

The Unity of Noun-Modifying Clauses in Asian Languages

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1. Basic Concepts and Areal Distribution

The starting point for my paper is the discussion of Japanese “relative clauses” by Matsumoto (1988). In this work, and with some further elaboration in my own work (Comrie, forthcoming b), a typological distinction is drawn between the expression of “relative clause meaning” in English and Japanese. In English, there is a distinct construction, or perhaps more accurately set of constructions, for the expression of relative clause meaning. More specifically, the relative clause may be introduced by a relative pronoun (*who*, *which*), by the element *that* (whose status I will not argue about further here), or by zero. If there is a clause-initial relative pronoun, it may be case-marked, either by accusative case (though only in more literary varieties of the language) or by a preposition; such case-marking is more usual in most of the other major European literary languages. Since English does not allow zero anaphora, the relative clause can be analyzed as containing a gap, i.e. there is an argument position that would normally be filled, such as direct object, but which is not filled in its usual linear order in the relative clause construction. These possibilities are illustrated in (1)–(5).

- (1) the student [whom I praised]
- (2) the student [to whom I gave the book]
- (3) the student [that I praised]
- (4) the student [I praised]
- (5) a. I praised the student.
b. *I praised.

There are syntactic constraints on which constituents can be relativized. For instance, while both subject and direct object of an embedded clause can be relativized if there is no overt complementizer, as in (6) and (7), only the direct object, and not the subject, can be relativized if there is an overt complementizer, as in (8)–(9):

- (6) the man [whom I believe [you saw]]
- (7) the man [who I believe [saw you]]
- (8) the man [whom I believe [that you saw]]
- (9) *the man [who I believe [that saw you]]

Moreover, this construction is distinct from the so-called *fact-S* construction, where a head noun takes a sentential complement. Here, only the complementizer *that* (or, conceivably, zero) can be used to introduce the subordinate clause, and there is no gap, as in (10).

- (10) a. the fact [that/*which I praised the student]
 b. *the fact [that I praised]¹

In Japanese, the basic structure that receives a relative clause interpretation consists of a head noun preceded by a subordinate clause, as in (7).

- (11) [gakusei ga katta] hon
 student NOM bought book
 'the book [that the student bought]'

There is no possibility of a case-marked relative pronoun, nor is there usually any other overt reference to the head noun *hon* 'book' within the relative clause. Since the verb *katta* 'bought' is transitive, one might conclude that the subordinate clause of (11) contains a gap, but given that Japanese has zero anaphora, this argument is actually difficult to maintain, and I prefer to abandon it. Under appropriate conditions, namely if the referent of the covert direct object is retrievable from context, (12) is a perfectly well-formed sentence in Japanese, indeed it is the normal translation of 'the student bought it'.

- (12) Gakusei ga katta.
 student NOM bought
 'The student bought [it].'

There is no reason to analyze the subordinate clause of (11) any differently, i.e. (11) consists of a head noun preceded by a clause which would be well-formed in isolation.²

Furthermore, Japanese seems to lack syntactic constraints on the relation between the head noun and the covert coreferential noun in the subordinate clause. The acceptability of different relations between coreferential head and covert subordinate-clause noun (phrase)s in Japanese is determined rather by pragmatic factors: If a native speaker of Japanese can readily establish a plausible relation, then the sentence is judged acceptable; if not, it is judged unacceptable. Nice examples of this are provided by Haig (in press), using syntactically parallel constructions where differing pragmatics can lead to differing acceptability judgments, as in (13)–(14).

- (13) ?[[katte ita] kodomo ga sindesimatta] inu
 keeping was child NOM died dog
 '*the dog_i [that the child_j [that —_j was keeping —_i] died]'
- (14) [[Kawaigatte ita] hito ga nakunatta] inu ga maiban
 keeping was person NOM died dog NOM every.evening
 eki made kainusi o mukae ni kita.
 station to master ACC greet to came

¹Sentence (6b) is, of course, grammatical in the somewhat unlikely event that I am talking about a fact which I praised.

²In most of the other languages I will be discussing that share the basic properties of the Japanese "relative clause", there is overt marking of the subordinate status of the subordinate clause, either through the presence (at least optionally) of a conjunction, or through the use of special subordinate morphology. This was, incidentally, also the case in Old Japanese. The statement about the well-formedness of the subordinate clause of (12) in isolation should be interpreted to mean "pace changes due solely to general properties of subordinate, or more narrowly noun-modifying, clauses".

*The dog_i [that the person_j [who —_j was keeping —_i] died] came to the station every evening to greet his master.'

Since the literal English translations of (13) and (14) are ungrammatical, let me give a paraphrase. Example (13) refers to a dog such that the child that was keeping that dog died. Example (14) refers to a dog such that the person that was keeping that dog died. The syntactic structure of the subordinate clauses in both examples is thus identical. But while all Japanese speakers find (14) acceptable, many find (13) to varying degrees unacceptable. The reason is that in (13) the hearer has no cues as to which child or which dog is being talked about. In (14), however, the reference to a dog going to the station each evening to greet its master—even though the master fails to show up—immediately calls to mind the story of the famous dog Hachiko. In other words, (14) can readily be given a cultural context, and is therefore readily interpreted. Note that, from a syntactic viewpoint, (13)–(14) would both violate subadjacency if Japanese had English-style relative clauses; indeed, this is precisely why the English translations are ungrammatical.

Finally, Japanese has other constructions with the same structure as (11), but which do not receive a relative clause interpretation. One of these is the translation equivalent of the English *fact-S* construction, as in (15). Another example, which requires a more round-about translation into English, is shown in (16).

- (15) [gakusei ga hon o katta] zizitu
 student NOM book ACC bought fact
 'the fact [that the student bought the book]'
- (16) [dareka ga doa o tataku] oto
 someone NOM door ACC knock sound
 'the noise of someone knocking at the door'

A more literal translation of (16) would be something like '*the noise that someone hits the door', which is ungrammatical in English.

In Comrie (forthcoming b) I argue that the study of relative clauses in Japanese, and perhaps a number of other languages, has suffered from trying to assimilate them to the English (or more generally, European) type. The Japanese data can be given a much more coherent interpretation by positing that Japanese has a single construction type which combines a head noun and a preceding subordinate clause. Depending on pragmatic factors—which interpretation makes more sense—this construction will be assigned either a relative clause interpretation, as in (11), or a *fact-S* interpretation, as in (15), or some other interpretation, as in (16).

In Comrie (forthcoming a), I make a first attempt at defining the areal distribution, at least within Eurasia, of languages that are more similar to English in this respect versus those that are more like Japanese. The English type is dominant in Europe, comprising not only the major Indo-European languages of Europe but also such non-Indo-European languages as Finnish and Hungarian. I will therefore henceforth call this the "European type". The Japanese type is widespread in Asia, and I will therefore henceforth call it the "Asian type", though I should emphasize that there are substantial parts of Asia that are not characterized by this type; for instance, most Indo-Aryan languages belong to a distinct type, with so-called correlative relative clause constructions, as in example (17) from Hindi, whose literal translation is something like 'which man I was talking to, he will go to India tomorrow'.

- (17) Maimì jis ādmī se bāt kar rahā thā,
 I.DIR which.SG.OBL man to talk do PROG.SG.M be.IPF.SG.M
 vah kal bhārat jācḡā.
 that.DIR.SG tomorrow India go.FUT.M.SG
 ‘The man [to whom I was talking —] will go to India tomorrow.’

As far as I can tell, the Asian type encompasses at least Ainu, Japanese, and Korean; Chinese, and probably some (but not all) other Sino-Tibetan languages; the Dravidian languages; some Turkic languages (but definitely not all—Turkish itself is excluded, see below); Thai and Khmer³ (though not, apparently, Vietnamese).

Since I have mentioned Thai, and since most conference participants will be in a far better position to evaluate the Thai material than I am, let me illustrate what I mean. My knowledge of Thai relative clauses and related constructions derives almost entirely from Hoonchamlong (1991), although the responsibility for interpreting the data is, of course, mine.⁴ The basic structure is illustrated in (18)

- (18) phūuchaaj [thī thə hěn]
 man that you see
 ‘the man that you saw’

Since Thai has zero anaphora, there is no *a priori* reason to assume that there is, in any strict syntactic sense, a gap in (18). And indeed we find examples that seem to violate subadjacency, such as (19), parallel to Japanese example (14), suggesting that there are no syntactic constraints on the relationship between the head noun and the covert coreferential noun phrase in the subordinate clause.

- (19) wan nū chán hěn nágkhǎn [thī nīt bōḡ nāj wāa dɛɛŋ
 day this I see writer that Nit tell Noy that Dang
 kamləŋ ʔaan nǎŋsŷy [thī wícaan]]
 PROG read book that criticize
 ‘*Today I saw the writer that Nit told Noy that Dang was reading the book
 that criticized.’

The sense of (19) is ‘...the writer such that Nit told Noy that Dang was reading the book that criticized him’, where *him* refers back to *the writer*.

Thai has the same construction in examples translating English *fact-S* constructions, as in (20) (Noss 1964:179).⁵

- (20) kaan [thī kháw sōḡb tōḡ]
 fact that he fail examination
 ‘the fact that he failed the examination’

However, in one sense the range of the Thai construction goes beyond that of the Japanese construction discussed above. In Thai, this construction can also be used for sentential complements that are arguments of a verb, as in (21).

³For Khmer, see Comrie and Horie (1995).

⁴It is, however, interesting to note that many aspects of Hoonchamlong’s analysis are very close to Matsumoto’s for Japanese and to my own ideas, even though Hoonchamlong’s account is formulated in a very different framework, namely the formal framework of Government and Binding theory.

⁵I suspect that the examples discussed by Hoonchamlong (1991:181–184) may belong here, although Hoonchamlong gives a different interpretation.