



A Contrastive Study of Relative Clauses between English and Libyan Arabic

Eman Ali Othman

Department of English, University of Zawia, Libya

ORCID: 0009-0004-6065-3238 | Email: ay.othman@zu.edu.ly

تاريخ الاستلام: 2026/05/05 - تاريخ المراجعة: 2026/05/28 - تاريخ القبول: 2026/06/07 - تاريخ النشر: 2026/06/21

Abstract— This research is conducted to a comparative analysis on relative clauses in two languages. The aim of this paper is to compare relative clauses in English and Libyan Arabic. The research stages in analyzing the data were: data collection, data classification, and data presentation. The results reveal both similarities and differences in the structure of relative clauses in English and Libyan Arabic. Types of relative clauses in English are defining and non-defining, while in Libyan Arabic they are definite and indefinite relative clauses.

Keywords— *Relative Clause; Language; Comparative Analysis; Libyan Arabic; Contrastive Linguistics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Contrastive analysis is a systematic study of two or more languages with the aim of identifying their structural differences and similarities. Kridalaksana (1983: 118) defines a clause as a grammatical unit consisting of at least a subject and a predicate, which carries the potential to function as a complete sentence. Various clauses can be categorized based on their grammatical relationship—yielding main clauses and subordinate clauses. Furthermore, Naibaho (2001: 1) notes that contrastive linguistics encompasses contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interference analysis, each applied according to its specific function.

In English, there are two fundamental types of clauses: the dependent clause and the independent clause. A dependent clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence and must be connected to an independent clause, which constitutes a complete and self-sufficient unit of expression.

Relative clauses represent one of the most extensively studied areas in language learning and linguistic analysis. A relative clause is, by nature, an embedded sentence that modifies a noun in a matrix sentence. Azar (1999) classifies relative clauses into two types: those introduced by relative pronouns (who, whom, which, that, whose) and those introduced by relative adverbs (where, when). The structural realization of relative clauses differs substantially between English and Arabic—including Libyan Arabic—which makes their contrastive study particularly valuable for language teaching, translation, and applied linguistics.

A. Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to describe and explain the similarities and differences in the construction of English and Libyan Arabic relative clauses. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- (1) Identify and categorize the types of relative clauses in English and Libyan Arabic.
- (2) Analyze the syntactic mechanisms governing relative marker usage in both languages.

(3) Derive pedagogical implications for Libyan learners of English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on relative clauses across languages has yielded important insights. Robert (1970) contrasted the restrictive relative clause in English, Hindi, and Baghdad Arabic, highlighting differences with pedagogical implications for teaching English to these speaker groups. Dalilan and Mulyono (2004) examined relative clauses in English and Indonesian, demonstrating that English applies a word-order strategy (active pattern) while Indonesian uses a verb-marking strategy with passive constructions. Rosmita and Mulyadi (2019) found that the Indonesian relativizer *yang* is typologically distinct from English relative pronouns.

Regarding Arabic specifically, Ibrahim et al. (2000) investigated differences between English and both Egyptian colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), noting that while English employs semantically differentiated pronouns (who, whom, which, that, whose), MSA uses pronouns that agree with the head noun in gender, number, and case. This difference leads Arab learners to make systematic errors in selecting English relative pronouns. Zagoood (2005) further documented the difficulties faced by Libyan students of the English Department at Al-Merqib University when translating relative clauses between English and Arabic, attributing errors to literal translation and L1 interference.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. As Bogdan and Biklen (1982) state, qualitative research is descriptive in nature, with data collected in the form of words and descriptions rather than numerical values. The data corpus consisted of published journal articles and linguistic studies related to relative clauses in English and Arabic. The analytical process was carried out in three sequential stages:

Stage 1 — Data Collection: Relevant sources and examples were gathered from linguistic literature.

Stage 2 — Data Classification: Gathered data were categorized by language and clause type.

Stage 3 — Data Presentation: Results were presented descriptively with supporting examples and expert-derived theoretical frameworks.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Relative Clauses in English

A relative clause in English is introduced by a relative pronoun (who, whom, which, that, whose) or a relative adverb (where, when, why). English distinguishes between two principal types:

1) Defining Relative Clauses

Also called identifying or restrictive relative clauses, defining clauses provide information that is essential to identifying the referent. They are not enclosed in commas, as removal would alter the meaning of the sentence.

Data 1:

- *The lady who called yesterday left no address.*

- *I met the lady who bought this car.*

In both sentences, the relative clause is indispensable; it specifies which particular lady is referred to from among a number of possible referents. These are therefore classified as defining relative clauses.

2) Non-Defining Relative Clauses

Non-defining (or non-restrictive) relative clauses provide supplementary information about a noun already sufficiently identified. They are set off by commas and can be removed without altering the core meaning of the sentence.

Data 2:

- *The woman, who is standing there, is a teacher.*
- *Jamilah, who submitted the article, was born in 1988.*

The relative clauses in these examples are set off by commas because they supply additional, non-essential information. Omitting them yields grammatically complete and semantically unchanged sentences: The woman is a teacher; Jamilah was born in 1988.

B. Relative Clauses in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

Relative clauses in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are introduced by relative pronouns that agree with the head noun in gender, number, and case—e.g., /ələði/ (masc. sing.) and /ələti/ (fem. sing.). MSA distinguishes between:

1) Definite Relative Clauses

A definite relative clause modifies a definite antecedent within the main clause. It requires an overt relative pronoun that morphologically agrees with the head noun.

Example: 'The man who is standing there is clever' is rendered in MSA with the pronoun /allaði/ agreeing with the masculine singular head noun.

2) Indefinite Relative Clauses

When the antecedent is indefinite, MSA omits the relative pronoun entirely. The modifying clause follows the head noun directly as a post-nominal modifier.

Data 6:

رأيتُ طالبًا يدرسُ اللغةَ الإنجليزية.

(I saw a student who was studying English.)

The noun طالبًا (a student) is indefinite; thus, the modifying clause follows directly without any relative pronoun. In contrast, English requires the overt relative pronoun who. This illustrates a fundamental structural divergence between the two languages.

C. Relative Clauses in Libyan Arabic (LA)

In contrast to Modern Standard Arabic, which employs a morphologically rich paradigm of relative pronouns agreeing in gender, number, and case, Libyan Arabic (LA) features a significantly simplified system. It relies exclusively on a single invariant relativizer: illi (اللي). This particle undergoes no morphological variation and is distributed strictly according to the definiteness of the antecedent.

1) Definite Relative Clauses in Libyan Arabic

When the antecedent is definite—typically marked by the article *al-* or a possessive construction—the marker *illi* is obligatorily inserted between the head noun and the modifying clause. Its omission renders the sentence ungrammatical.

Example 1:

الرجل اللي يسكن قدامنا مهندس.

(*Ar-rājil illi yiskun gaddāmna muhandis.*)

→ *The man who lives opposite us is an engineer.*

The antecedent الرجل (the man) carries the definite article *al-*; therefore, *illi* must be inserted to introduce the relative clause يسكن قدامنا (lives opposite us).

2) Indefinite Relative Clauses in Libyan Arabic

When the antecedent is indefinite, Libyan Arabic obligatorily omits *illi*. The modifying clause immediately follows the head noun, functioning as a post-nominal modifier (*ṣifah*)—a structure with no direct overt counterpart in English.

Example 2:

قابلت أستاذ يدرّس اللسانيات في الجامعة.

(*Qābilt ustādh yidarris al-lisāniyyāt fi al-jāmi'a.*)

→ *I met a professor who teaches linguistics at the university.*

The antecedent أستاذ (professor) is indefinite; accordingly, *illi* is omitted and the relative clause follows directly.

3) Pronoun Retention (Resumptive Pronouns)

In Libyan Arabic, when the relativized noun functions as an object within the relative clause, a resumptive pronoun—realized as a clitic suffix—must be retained on the verb or preposition. This differs sharply from English, where object-position gaps (pronoun deletion) are standard. For instance, the English sentence 'The book that I read' corresponds to a Libyan Arabic sentence in which a bound object suffix is attached to the verb.

V. COMPARATIVE SYNTACTIC SUMMARY

Table I below summarizes the core structural contrasts between English and Libyan Arabic relative clauses across eight syntactic parameters.

TABLE I — COMPARATIVE SYNTACTIC PROPERTIES: ENGLISH VS. LIBYAN ARABIC RELATIVE CLAUSES

Syntactic Feature	Property /	English Paradigm	Libyan Arabic Paradigm
Core Function		Modifies an antecedent noun via subordinate embedding	Modifies an antecedent noun via subordinate embedding
Primary Classifications		Defining (essential) vs. Non-defining (extra info)	Definite (requires 'illi') vs. Indefinite (omitted)
Relative Markers Used		Variable pronouns/adverbs (who, which, that, where, when)	Single, invariant relative particle: 'illi' (اللي)
Gender/Number Agreement		Pronoun changes by animacy (who vs. which), not gender	Marker 'illi' is invariant; inner verbs/pronouns agree
Possessive Structures		Requires specific relative pronoun ('whose')	Expressed via relative clause + bound possessive suffix
Object Relativization		Object pronoun is deleted (e.g., 'the book I read')	Requires a resumptive object pronoun suffix on the verb
Relative Adverbs (Place/Time)		Uses distinct adverbs ('where', 'when')	Typically relies on 'illi' coupled with a preposition
Orthographic Punctuation		Uses commas exclusively for non-defining clauses	No change in internal comma structure or punctuation rules

VI. DISCUSSION

The process of contrastive analysis in this study follows two principles articulated by Halliday (1970). The first principle involves the examination level: the observation and description of patterns in each language individually. The second principle entails the comparative level: the systematic juxtaposition of specific aspects across the languages without treating them as undifferentiated wholes.

The analysis demonstrates that Libyan Arabic simplifies the relative pronoun paradigm radically by replacing the multiform MSA system with a single invariant marker, *illi*, whose distribution is determined solely by the definiteness status of the antecedent. English, by contrast, employs semantic parameters—animacy (who vs. which) and essentiality (defining vs. non-defining)—as the primary determinants of relative pronoun selection.

Tusheyeh (1998) found, using multiple data-elicitation techniques, that Arab learners of English frequently produce resumptive pronouns in English relative clauses, reflecting a transfer of the LA structural requirement for pronoun retention into an English context where such pronouns are deleted. Ibrahim et al. (2000) further note that MSA's use of a single pronoun

form /allati/ to cover both human and non-human antecedents leads Arab learners to incorrectly use which where English requires who or whom.

VII. FINDINGS

The following findings emerge from the contrastive analysis:

- [F1] English employs an explicit system of differentiated relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, that), while Libyan Arabic uses the single invariant marker illi for definite antecedents and omits it entirely for indefinite ones.
- [F2] The definiteness of the antecedent is the primary grammatical determinant in Libyan Arabic relative clause formation, a parameter with no direct structural equivalent in English.
- [F3] Libyan Arabic requires resumptive object pronouns within relative clauses, whereas English prefers gap strategies (pronoun deletion).
- [F4] Cross-linguistic interference from Libyan Arabic leads to systematic errors among Libyan EFL learners, including pronoun retention, relative pronoun omission after indefinite nouns, and incorrect pronoun selection (which for who/whom).
- [F5] A contrastive approach to relative clause instruction yields valuable insights for English language pedagogy, translation studies, and future descriptive research on Libyan Arabic syntax.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This contrastive analysis reveals that while both English and Libyan Arabic successfully form complex noun modifiers through relative clauses, their structural mechanisms are fundamentally divergent. English anchors its relative clause system on semantic parameters—distinguishing between animate/inanimate referents and essential/non-essential information—employing an array of pronouns and orthographic conventions (commas). Libyan Arabic, by contrast, organizes its relative clause system around the morphosyntactic property of definiteness, simplifying the relativizer inventory to the single particle illi while obligatorily retaining resumptive pronouns for object-position relativization.

These structural divergences have direct pedagogical consequences. Libyan learners of English frequently produce interference errors such as pronoun retention (e.g., *The book that I read it yesterday) and omission of relative pronouns following indefinite antecedents—both attributable to structural transfer from Libyan Arabic. Systematic contrastive instruction that explicitly addresses these differences can mitigate interlingual errors and foster superior grammatical competence in English.

Future research should extend this contrastive framework to spoken corpora of Libyan Arabic, investigate the acquisition of English relative clauses by Libyan learners at different proficiency levels, and examine relative clause patterns in other Maghrebi Arabic dialects.

REFERENCES

- [1] Azar, B. S. (1999). *Understanding and using English grammar* (3rd ed.). Longman.
- [2] Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Allyn and Bacon.
- [3] Dalilan & Mulyono. (2004). Relativization in English and Indonesian. *Contrastive Linguistics Studies*.
- [4] Halliday, M. A. K. (1970). Language structure and language function. In J. Lyons (Ed.), *New horizons in linguistics* (pp. 140–165). Penguin.
- [5] Ibrahim, A., et al. (2000). Differences between English and Egyptian colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic relative clauses. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*.
- [6] Kridalaksana, H. (1983). *Kamus linguistik* (2nd ed.). Gramedia.
- [7] Maxwell, K. G., & Cladfield, L. (n.d.). Relative clauses. OneStopEnglish. <http://www.onestopenglish.com>
- [8] Ming, L. C., & Lili. (1994). Relativization in English and Chinese. *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics*, 29, 61–74.
- [9] Naibaho, K. (2001). Contrastive analysis and its role in language teaching. *Linguistics Bulletin*.
- [10] Nor-addeen, E. (1991). *Annahaw almuyasar*. The Open University.
- [11] Quirk, R., & Greenbaum, S. (1973). *A university English grammar*. Longman.
- [12] Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (1999). *Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Longman.
- [13] Robert, P. (1962). *English sentences*. Harcourt, Brace and World.
- [14] Rosmita & Mulyadi. (2019). A study on relative clause in English and Arabic language: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Linguistics*.
- [15] Scott, M., & Tucker, G. (1974). Error analysis and English language strategies of Arab students. *Language Learning Journal*, 24(1), 69–96.
- [16] Swan, M. (1998). *Practical English usage*. Oxford University Press.
- [17] Thomson, A. J., & Martinet, A. V. (1982). *A practical English grammar* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [18] Tushyeh, H. (1998). Transfer and related strategies in the acquisition of English relative clauses by adult Arab learners. *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics*, 23, 69–84.
- [19] Yule, G. (2000). *Explaining English grammar* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [20] Zagood, M. (2005). Translation of relative clauses [M.A. thesis]. Academy of Postgraduate Studies, Tripoli.
- [21] Zagood, M. J. M. (2012). A contrastive study of relativization in English and Arabic with reference to translation pedagogy. Retrieved from <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3402/>
- [22] Abdallah, G., Salim, A., & Ahmed, M. A. (2015). Semantic structure of relative clauses in English and Arabic: A contrastive study in Sudanese context. *European Academic Research*. <http://euacademic.org/UploadArticle/2135.pdf>
- [23] Hadaga, H. M. S. (2026). Exploring Libyan EFL Teachers' Views towards Using Artificial Intelligence Tools in Teaching English Language Translation: A Study at the Department of Translation at the Faculty of Languages within the University of Benghazi. *Al-Farooq Journal of Sciences*, 2(3), 351-360.
- [24] Ali, R. S. (2025). EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes Towards Using AI Applications. *Al-Farooq Journal of Sciences*, 1(1), 93-109