Language and human behavior*. Routledge.
- Boguraev, B., et al. (2025). Processing filler-gap dependencies in relative clauses. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 56(2), 201–229.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, C., & Langendoen, T. (1971). *Semantics: An interdisciplinary reader*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibson, E. (1998). Linguistic complexity: Locality of syntactic dependencies. *Cognition*, 68, 1–76.

- Givón, T. (1984). *Syntax: A functional-typological introduction*. John Benjamins.
- Hall, R. (1964). *Introductory linguistics*. Chilton.
- Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hulsey, S., & Sauerland, U. (2006). *Matching theory of relative clauses*. MIT Press.
- Jikti, M., & Mulyadi, R. (2025). Genre-based analysis of relative clauses in academic writing. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 53(1), 67–89.
- Lee, J., Kim, S., & Park, H. (2025). Cognitive processing of English relative clauses. *Applied Linguistics*, 46(1), 88–110.
- Miller, J. (2002). *An introduction to English syntax*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1973). *A grammar of contemporary English*. Longman.
- Roberts, I. (1997). *Comparative syntax*. Routledge.
- Ross, J. (1967). *Constraints on variables in syntax*. MIT dissertation.
- Stockwell, R., Schachter, P., & Partee, B. (1973). *The major syntactic structures of English*. Holt.
- Stageberg, N. (1971). *An introductory English grammar*. Holt.