

Unit 10

RELATIVE CLAUSES

I. INTRODUCTION

In Units 8 and 9, we saw that a **subordinate clause** (both finite and non-finite) functions as part of another clause, by being its Subject, Object, Complement or Adverbial. For example, in sentence (1), the underlined subordinate clause ('what you said') is the Object of the sentence:

1. I heard what you said.

'What you said' is an object just like any other object, e.g. 'a song' in:

2. I heard a song.

But there is one other type of clause which is even 'lower' than that. It is not even part of a clause (like a Subject, Object or Complement), but only part of a **noun phrase**. The noun phrase itself may function as the Subject, Object or Complement, but the clause is only part of that. Let's look at the following example:

3. I heard [a song which was composed by a 12th-century nun].

The clause 'which was composed by a 12th-century nun' is only part of the noun phrase [a song which was composed by a 12th-century nun], and the whole noun phrase functions as the Object of the above sentence.

QUESTION 1:

Underline the **Object** in sentences 1-3, and the **Subject** in sentences 4-6:

1. He knows the answer.
2. He knows that matter is a form of energy.
3. He knows the formula which Einstein discovered.
4. The rumour is true.
5. What he told me is true.
6. The rumour which he told me is true.

What you should have noticed in the above question is that the Object in (3) is ‘the formula which Einstein discovered’ and the Subject in (6) is ‘the rumour which he told me’, and that clauses like:

‘which Einstein discovered’
‘which he told me’

are only part of the noun phrases [the formula which Einstein discovered] and [the rumour which he told me] respectively.

II. RELATIVE CLAUSES

The ‘which he told me’ type of clause is known as a **relative clause**. A relative clause is part of a **noun phrase**, and it ‘modifies’ (or says something about) the **noun**. Students make a lot of mistakes with relative clauses, or else avoid using them entirely, so it is worthwhile trying to understand and use them properly.

The first and most basic kind of mistake is to treat the noun and the relative clause as two separate things. Look at the following sentences:

7. The nice young man apologised to me.
8. The man who stepped on my foot apologised to me.

When asked what the Subject is, many students would say ‘the nice young man’ in (7), but ‘the man’ in (8). In other words, they treat ‘the nice young man’ as one single noun phrase, but not ‘the man who stepped on my foot’, even though both ‘nice young’ and ‘who stepped on my foot’ modify (or describe) the noun ‘man’.

Why should students make such a mistake? Part of the reason is that, in Chinese, everything that modifies a noun must come before it. Thus, sentence (8) in Chinese would be

- 8a. ‘[那個踏我腳的男子]向我道歉’ (‘[The step on my foot man] to me apologise’).

Students would have no trouble identifying the subject of the Chinese sentence (8a) as ‘the step on my foot man’ (那個踏我腳的男子). They expect the noun ‘man’ to come at the end of the noun phrase, and all its modifiers to come before it. But in English, they have some difficulty recognising ‘the man who stepped on my foot’ as one single noun phrase, because ‘who stepped on my foot’ comes after ‘man’. So here’s the first point to remember:

In a noun phrase in English, a **relative clause** follows the **noun**, but it still forms one single noun phrase with the noun (just as much as an adjective before it).

So all of the following are equally **noun phrases**, and all of them can be replaced by a single pronoun, 'he':

- [the man]
- [the nice young man]
- [the man who stepped on my foot]
- [the nice young man who stepped on my foot]

QUESTION 2:

In each of the following sentences, there is a **noun phrase** which contains a relative clause. Put brackets around each of these noun phrases:

1. The Egyptian plane which disappeared over the Atlantic Ocean was carrying nearly 200 passengers.
2. The news which most excited Hong Kongers in recent years was the Disneyland deal.
3. The teacher scolded the student who forgot to do his homework.
4. *Life Is Beautiful* is a movie which can make you both laugh and cry.
5. I can't stand people who smoke non-stop.
6. He finally got the job that he wanted.

QUESTION 3:

In each of the following sentences, fill in the blank after the underlined noun with a suitable relative clause:

1. The bus _____ is late today.
2. The waiter _____ was fired.
3. The student _____ was very happy.
4. She married the man _____.
5. The World Trade Centre was the building _____.

III. THE FORM OF THE RELATIVE CLAUSE

Relative clauses have a special form which makes it different from all other clauses. The first special feature is the most obvious, and yet it is also the one which causes the most errors.

QUESTION 4:

Here again are the sentences from Question 2, but this time with the relative clauses underlined. Circle the 'special' word which marks the whole clause as a relative clause:

1. The Egyptian plane which disappeared over the Atlantic Ocean was carrying nearly 200 passengers.
2. The news which most excited Hong Kongers in recent years was the Disneyland deal.
3. The teacher scolded the student who forgot to do his homework.
4. *Life Is Beautiful* is a movie which can make you both laugh and cry.
5. I can't stand people who smoke non-stop.
6. He finally got the job that he wanted.

You will probably have circled the words *which*, *who* and *that* in the above sentences. These words have a special name – **relative pronouns**. A 'pronoun', as you know, stands for a noun. So what do these 'relative pronouns' stand for?

QUESTION 5:

In each of the following sentences, the relative clause is underlined, and the relative pronoun is given in **bold**. What noun does it stand for in that sentence?

1. The movie **which** won the Best Picture Award was *Gladiator*.
2. The movie **which** I saw last week was *Gladiator*.
3. The actor **who** made me laugh so much was Roberto Benigni.
4. The actor **whom** everyone loved so much was Roberto Benigni.
5. The song **that** Celine Dion sang in *Titanic* was 'My heart will go on'.
6. The singer **that** sang 'My heart will go on' was Celine Dion.

A relative pronoun always stands for the noun _____

It is relatively easy to decide which noun the relative pronoun stands for. It always stands for the noun just before it!

What is more important is this: what **function** does the relative pronoun play in the relative clause itself? Lots of errors are made because of this. Is the relative pronoun the **Subject** of the relative clause, or **Object**, or what?

Consider the following sentence:

7. The movie which made the most money was *Titanic*.

In the relative clause [which made the most money], where is the **Subject**? There's a verb 'made', and just before it there is a relative pronoun 'which', but no other noun. Therefore the subject of this relative clause is 'which'. And 'which', as you know, stands for the noun before it, i.e. 'the movie'.

Now consider another sentence:

8. The movie which I love most is *Gone with the Wind*.

In the relative clause [which I love most], what is the Subject? It is obviously 'I'. So 'which' cannot be the Subject. But where's the **Object** of the verb 'love'? ('love' is a transitive verb which requires an object.) The Object can only be 'which', because there is no other noun within this clause which can be the Object. And since 'which' stands for 'the movie', the relative clause means 'I love (the movie) most'.

QUESTION 6:

Here again are the six sentences from Question 5. In each of the underlined relative clauses, what is the **function** of the relative pronoun – is it the Subject or Object of the clause? (Write 'S' or 'O' in the blank at the end of each sentence.)

1. The movie which won the Best Picture Award was *Gladiator*. _____
2. The movie which I saw last week was *Gladiator*. _____
3. The actor who made me laugh so much was Roberto Benigni. _____
4. The actor whom everyone loved so much was Roberto Benigni. _____
5. The song that Celine Dion sang in *Titanic* was 'My heart will go on'. _____
6. The singer that sang 'My heart will go on' was Celine Dion. _____

One common type of error made by students is to have an extra object in a relative clause in which the relative pronoun is already functioning as the Object. For example:

7. * The movie which I saw it last week was *Gladiator*.

8. * The actor whom everyone loved him so much was Roberto Benigni.

There you have a double object – ‘which’ and ‘it’, ‘whom’ and ‘him’. It’s like saying * ‘I saw the movie it last week’ and * ‘everyone loved the actor him so much’! So watch out for this kind of error.

IV. THE RELATIVE PRONOUN

Now we’ll look a little more closely at the relative pronoun. The most common relative pronouns are ‘who’, ‘which’ and ‘that’. ‘Who’ has another form ‘whom’ (used in formal English only) when the relative pronoun is an **Object**, as in sentence (4) above. ‘That’ is an ‘all purpose’ relative pronoun which can replace ‘who’, ‘whom’ and ‘which’:

1. The man who/that created modern Singapore was Lee Kuan Yew.
2. The man whom/that everybody knows in Singapore is Lee Kuan Yew.
3. The city which/that attracts the most tourists is Hong Kong.
4. The city which/that people want to visit most is Hong Kong.

The **relative pronoun** ‘that’ should not be confused with the **subordinator** ‘that’, which introduces a subordinate clause rather than a relative clause. Compare the following:

5. I know the man that wrote this book. (relative pronoun, introducing relative clause)
6. I know that he wrote this book. (subordinator, introducing subordinate clause)

The differences between the two ‘that’s are:

- The **relative pronoun** ‘that’ occurs immediately after a **noun**, but not the **subordinator** ‘that’;
- The **relative pronoun** ‘that’ functions as the Subject or Object of the relative clause (e.g. in sentence (5) it is the Subject), but the **subordinator** ‘that’ only introduces the subordinate clause, which has its own Subject and Object.

Now, the most common error that students make with relative clauses is to leave out the relative pronoun. Take a look at the following examples.

QUESTION 7:

Correct the errors in the following sentences written by students:

1. The early symptom of people lack vitamin A is night blindness.

ANSWER:

2. One of the plants contains carotene is the carrot.

ANSWER:

3. The heat came from the earth would make the mud become rock.

ANSWER:

In all of the above examples, a relative pronoun is missing. It is interesting to note that relative pronouns do not exist in Chinese, which is one reason why they are often left out by our students. In Chinese, the noun phrase ‘people who lack vitamin A’ would be ‘the lack vitamin A people’ (缺乏维他命 A 的人) – without a relative pronoun, and with the relative clause before rather than after the noun ‘people’.

Actually, under some conditions, a relative pronoun can be omitted in English. But make sure you understand what these conditions are.

QUESTION 8:

In some of the following sentences, the relative pronouns are left out. In some cases, the results are grammatical, but in others, they are not (*). Can you figure out the reason why?

1. The movie **which** won the Best Picture Award was *Gladiator*.
2. * The movie won the Best Picture Award was *Gladiator*.
3. The movie **which** I saw last week was *Gladiator*.
4. The movie I saw last week was *Gladiator*.
5. The actor **who** made me laugh so much was Roberto Benigni.
6. * The actor made me laugh so much was Roberto Benigni.
7. The actor **whom** everyone loved so much was Roberto Benigni.
8. The actor everyone loved so much was Roberto Benigni.

ANSWER:

QUESTION 9:

Answer the following questions, making use of relative clauses in your answers. Compare your answers with your classmate's.

Example: What kind of food do you like?
I like food that is spicy.

1. What kind of person do you want to marry?

ANSWER:

2. What kind of person do you want the leader of your country to be?

ANSWER:

3. What kind of person would make an ideal teacher?

ANSWER:

4. What kind of television programs do you like to watch?

ANSWER:

5. What kind of place would you like to visit on vacation?

ANSWER:

6. What kind of apartment would you like to live in?

ANSWER:

7. What kind of books do you enjoy reading most?

ANSWER:

8. What kind of students get the highest grades?

ANSWER:

V. NON-FINITE RELATIVE CLAUSES

Just as there are finite and non-finite subordinate clauses, there are **finite** and **non-finite** relative clauses too. Let's find out how we use them.

QUESTION 10:

The following pairs of sentences illustrate the form of finite relative clauses and non-finite relative clauses (they are both underlined for you). Based on these examples, can you describe their general differences?

1. Vehicles which are abandoned by their owners will be towed away.
2. Vehicles abandoned by their owners will be towed away.
3. Students who fail the test will be required to re-take it.
4. Students failing the test will be required to re-take it.
5. People who live on Lantau Island are very excited about Disneyland.
6. People living on Lantau Island are very excited about Disneyland.
7. Every suspect who is arrested by the police is entitled to legal aid.
8. Every suspect arrested by the police is entitled to legal aid.

The differences are:

(1) Finite relative clauses _____

(2) Non-finite relative clauses:

QUESTION 11:

Fill in the blanks below with **non-finite** relative clauses, making use of the words given in brackets and taking special care with the form of the verb.

1. Students _____ (plan to study abroad) must apply for a student visa.
 2. Towns _____ (destroy, earthquake) will be rebuilt with international aid.
 3. Motorists _____ (drive through the burning tunnel) were overcome by the heavy smoke.
 4. The most important drug _____ (discover in the 20th century) was penicillin.
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VI. EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

There is one common grammatical construction in English which often makes use of relative clauses, and which is the cause of some errors. First, let's see what it is.

QUESTION 12:

Read the following text, about the great detective Sherlock Holmes. Pay particular attention to the underlined expressions, and how they are used.

Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective, was once taken to a house where a murder had apparently taken place. This was how his partner Dr Watson described the scene:

When we arrived at the house, there were dozens of people standing around and pointing at the upper floor. We went upstairs into a large, empty room. There were no windows which were open. There was a dead body lying in the middle of the room. It was that of a stout, middle-age man. There were no visible wounds on him, but there was a pool of blood a few feet away. There were no signs of a struggle. The floor was dusty, and there were clear footprints going round and round the body. On the wall, there was a word written in blood: 'Rache'.

Now, without looking at the text, try to describe whatever details you can remember.

You will notice that, in the above text, there are a lot of sentences or clauses which begin with the expression 'there be (is/are/was/were)...'. Why do you think this construction is called the 'existential' construction? Because it is a way of pointing to the existence of something not mentioned earlier. To better understand the function of this construction, compare the (a) sentences with the (b) sentences in the following question.

QUESTION 13:

Which sounds better to you, the (a) or (b) sentences? Do you have any idea why?

- 1a. A man is looking for you.
- 1b. There is a man looking for you.
- 2a. A book is on the table.
- 2b. There is a book on the table.
- 3a. A word was written on the wall.
- 3b. There was a word written on the wall.
- 4a. A country has 10 times as many sheep as people.
- 4b. There is a country which has 10 times as many sheep as people.

ANSWER:

Now try giving the Chinese equivalents of the above English sentences. (The Chinese equivalent for 'there is/are...' is '有...'.) Which ones sound better in Chinese, the (a) or (b) sentences?

ANSWER:

You may have come up with a very good explanation why the sentences with 'there is/are' above (or '有' in Chinese) sound better. Now compare it with the following explanation:

You will recall that a **noun** can be used in a **definite** or **indefinite** sense. If it's indefinite, it refers to someone or something which is mentioned for the first time in this exchange, e.g.

(1a) A man is looking for you.

In English this sounds a little odd (not wrong, just a little odd), and in Chinese it sounds much worse. The meaning itself is perfectly clear -- that's not the problem. But it's unusual to begin a sentence with something coming out of nowhere, which is what we get when we have an **indefinite subject** (like 'a man'). It doesn't 'connect' with anything we've said before, or anything already in the minds of the speaker and hearer.

Now, starting the sentence with 'there is...', or '有...' in Chinese, prepares us by drawing our attention to the existence of something not mentioned before:

(1b) There is a man looking for you.
有一个人来找你

The similarities between English and Chinese in this respect may make it easier for you to learn the existential construction 'there is/are'. But there are three important points that you must be careful about.

Point (1): The existential construction '有...' is used much more often in Chinese than the existential construction 'there is/are...' in English. So don't over-use it in English.

Point (2): Some students treat the Chinese '有' as equivalent to the English 'have', and produce ungrammatical sentences like the following (some are not even existential sentences):

1. * Normally, it had about 30 metres high.
2. * It includes some giant plants that have 30 meter high.
3. * There had some environmental changes.

In English, 'have' cannot be used this way. The existential verb, i.e. the verb which indicates the existence of something, is not 'have' but 'be'. The 'have/had' in the above sentences should be replaced by 'was/are/were':

1. Normally, it was about 30 metres high
2. It includes some giant plants that are 30 meter high.
3. There were some environmental changes.

Point (3): The form of the existential construction in English differs from Chinese in one important way. Let's see if you can identify it.

QUESTION 14:

The following sentences were written by students. Correct any mistakes that you may find.

1. There were over 80% of them agreed with that.

ANSWER:

2. There were about 23 percent of them disagreed with the importance of leadership ability.

ANSWER:

3. There are many students study in the library.

ANSWER:

4. There was a large number of people worked in the wholesale industry.

ANSWER:

We want to draw your attention to one interesting thing. The sentences in (1-4) above are all ungrammatical. But try removing the expression ‘there is/are/were’, and what have we got?

5. Over 80% of them agreed with that.
6. About 23 percent of them disagreed with the importance of leadership ability.
7. Many students study in the library.
8. A large number of people worked in the wholesale industry.

Notice that all these sentences are now grammatical! What does this mean? This means that the students who wrote sentences (1-4) have taken ‘normal’ sentences like (5-8), and merely added the expression ‘there is/are/were’ to the beginning. They thought it would be a perfectly correct thing to do – but it is not!

But in Chinese, they would be right: this is how you would do it in Chinese – simply add ‘有’ to the beginning of a normal sentence, and the result would be equally grammatical. You don’t have to change a thing in the original sentence.

But English does not work this way. The sentences marked with * below, which would be fine in Chinese, are ungrammatical in English:

- 1a. A man is washing the car
- 1b. * There is a man is washing the car.
- 2a. A man has been arrested 20 times by the police.
- 2b. * There is a man has been arrested 20 times by the police.
- 3a. A student scored 8 distinctions in the exam.
- 3b. * There was a student scored 8 distinctions in the exam.

So make sure that you get this important point about existential constructions:

In English (unlike Chinese), you cannot just add 'there is/are' to the beginning of a regular sentence and leave the rest unchanged.

What then do we have to do to produce a grammatical sentence with 'there is/are...'?

QUESTION 15:

Study the examples below, which are all grammatical. By comparing the pairs of sentences ('a' and 'b'), try to describe what changes have to be made to the original main clause (a) in order to turn it into an **existential** sentence (b):

- 1a. A man is washing the car.
- 1b. There is a man washing the car.
- 2a. A man has been arrested 20 times by the police.
- 2b. There is a man who has been arrested 20 times by the police.
- 3a. A student scored 8 distinctions in the exam.
- 3b. There was a student who scored 8 distinctions in the exam.

| |
|---|
| To change sentence (a) into an existential sentence (b), you'll have to: _____ _____, OR _____ _____ |
|---|

This is what you should have found:

If the existential marker 'there is/are' is attached to a main clause, then we'll have to change it into either:

a **finite relative clause** -- as in (2b): There is a man who has been arrested 20 times by the police. Or:

a **non-finite relative clause** -- as in (1b): There is a man washing the car. (where the verb 'washing' is non-finite and the relative pronoun 'who' is left out).

This is the big difference between English and Chinese existential constructions. In English, the clause that follows ‘there is/are...’ cannot be a main clause, but a relative clause, because the main clause is now ‘there is/are...’

QUESTION 16:

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences, using the correct form of the verb in brackets, plus any other words needed:

1. There are 5 books _____(recommend) by the teacher as essential.
2. There were many people _____(sleep) on the floor after the party.
3. There was a student _____(say) that the subject was boring.
4. There will be many students _____(apply) for the new course.
5. Is there anyone _____(wait) for the bus?