TABOO OBJECT RELATIVE CLAUSES IN INDONESIAN

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0. Abstract
This paper concerns one type of relative clause in Indonesian, the variety of Malay which is the national language of Indonesia. This clause type has a verb marked by the meN- nasal prefix, and uses a gap strategy to relativise on an Object position – illustrated in (8) and (9) below. (In this paper the term ‘Object’ is used to refer collectively to both direct objects and objects of complements, as both are equally the focus of the paper. When it is necessary to distinguish the two, the terms ‘direct object’ or ‘object of a complement’ are used.)

This type of relative clause is rejected by grammarians and is apparently regarded as non-existent. This paper will demonstrate that it has a small but definite role in the formal variety of Indonesian. The paper will also identify factors that motivate its use, and explain why it is likely to become more common.

1. Background
1.1. Basic clause types
An active clause in Indonesian is as follows:

(1) Anak itu akan membantu Ali.
child that FUT MEN-help Ali.
That child will help Ali.

The word order is SVO. The verb is marked as active by the nasal prefix meN-. Two passive constructions exist in Indonesian, often called Passive Type 1 and Passive Type 2 (cf. Sneddon 1996). The choice between Type 1 and Type 2 is determined by who the Actor is.

Passive Type 1 is used when the Actor is third person.

(2) Ali akan dibantu (oleh) anak itu.
Ali FUT DI-help by child that
Ali will be helped by that child.

In (2), the verb bantu is marked as passive by the verb prefix di-. The Agent anak itu is placed after the verb, as an oblique constituent.

Passive Type 2 is used when the Agent is a pronoun or a pronoun substitute.

(3) Ali akan saya bantu.
Ali FUT lsg ø-help
Ali will be helped by me.
In (3) the verb *bantu* is marked with a zero prefix. No element can intervene between Agent and Verb. So any modifiers of the verb, as with the future marker *akan* here, must precede the Agent.

1.2. *Preverbal elements in passive clauses*

A constraint on forming passive clauses is that certain lexical elements cannot always precede a passive verb. By way of illustration, let us first look at a word that *can* freely do so: the future marker *akan*. In (1) it precedes the active verb *membantu* ‘help’, while in (2) and (3) it precedes the passive verbs *dibantu* and *bantu* respectively, to form a passive clause that is semantically equivalent to the active clause.

A word that cannot precede a passive verb in that way, according to Wolff (1986) and some informants, is the word *berani* ‘dare.’ Here it is first in an active clause:

(4) Ali berani melawan polisi itu.
Ali dare MEN-resist police that
Ali dared to resist those police.

In (4), it is the Agent, Ali, who is doing the ‘daring’. In other words, *berani* ‘dare’ is semantically linked to the Agent. But if we try to use *berani* that way in a passive clause, it is not accepted by all speakers:

(5) ?Polisi itu berani dilawan oleh Ali
Police that dare DI-resist by Ali
For: Ali dared to resist those police.

Sentence (5) is intended to mean the same as (4), i.e. *berani* ‘dare’ is once again linked semantically to Ali. But when *berani* ‘dare’ precedes a passive verb while thus semantically linked to the Agent, some speakers regard the resulting clause as unacceptable.

It is hard to specify which words can and cannot precede a passive verb when semantically linked to the Agent. Both informants and writers disagree among each other in the case of certain words, with Alieva et al (1991: 390) contradicting Wolff (1986) by accepting *berani* ‘dare,’ and Alwi et al (2000:347-348) contradicting nearly everyone by ruling out *ingin* ‘wish, desire’ in some sentences. But the crucial thing for present purposes is simply that many words are problematic in this position. Ones that struck one or more of my informants as awkward to some degree include: *berani* ‘dare’, *ikut* ‘join in’, *mampu* ‘(be) capable’, *berhasil* ‘succeed’, *gagal* ‘fail’, *suka* ‘like’, *lupa* ‘forget, *coba* ‘try’, *mulai* ‘start’, *takut* ‘(be) afraid’, *enggan* ‘(be) reluctant’, *senang* ‘(be) happy’, *malu* ‘(be) ashamed’ and *berusaha* ‘try’.

1.3. *Relative clauses*

A subject relative clause (RC) in Indonesian is illustrated below. (In all RC examples both the relativiser *yang* and the position of the gapped noun phrase are highlighted in bold.)

(6) Anak *yang* Ø membantu Ali itu baik hati sekali.
child REL MEN-help Ali that kind very
*The child who helped Ali is very kind.*
Taboo object relative clauses in Indonesian

In (6), the relativised noun phrase (NP) is anak ‘child’. The position of the relativised NP is marked with a gap, indicated here by the null symbol ø. This NP is the subject of the verb membantu ‘correct,’ which is marked as active by the nasal prefix meN-. The relative clause is preceded by the relativising particle yang. This type of RC is often referred to as a gap strategy and is the most common type of RC in Indonesian (cf. Sneddon 1996, Cole & Hermon 1998).

According to most grammarians of Indonesian, one cannot relativise with the gap strategy on any position other than Subject. And when the RC verb is marked with a meN- prefix, then virtually all grammarians agree in ruling out any non-Subject position (e.g. Cole & Hermon (1998); Vamarasi (1999: 12-13); Kaswanti Purwo (1989: 350, 1996: 195); Musgrave (2001: 59); Sneddon (1996: 286); Voskuil (1996: 188-189)). Native-speaking informants also tend to regard such RCs as awkward to some degree, discussed later.

In line with this constraint, Indonesians routinely use passive RCs to ensure that a gapped NP occupies the Subject position. So a notion such as “the child whom Ali helped” will typically be rendered as:

(7) Anak yang ø dibantu oleh Ali itu kecil sekali.
    child REL DI-help by Ali that small very
    The child whom Ali helped is very small. (literally: ‘who was helped by Ali’)

The type of RC which is the focus of this paper disregards that constraint, and uses an active RC to gap an Object position instead. Here is an example, from a public address by the fiction writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer:

(8) Bisa saja dibuat daftar kekurangan atau kekeliruan
    can just DI-make list deficiency or error
    angkatan-angkatan terdahulu yang kalian
    generation-generation earliest REL 2pl
    perlu mengoreksi ø.
    need MEN-correct
    One could certainly make a list of the deficiencies or errors of the earliest generations (of freedom fighters) which you need to correct.

In (8), the relativised NP is kekurangan atau kekeliruan angkatan-angkatan terdahulu ‘deficiencies or errors of the earliest generations’. This NP is the direct object of the meN- prefixed verb mengoreksi ‘correct,’ and its position in the RC is marked with a gap.

A second example is this, from a writer’s personal weblog:
Bukankah kehendak kita menciptakan manusia yang tak NEG-INT desire lpl MEN-create-KAN human REL NEG bisa mengambil keputusan sendiri menjadi maksud yang MEN-take decision self MEN-be intention REL tidak perlu ...? Jadi misteri yang kita tak mampu NEG necessary so mystery REL lpl NEG (be) capable menangkap Ø dengan nalar, mengapa manusia diciptakan!
MEN-catch with reason why human di-CREATE-kan Isn’t our desire to create humans devoid of free will, a pointless desire...? So the mystery that we are not capable of grasping rationally is: why was humanity created?

In (9), the relativised NP is misteri ‘mystery’. This NP is the object of the meN-prefixed verb menangkap ‘catch,’ and its position in the RC is marked with a gap. The lexical element mampu (‘be capable’ is probably best regarded here as a full verb. As such, it is a matrix verb that takes the verb menangkap ‘catch’ as its verbal complement (see Wolff 1986: 142-144; Sneddon 1996: 270-271). By that analysis, the relativised NP misteri is not a direct object but rather the object of a complement.6

The types of relative clause in (8) and (9) – which I will refer to collectively as “meN- gapped Object,” seem to be regarded as non-existent.7 The direct object variant receives more explicit attention, with Voskuil (1996: 203) stating flatly that instances of it “do not occur, in no variant of Indonesian”. Similarly, Ewing and Cumming (1998:79) say that the prescriptive ban on that clause type is closely adhered to in both formal discourse and more informal written texts. And while grammarians often fabricate instances of “meN- gapped Object” for discussion, I have never seen an authentic instance of it cited by any writer.

The aims of the present study are: to demonstrate that the relative clause type “meN- gapped Object” does occur in Indonesian; to describe the salient formal features of authentic tokens of this clause type and to identify factors motivating its use.

2. Method
The first stage of the research was casual observation. I simply recorded in a notebook, over several years, any instance of “meN- gapped Object” that I happened to notice in any text (19 instances in total). The second stage was a small-scale search for additional instances of this construction in written texts on the internet, using Google search engine.8 This search consisted of six sessions of about two hours each. It was not intended to be exhaustive but rather to test out tentative notions formed on the basis of the initial observational data about what type of formal features tended to characterise tokens of “meN- gapped Object,” and to give some idea of how frequently writers might use this clause type and in what type of texts.

3. Findings and Discussion
The study found that “meN- gapped Object,” while very infrequent, is used in Indonesian and within the formal variety of Indonesian specifically. Nearly 100 Indonesian texts were found that contained an instance (or more than one) of this clause type.9 Of these texts, just under two-thirds were original Indonesian texts. The