Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

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Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth grammatical examination of the differences between adjectives and relative clauses in English. Although they share the function of modifying noun phrases, they differ fundamentally in structure, composition, function, and patterns of agreement, as well as in their cognitive processing. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including traditional descriptive grammar, generative grammar, functional linguistics, and contemporary psycholinguistic research, the study argues that adjectives function as lexical modifiers, while relative clauses are embedded sentence structures that express hypothetical content. A comparison with Arabic suggests that this separation reflects a shared grammatical architectural feature across languages. The research employs a qualitative theoretical approach that combines structural, functional, and cognitive analysis. The findings support an integrative model of noun modification that rejects the simplification of relative clauses as merely expanded adjectives.

* Introduction

Noun modification is a central means by which languages expand their capacity for more precise definition and description. Traditional English grammar has grouped adjectives and relative clauses under the single term "noun modifiers," implying a functional similarity between them. However, closer examination reveals that the difference between adjectives and relative clauses lies not only in length

Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

1

or complexity but also in their fundamental grammatical structure.

Adjectives provide lexical descriptions of noun properties, while relative clauses contain complete propositions that define or clarify the referent of the noun. As Quirk et al. (1973) point out, relative clauses retain the structure of independent sentences, a feature absent in adjectival modification. Huddleston and Pullom (2002) further emphasize that relative clauses express complete predicates, not merely adjectives.

This study aims to clarify the differences between adjectives and relative clauses in English through three main axes: -
Semantic function
Structural organization
Agreement and dependency relations

Arabic is used as a comparative language to demonstrate the similarities and differences in linguistic patterns. The analysis relies on an integration of insights drawn from classical grammar, generative grammar, functional linguistics, and cognitive studies.

* Literature Review

Early descriptive grammars acknowledged a superficial similarity between adjectives and relative clauses but emphasized the need to distinguish between them. Quirk et al. (1973) classified relative clauses as modifiers that maintain sentence structure integrity, viewing adjectives as limited lexical elements, while relative clauses represent extended grammatical structures.

Huddleston and Pullom (2002) developed this distinction by emphasizing that relative clauses refer to events or situations linked to nominal referents, a propositional dimension that places them in a grammatical category distinct from adjectives. Radford (2004) supports this argument within the framework of generative grammar, analyzing relative clauses as kinetic structures structurally related to interrogation.

Functional approaches add an evolutionary dimension; Giffon (1984) argues that relative clauses originated from sentence-linking strategies used in discourse organization. From this perspective, relative clauses perform referential and narrative roles that extend beyond mere classroom description.

Psycholinguistic evidence reinforces this structural distinction; Gibson (2000) demonstrates that processing relative clauses places a memory burden proportional to the length of the dependency relationships, while Levy (2008) shows that comprehension is influenced by probabilistic expectations formed through

Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

2

repetition. These findings suggest that relative clauses represent more complex cognitive structures than adjectives.

Despite this theoretical accumulation, studies that systematically compare adjectives and relative clauses within a unified framework remain rare. This study aims to bridge this gap.3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative theoretical methodology combining:-
structural syntactic analysis
functional semantic interpretation
agreement analysis
cross-linguistic comparison
cognitive evidence from psycholinguistics

Data consist of constructed English examples and parallel Arabic structures selected to illustrate contrasts. The analysis prioritizes explanatory adequacy rather than corpus frequency, following established practice in theoretical linguistics.

* Functional Distinctions

1- Adjectives as Property Attributors

Adjectives describe inherent or attributed properties: -
the old house
a bright student
They classify or evaluate entities without embedding events.

Arabic parallel:
البيت القديم

The adjective contributes descriptive meaning without introducing propositional content.

2- Relative Clauses as Referential Restrictors

Relative clauses encode identifying events: -
the house that burned last year
the student who won the prize
Arabic:
البيت الذي احترق العام الماضي

Here the clause specifies an event necessary for referential identification.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) note that such clauses "express predications anchored to the referent," a function adjectives cannot replicate.

* Structural Distinctions

Adjectives form minimal phrases: -
a very happy child
Relative clauses contain full clause structure:
the child who was laughing loudly

Radford (2004) argues that the presence of tense and argument structure places relative clauses within CP domains, not adjectival projections.

* Dependency and Binding

Relative clauses involve filler–gap dependencies: -

Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

3

the book that I read __

Arabic:

الكتاب الذي قرأته __

The internal gap corresponds to the external head noun, demonstrating syntactic binding absent in adjectives.

* Agreement

English adjectives show minimal agreement: -

a tall man / tall men

Relative clauses control verbal agreement:

the girl who is singing

the girls who are singing

Arabic magnifies this contrast:

رجل طويل / رجال طوال

الرجل الذي يتكلم / الرجال الذين يتكلمون

Relative clauses trigger clausal agreement systems rather than nominal inflection alone.

* Processing Evidence

Relative clauses increase cognitive load: -

The reporter who the senator attacked resigned.

Object relatives demand greater working memory (Gibson, 2000). Adjectives impose no comparable dependency cost.

* Comparative Insights

Arabic allows recursive adjectives: -

رجل طويل ذكي قوي

Relative clauses are more structurally constrained:

الرجل الذي قابلته

This confirms that adjectival and clausal modification engage distinct grammatical mechanisms cross-linguistically.

* Discussion

The evidence demonstrates that adjectives and relative clauses constitute separate grammatical systems. Functionally, adjectives encode properties while relative clauses encode events and relations. Structurally, adjectives are lexical projections, whereas relative clauses are embedded predications containing movement chains (Radford, 2004).

Agreement patterns further separate the two systems: adjectives interact with nominal morphology, but relative clauses activate clause-level agreement. Arabic illustrates this contrast vividly, reinforcing its typological robustness.

Cognitive findings confirm that relative clauses require integration across dependencies. Gibson (2000) shows that processing difficulty scales with syntactic distance, supporting the claim that relative clauses are structurally heavier than adjectives.

However, the boundary is historically gradient. Participial adjectives such as broken originate from reduced relative clauses,

Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

4

aligning with Givón's (1984) theory that grammatical structures evolve along a discourse-to-syntax continuum. This diachronic overlap explains pedagogical confusion while preserving structural distinction.

Educationally, presenting relative clauses as "long adjectives" misrepresents their grammatical nature. A more accurate model recognizes them as embedded propositions functioning within noun phrases.

The study therefore supports an integrative framework combining structural syntax, discourse function, and processing constraints. No single model fully captures noun modification. Only a multidimensional approach explains the interaction between form, meaning, and cognition.

* Conclusion

Adjectives and relative clauses differ in: -
functional contribution
structural architecture
agreement behavior
cognitive processing
cross-linguistic distribution
They are not interchangeable modifiers but distinct grammatical systems. Recognizing this distinction enhances linguistic theory, typology, and grammar pedagogy.

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Adjectives vs. Relative Clauses in English: A Functional, Structural, and Agreement-Based Analysis with Arabic Comparative Evidence

5