

Unit 33 - Relative pronouns (1)

1 Definitions

A **relative clause** is a type of subordinate clause that gives information about (usually) a preceding noun. It is linked to the main clause by means of a **relative pronoun** (e.g. in English *who*, *that* or *which*, or in French *qui*, *que* or *dont*). The noun which the relative clause describes is called the **antecedent**. Take, for example, the following sentence :

The man who lives next door is very friendly

Here, *who* is the relative pronoun, *who lives next door* is the relative clause and *the man* is its antecedent.

2 How relative pronouns work

Although the rules governing the use of relative pronouns in English and French differ in certain major respects, the fundamentals are essentially the same. A relative pronoun is used to join two pieces of information containing a common element. One of these pieces of information can be considered to be the primary piece of information, and is expressed in the main clause. The second is an additional piece of information about the common element in the main clause, and is expressed in the relative clause. For example, take two pieces of information with the common element *Sara*, expressed as simple sentences :

Sentence 1 (main information) : *Sara is a teacher*

Sentence 2 (additional information) : *Sara lives in Manchester*

Let us suppose that the main piece of information you wish to express is that contained in Sentence 1 *Sara is a teacher*, and that you also wish to express the idea in Sentence 2 *Sara lives in Manchester*. You then need to decide what grammatical role the common element *Sara* is playing in the **second** sentence (i.e. the one that is to be turned into a relative clause) and choose the relative pronoun that corresponds to this role. As the *Sara* in Sentence 2 is the subject of its sentence the pronoun will be *who*, which in English is the relevant subject relative pronoun. Next you insert the pronoun *who* directly after the *Sara* in Sentence 1 (with or without commas, see section 3 below) followed by Sentence 2 missing out the common element *Sara* (which of course has been replaced by the relative pronoun). This gives the sentence :

Sara, who lives in Manchester, is a teacher

The second occurrence of the common element can have two other grammatical roles, that of direct object or complement of a preposition. In both cases the procedure is similar. Take for example Sentence 3 *Peter knows Sara*, in which *Sara* is the direct object of its sentence . In order to form a relative clause within Sentence 1, you need to choose the relevant direct object relative pronoun in English, which is *whom* (or *who* in informal language) and then follow the same procedure, giving the sentence :

Sara, who(m) Peter knows, is a teacher

Or take for example Sentence 4 *Peter is talking to Sara*, in which *Sara* is the complement of the preposition *to*. To form a relative clause within Sentence 1, you need to choose the relevant relative pronoun for preposition complements in English, which is also *whom*. The procedure is then the

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same, except that the relative pronoun is preceded by the preposition in question, giving the sentence :

Sara, to whom Peter is talking, is a teacher

3 Restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses

The type of relative clause shown in the above example serves simply to give additional information about the antecedent rather than to restrict its meaning. It would be possible to remove it from its sentence and still have a meaningful sentence. This is called a **non-restrictive** or **non-defining** relative clause, and it is usually separated from the rest of the sentence by commas or intonation. In many cases, however, relative clauses contain information that is essential to the meaning of the sentence. For example in the sentence *The Head of Department post went to the teacher who was from Manchester*, the relative clause *who was from Manchester* serves to narrow down the meaning of the word *teacher* and cannot be left out. This type of relative clause is called a **restrictive** or **defining relative clause** and it is not usually separated from the rest of the sentence by commas or intonation.

4 Difficulties in finding the right relative pronoun

One of the great difficulties of translating English relative clauses into French lies in the fact that verbal expressions in the two languages often differ as to whether they take a direct or indirect object, what preposition they take and so on. The same goes for prepositions following adjectives. For example, the English verb *to need* takes a direct object, whilst its equivalent in French, *avoir besoin de*, takes a complement of a preposition. The relative pronoun required in the two languages is consequently different :

the book **that** I need : *that* = direct object pronoun

le livre **dont** j'ai besoin : *dont* = relative pronoun replacing nouns introduced by *de*, equivalent of English *of which*

For the purposes of this unit, therefore, it will be assumed that the starting point is not an English relative clause but two simple sentences in French containing a common word or phrase, one containing primary information, the other supplementary information. In this way, the choice of relative pronoun depends on the grammatical role played by the word or phrase it is replacing in the sentence containing the supplementary information.

5 *Qui*

If the role of the word / phrase being replaced by the relative pronoun is that of subject, then *qui* is used :

le client **qui** vous reconnaît [i.e. **le client** vous reconnaît]

the client who recognizes you [i.e. **the client** recognizes you]

le travail **qui** vous gêne [i.e. **le travail** vous gêne]

the work which bothers you [i.e. **the work** bothers you]

In French the subject relative pronoun *qui* is used for both **people and things**. This contrasts with English, which has one for people - *who* - and two for things - *which* and *that*. Note that *qui* never contracts to *qu'*.

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It is important to avoid automatically associating *qui* with *who* (this is unlike the question word *Qui?* which always means *Who?*). For example the sentence *Was that your sister (who) I saw in town yesterday?* is translated *C'est ta soeur **que** j'ai vue en ville hier ?* and **not** * *C'est ta soeur **qui** j'ai vue en ville hier ?*. A simple rule of thumb : if the *who* can be left out in English, it **cannot** be translated by *qui*.

6 *Que*

If the role of the word / phrase being replaced is that of direct object, then *que* is used (or *qu'* in front of a vowel) :

le client que vous reconnaissez	[i.e. vous reconnaissez le client]
the client who(m) you recognize	[i.e. you recognize the client]
le travail que vous détestez	[i.e. vous détestez le travail]
the work which you hate	[i.e. you hate the work]

As with *qui*, *que* is used for **both people and things**. This again contrasts with English, which has one for people - *whom* - and two for things - *which* and *that*.

Whilst in English the relative pronoun can be omitted when it functions as the direct object of a relative clause, it is never omitted in French :

Les lettres **que** je recevais (**and never** * Les lettres je recevais)
The letters (which or that) I received

In sentences involving *que* the French often put the subject **after** the verb :

Les décisions qu'a prises le directeur
The decisions which the Head made
Les questions que lui ont posées ses étudiants
The questions that his / her students asked him / her

This can be a major source of confusion for learners of French. Where *que* or *qu'* is used there **must** be a subject coming afterwards. If it is not before the verb, then it must be after it.

7 *After prepositions except de*

If the word / phrase being replaced is introduced by a preposition other than *de*, then the rules are as follows :

7.1 [Preposition] + *qui* is used **for people** :

La femme **à qui** (or *à laquelle*) tu parlais - i.e. tu parlais **à la femme**
The woman to whom you were talking (formal)
The woman you were talking to (everyday)

Note that after the prepositions *parmi* and *entre*, *lequel* or derivatives is preferred to *qui* :

Les membres du nouveau cabinet, **parmi lesquels** on compte plusieurs femmes, ...
The members of the new cabinet, amongst whom there are several women, ...

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7.2 [Preposition] + *lequel* / *laquelle* etc. is used **for things** :

La situation difficile **dans laquelle** je me trouve - i.e. *je me trouve dans une situation difficile*

The state in which I find myself (formal)

The state I find myself in (everyday)

Note that whilst in English there are two options for the position of the preposition (at the beginning or end of the relative clause), in French the preposition must always precede the relative pronoun.

Note also that *à* + *lequel* contracts to *auquel* :

Le guichet auquel il fallait m'adresser ...

The window I had to enquire at ...

7.3 *Quoi* is used after prepositions when the relative pronoun refers to a fact or idea rather than to a person or thing :

Je lui ai dit que je n'aimais pas Mozart, **à quoi** il a répondu que ...

I told him that I didn't like Mozart, to which he replied that ...