

46. Relative pronouns - *qui, que*

1 Definitions

A **relative clause** is a type of subordinate clause that gives information about 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*). Take, for example, the following sentence:

The man who lives next door is very friendly

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

2 *Qui*

Qui acts as the subject of a relative clause:

Paul, **qui** habite en face de nous, est professeur

Paul, **who** lives opposite, is a teacher

J'aime bien la vase **qui** est sur la table

I like the vase **that** is on the table

It is important to note that *qui* is used for both **people and things**. English has two equivalents: one for people - *who* - and two for things - *which* and *that*. Note also that *qui* never contracts to *qu'*, i.e. you **cannot** say **La vase qu'est sur la table*.

3 *Que*

Que acts as the direct object of a relative clause:

Paul, **que** je n'ai pas vu depuis deux ans, vient nous voir ce weekend

Paul, **who** I haven't seen for two years, is coming to see us this weekend

Note that *que* contracts to *qu'* before a vowel:

Son fils, **qu'**elle n'a pas vu depuis deux ans, vient la voir ce weekend

Her son, **who** she hasn't seen for two years, is coming to see her this weekend

As with *qui*, *que* is used for **both people and things**. English also has two equivalents, one for people - *whom* - and two for things - *which* and *that*. Note that while these can be omitted in English, *que* is **never** omitted in French:

Heureusement le vase **qu'**il a cassé n'avait pas de valeur (**and never** * le vase il a cassé)

Luckily the vase he broke wasn't valuable

Where *que* is used with a compound tense like the perfect, the participle will agree with the noun to which *que* is referring. This is because the *que* is a preceding direct object (for more information, see Unit 11):

La femme **que** nous avons rencontrée est notre voisine

The woman we met is our neighbour

Les questions **que** le journaliste a posées étaient difficiles

The questions the journalist asked were difficult