Relative Clauses in Indonesian Discourse: Face to Face and Cyberspace Interaction

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1. Introduction

According to prescriptive grammar, relative clauses in Standard Indonesian are restricted to the most constrained position on the Keenan-Comrie accessibility hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977, 1979): only subjects may be relativized. Formal written Indonesian adheres closely to the standard in this respect. In this paper, we address the question of whether the standard constraint also applies to less formal genres. In other words, are the syntactic constraints on relative clauses part of the "real" Indonesian language, or merely an artifact of the prescriptive tradition? To this end, we compared two kinds of informal data — natural conversation and Internet newsgroup postings in Indonesian — with results from previous research on relative clauses in formal written Indonesian (Ewing 1991, Cumming 1995). We discovered that relative clauses in Indonesian conversation are overwhelmingly intransitive. Those transitive relative clauses that occur are primarily restricted to clefts, and are loose in their syntactic organization. The newsgroup data has many informal and interactional linguistic features; however, relative clauses in these data are more similar to formal written Indonesian in their form and function. This suggests that the constraint on the role of the head of a relative clause is not merely a prescriptive artifact, although the demands of real-time interaction may restrict its use in face to face conversation.
2. Traditional approaches to relativization

Work on relative clauses in Indonesian has focused mainly on the interaction of word order and verb morphology with relativization (MacDonald & Dardjowidjojo 1967, Wolff 1980, Moeliono 1988). In this section we define the term “trigger” and show how trigger choice is constrained in Standard Indonesian relative clauses. The examples we give here are taken from a novel (Senja di Jakarta by Mochtar Lubis), illustrating that the constraint holds in the kind of planned formal language in which prescriptive rules might be expected to be applied.

2.1 Trigger choice

The term “trigger” refers to the privileged NP of the clause — the syntactic role which has traditionally been called the subject. The trigger acts as the pivot in clause combining constructions, including relativization. The trigger may have any one of the three semantico-syntactic macro-roles: S, A, and P (Comrie 1989), where S is the single argument of an intransitive clause, A is the most agent-like argument of a transitive clause, and P is the most patient-like argument of a transitive clause. The privileged NP triggers the morphology of the verb, hence the name trigger. The following examples illustrate trigger choice and verb morphology in independent clauses.

In intransitive clauses, with S triggers, the verb may be unprefixed, or may be prefixed with me-, ter-, or ber-.

(1) Beberapa mobil di belakangnya berhenti pula²
   several car at behind:3SG MID:stop also
   ‘Several cars behind him also stopped’ (SDJ)

(2) Saimun terperanjat bukan kepaling.
    Saimun INVOL:startle not trifile
    ‘Saimun was extremely startled’ (SDJ)

In transitive clauses, if the trigger is the A argument, the verb usually takes the prefix me- (with a few high-frequency lexical exceptions):
(3) Suryono mengeluarkan uang lima rupiah dari sakunya
    Suryono AT:take:out money five rupiah from pocket:3SG
    ‘Suryono took five rupiah out of his pocket’ (SDJ)

If the trigger is P, the verb may take the prefix di-:

(4) Hampir pula dia ditabrak sebuah mobil yang buka kap
    almost also 3SG PT-hit one:CL car REL open top
    ‘He was almost hit by an open convertible’ (SDJ)

When the agent of a P-trigger clause is a speech participant
(first or second person), the prefix di- does not occur and the
agent directly precedes the verb.

(5) Apa hendak saudara buat, jika kembali di kampung?
    what want 2SG do when return at village
    ‘What do you want to do when you get back to the village?’ (SDJ)

2.2 Relativization

A standard Indonesian relative clause follows its head noun
and is introduced by the linker yang. Relative clauses may be
formed on the macro-roles A, S, and P, and the head is omitted
in the relative clause itself.³ There is a syntactic constraint
which applies to the relative clause as well: the shared NP (the
head) must be the trigger of the relative clause. Since intransi-
tive (S) relatives have only one relativizable argument, this
trigger constraint has no morphological or syntactic conse-
quences for them. In the case of A and P relatives, however,
the morphology of the verb reflects the role of the head. The
following examples of relative clauses formed on A and P
arguments in standard written Indonesian illustrate this trigger
constraint.
A Relative

(6) Pukulan akan dilepaskan terhadap mereka
blow will PT:loose against them

<yang selama ini menginjak rakyat
REL as:long this AT:step:on people

dan mengisap kaum kecil.>
and AT:suck group small

'Blows would be loosed against those who all this time had been treading down the people and exploiting the common man.' (SDJ)

P Relative

(7) Dilihatnya orang <yang dilanggarnya itu> telah berdiri.
PT:see:3SG person REL PT:hit:3SG that already MID:stand

'He saw the person whom he had hit standing up already.' (SDJ)

If this trigger constraint only occurs in formal written genres it might be inferred that it is an artifact of prescriptive grammar, applied only when language is produced under carefully monitored circumstances such as formal writing. On the other hand, if these constraints are followed in informal, spontaneous circumstances, it could be inferred that these constraints are a part of the "real" grammar.

3. Conversation

The conversational data used in this study were transcripts of two twenty-minute segments of conversations recorded in Indonesia. The first was an informal meeting in a newspaper office in Jakarta, and the second was a group of graduate students in Malang, chatting at home. The transcripts were segmented by intonation units (IU). An intonation unit is a segment of speech under a single intonation contour, whose boundaries are indicated by a combination of pitch reset, pause, initial anacrusis, and terminal lengthening (Chafe 1994, Du Bois et al. 1992). Relative clauses were identified by the presence of the relative particle yang. The conversational data consist of 1360 IUs and included 74 relative clauses.