

# Relative Constructions in African Languages

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[http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/fb10/zimmermann/HP\\_FG-RelS/info\\_typ.htm](http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/fb10/zimmermann/HP_FG-RelS/info_typ.htm)

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## 1 Relative Clause Constructions: A Definition

According to Dixon (2010: 314) a canonical relative clause construction has the following four characteristics:

- It involves a main clause – MC – and a relative clause – RC – which form a complex sentence with a single unit of intonation;
- The underlying structure of these two clauses must share one common argument; This CA functions both as an argument in the main clause and in the relative clause and may occur in both clauses, in one of them, or in neither of them.
- The relative clause modifies the common argument of the main clause. It may either provide *information* which is essential for the identification of the reference of the common argument – in a **restrictive relative clause** – or it provides additional information about the common argument – in a **non-restrictive relative clause**.
- The relative clause must have the basic structure of a clause with at least a predicate and the core arguments required by this predicate. It may also have additional arguments and is sometimes not marked with respect to tense, aspect, modality, etc.

In addition to this canonical and in a way prototypical relative clause construction Dixon (2010: 315) mentions a number of non-canonical types as, for example, the ‘co-relatives’ (or ‘correlatives’), where there is no embedding, and other adjoined clauses which may have a temporal or relative clause interpretation.

## 2 Relative Clause Constructions across Languages

Kuteva & Comrie (2005) postulate four major types of relative clause formation which can be found cross-linguistically:

**relative pronoun strategy** => case marked relative pronoun that indicates both the syntactic and semantic role of the head noun within the relative clause; an element or pronoun which simply indicates that a clause is a relative clause is not sufficient to postulate that a language is applying this strategy

**non-reduction** => a) correlatives / b) head-internal / c) paratactic

a) full NP within the relative clause + (at least one) pronominal form in the matrix clause

b) full NP within the relative clause, no representation thereof in the matrix clause

c) the ‘relative clause’ does not differ from an ordinary declarative clause; it is loosely connected to a ‘main clause’

**pronoun retention** = > resumptive pronoun within the relative clause, whereas the term ‘resumptive pronoun’ applies only if this pronoun were ungrammatical or optional in an independent clause

**gap** => no overt reference to the case of the head noun

### 3 Relative Clause Constructions in the African Context

According to Kuteva & Comrie (2005) only three of the above presented strategies can be found in African languages. These are

- correlative (subtype of the non-reduction strategy),
- pronoun-retention and
- gap.

There is also at least one language known which makes use of the paratactic strategy: Koyaga, a language of the Manding-cluster. But this seems to be a remnant, as Bambara, a closely related Mande-language, uses a similar relative marker and has already undergone a grammaticalization process towards the correlative strategy.

Other aspects of relativization strategies observable in the African context involve nominalization of verbs, as, for example, in §Ani (RV, pc) as well as the use of optional particles marking the beginning and the end of a relative clause and thus “support” a strategy which basically involves a tonal changes of the NP preceding the relative unit (Ngas).

In the following sections I will mainly concentrate on two of the above mentioned strategies, namely those involving correlatives and those with a gap. Examples for the correlative strategy will be taken from Bambara, while the gap-strategy is illustrated on the basis of Swahili. I will, however, also provide some examples of relative clauses in Ngas and briefly touch on the nominalization strategy in §Ani.

#### 3.1 Bambara

##### 3.1.1 Some introductory remarks on the language

- member of the Mande language family in West Africa,
- tone language (high/low),
- isolating,
- predominant word order: subject – tense/aspect marker – object – verb

##### 3.1.2 Relative constructions in Bambara

Relative clauses in Bambara are marked by the particle **mín** (REL) when the referent appears in the singular and by **mín-w** (REL + PL) when the referent appears in its plural form. The latter is often pronounced as **múnu** (Kastenholz 1998).

With regard to the function Bambara distinguishes between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses which are expressed in different ways: While a restrictive relative clause precede the main clause, a non-restrictive relative clause follows the main clause. Another important difference is that the relative particle **mín** follows the relativized constituent in a restrictive relative clause, but replaces it in a non-restrictive context.<sup>1</sup>

(1)      dònso yé                      màrifa mín sà, ò                      s0ng0 tùn      ká      gEIEn  
          hunter PERF.AFF            gun REL buy DEM.REF.SG      price PAST      PART      expensive  
*the gun the hunter bought was expensive*

(2)      dònso yé                      màrifa sà, mín      s0ng0 tùn      ká      gEIEn  
          hunter PERF.AFF            gun buy REL      price PAST      PART      expensive  
*the hunter bought a gun, which was expensive*

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<sup>1</sup> If not indicated otherwise, examples are taken from Kastenholz (1998). The interlinearization throughout this paper is my own.

### 3.1.2.1 Restrictive Relative Constructions

Characteristics (Kastenholz 1998, among others):

- RC precedes the main clause
- relativized constituent followed by **mín** / **mínw** which generally refers to the whole / complex NP => **the antecedent or head noun is part of the RC!**<sup>2</sup>
- plural marking occurs on the relative particle
- the main clause usually contains either the singular referential/distal demonstrative **ò** or its plural correspondent **òlu**; this elements occurs in that position of the clause to which the information given in the relative clause refers.
- instead of the demonstratives **ò** / **òlu** there may also appear the 'simple' pronouns of the third person singular or plural, **à** and **ù**, respectively

(3)	ù	bìn-na		<b>m0g0</b>	<b>mín-w</b>	kán,
	3PL	pull down-PERF.AFF.INTRANS		person	REL-PL	POSTPOS
	<b>òlu</b>	bEE	tùn	yé	dúnan-w	yé.
	DEM.REF.PL	all	PAST	PERF.AFF	stranger-PL	POSTPOS

'The people whom they pulled down were all strangers.'  
*literally:* 'The people whom they pulled down – those were all strangers.'

I assume that this correlative construction is based on the following two statements:<sup>3</sup>

<b>m0g0-w</b>	bEE	tùn	yé	dúnan-w	yé.
person-PL	all	PAST	PERF.AFF	stranger-PL	POSTPOS

'The people were all strangers.'

ù	bìn-na		<b>m0g0-w</b>	kán,
3PL	pull down-PERF.AFF.INTRANS		person-PL	POSTPOS

'They pulled the people down.'

(4)	à	yé	<b>jíri-bolo</b>	<b>jálan</b>	<b>mín</b>	kári.
	3SG	PERF.AFF	tree-branch	dry	REL	break
	à	yé	<b>ò</b>	cì.		
	3SG	PERF.AFF	DEM.REF.SG	chop		

'She chopped the dry tree-branch which she had broken.'  
*literally:* 'The dry tree-branch which she had broken – she chopped that one.'

Based on:<sup>4</sup>

à	yé	<b>jíri-bolo</b>	<b>jálan</b>	cì
3SG	PERF.AFF	tree-branch	dry	chop

'She chopped the dry tree-branch.'

à	yé	<b>jíri-bolo</b>	<b>jálan</b>	kári.
3SG	PERF.AFF	tree-branch	dry	break

'She had broken the dry tree-branch.'

<sup>2</sup> Not explicitly stated in Kastenholz and *The New Bambara Grammar*, but very important for our analysis!

<sup>3</sup> These examples are my own creations.

<sup>4</sup> see footnote 3

The NP which is relativized – the so-called head noun – can be omitted, if it is clearly identifiable from the context.

Examples thereof can be found in the Gospels (here: Mt.5,22 <http://www.bible.is/BAMLSB/Matt/5>).

(5)	(məŋɔ́ ó məŋɔ́)	<b>Mín</b>	b'à(<bE+à)	wele	fato,
	(everyone)	REL	PRES.AFF+3SG	call	"fato"
	<b>ò</b>	ka kan ni	jahanama	tasuma	ye.
	DEM.REF.SG	deserve...	hell	fire	...

'(Everyone) Who calls him "fato" deserves hellfire.'

### 3.1.2.2 Non-restrictive Relative Constructions

Characteristics (Kastenholz 1998, among others):

- RC follows the main clause
- **mín / mín-w** occurs in the position of the relativized constituent => **the antecedent or head noun is not part of the relative clause!**<sup>5</sup>
- the main clause looks exactly like an ordinary declarative clause (no special pronouns required)

(6)	mùso-w	yé	ù	<b>dèn-w</b>	k0I0si,
	woman-PL	PERF.AFF	3PL	child-PL	look after
	<b>mín-w</b>	yé	í	kò	bá lá
	REL-PL	PERF.AFF	REFL	wash	river POSTPOS

'The women looked after their children, who washed themselves in the river.'

Based on:<sup>6</sup>

mùso-w	yé	ù	<b>dèn-w</b>	k0I0si,
woman-PL	PERF.AFF	3PL	child-PL	look after

'The women looked after their children.'

<b>dèn-w</b>	yé	í	kò	bá	lá
child-PL	PERF.AFF	REFL	wash	river	POSTPOS

'The children washed themselves in the river.'

(7)	à	yé	mùsu	fúru,
	3SG	PERF.AFF	woman	marry
	<b>mín</b>	b0-ra		Làgine.
	REL	come from-PERF.AFF.INTRANS	Guinea	

'He married a woman, who comes from Guinea.'

<sup>5</sup> Again this is neither explicitly stated in Kastenholz or *The New Bambara Grammar*, but essential for our analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Again, these examples are my own creations.

Based on:<sup>7</sup>

à yé mùsu fúru.  
3SG PERF.AFF woman marry  
'He married a woman.'

músu b0-ra Lagine.  
woman come from-PERF.AFF.INTRANS Guinea  
'The woman came (comes) from Guinea.'

### 3.1.2.3 Other possibilities to express Relative Constructions

Participles (examples from *The New Bambara Grammar*):

(8) O m0g0 sigi-**len** ye ne fa ye.  
DEM.DIST.SG person sit-**PPP** COP 1SG father COP  
'The person who is seated is my father.'  
*literally*: 'The seated person is my father.'

(9) O cè na-**tò** ye ne fa ye.  
DEM.DIST.SG man come-**PPA** COP 1SG father COP  
'That man who is coming is my father.'  
*literally*: 'The coming man is my father.'

Nomina Agentis (examples from *The New Bambara Grammar*):

(10) Ne tè a dila-**baa** dòn.  
1SG PRES.NEG 3SG make-**AGENS** know  
'I do not know who made it.'  
*literally*: 'I do not know the maker.'

(11) I wele-**baa** bè so kònò.  
2SG call-**AGENS** PRES.AFF house POSTPOS.LOC  
'The one who has called you is in the house.'  
*literally*: 'Your caller is in the house.'

Distributive forms (example from *The New Bambara Grammar*)

(12) **Mògò o mògò** da-ra a la,  
everyone / whoever believe-PERF.AFF.INTRANS 3SG POSTPOS

o na kisi  
DEM.REF.SG FUT save

'Whoever believes in him will be saved.' /  
'Everyone who believes in him will be saved.'

## 3.2 Swahili

### 3.2.1 Some introductory remarks on the language

- East African Bantu language spoken in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and beyond
- most important Lingua Franca besides Hausa
- class language: nouns are grouped according to semantic units, all elements depending on a certain noun have to be marked with a respective concord marker that differs according

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<sup>7</sup> see footnote 6

to the word category: adjectives, possessives, others (e.g. demonstratives), subjects, objects, relatives;

- highly agglutinating; the sequence structure of the verb is as follows: (non-optional slots marked in boldface): negation<sub>1</sub> – **subject** (PRO or CL) – **tense/aspect**/negation<sub>2</sub> – relative<sub>1</sub> – object (PRO or CL)/reflexive – **verbal base** – derivational suffixes – **indicative/negated present tense/subjunctive/negated imperative/passive** – relative<sub>2</sub> 0
- unmarked word order is SVO

### 3.2.2 Relative Constructions in Swahili

Swahili has three primary strategies used in the formation of relative clauses. Two of these strategies are expressed within the verb, as can be seen in the morphological sequence structure illustrated above. The third one involves *amba*, which has been referred to as ‘relative pronoun’ by some authors but whose status is in fact not totally clear yet.

#### 3.2.2.1 Strategy I: “tensed relatives”

The basic requirements for using this strategy are

subject (PRO or CL) – tense/aspect marker – relative<sub>1</sub> – verbal base – indicative

PRES.PROG	=> -na-
FUT	=> -taka-
PAST	=> -li-
NEG	=> -si-

- (13) “tensed” RC with antecedent / head noun of class 1 (human, singular)

**Mw**-alimu      **a-na-ye**-sem-a                      a-na-ka-a                      jira-ni.  
 CL1-teacher      3SG-PROG-REL.CL1-speak-INDIC      3SG-PROG-live-INDIC      next door-LOC  
 ‘The teacher who is speaking is living next door.’  
 Mwalimu is both the subject of the main and of the relative clause!

Based on:

Mw-alimu      a-na-ka-a                      jira-ni.  
 CL1-teacher      3SG-PROG-live-INDIC      next door-LOC  
 ‘The teacher is living next door.’

Mw-alimu      a-na-sem-a.  
 CL1-teacher      3SG-PROG-speak-INDIC  
 ‘The teacher is speaking.’

- (14) “tensed RC” with antecedent / head noun of class 2 (human, plural)

**W**-alimu      **wa-na-o**-sem-a                      wa-na-ka-a                      jira-ni.  
 CL2-teacher      2PL-PROG-REL.CL2-speak-INDIC      3PL-PROG-live-INDIC      next door-LOC  
 ‘The teachers who are speaking are living next door.’  
 Walimu is both the subject of the main and of the relative clause!

Based on:

W-alimu      wa-na-ka-a                      jira-ni.  
 CL2-teacher      3PL-PROG-live-INDIC      next door-LOC  
 ‘The teachers are living next door.’

W-alimu      wa-na-sem-a.  
 CL2-teacher      3PL-PROG-speak-INDIC  
 ‘The teachers are speaking.’



### 3.2.2.3 Strategy III: “*amba* relatives”

Among the three primary Swahili relativization strategies the one with *amba* is the least constrained with regard to tense/aspect marking, and, in a way, the closest to what speakers of languages that make use of a relative pronoun are used to.

- (19) **Ch-akula**      **amba-cho**      u-me-ki-pik-a  
 CL7-meal      AMBA-REL.CL7    2SG-PERF-OBJ.CL7-cook-INDIC  
 ki-ko      j-iko(<ji+iko)-ni.  
 CL7-be.LOC      CL5-kitchen-LOC  
 ‘The meal which you have cooked is in the kitchen.’

Based on:

Ch-akula	ki-ko	j-iko(<ji+iko)-ni.	(chakula=subject)
CL7-meal	CL7-be.LOC	CL5-kitchen-LOC	

‘The meal is in the kitchen.’

u-me-ki-pik-a	ch-akula.	(chakula=object)
2SG-PERF-OBJ.CL7-cook-INDIC	CL7-meal	

‘You have cooked the meal.’

- (20) M-tu      a-me-wa-salimu      **wa-geni**      **amba-o**  
 CL1-person    3SG-PERF-OBJ.3PL-greet    CL2-guest      AMBA-REL.CL2  
 a-me-wa-alik-a  
 3SG-PERF-OBJ.3PL-invite-INDIC  
 ‘The man has greeted the guests whom he has invited.’

Based on:

M-tu	a-me-wa-alik-a	wa-geni.	(wageni=object)
CL1-person	3SG-PERF-OBJ.3PL-invite-INDIC	CL2-guest	

‘The man has invited the guests.’

M-tu	a-me-wa-salimu	wa-geni.	(wageni=object)
CL1-person	3SG-PERF.OBJ.3PL-greet	CL2-guest	

‘The man has greeted the guests.’

As I have already pointed out, *amba*-relatives are in a way more familiar to us than the other two strategies. Besides their “relative pronoun-type” character they are identifiable more easily, which might be the reason why this strategy is preferred in certain contexts, for instance, when a sentence is longer and more complex (Ashton 1944[1971]:309f.).

### 3.2.2.4 Other possibilities to express Relative Constructions

Like Bambara, Swahili has other possibilities to express relative contexts. Among these secondary strategies are cleft constructions as in (21) (Mohammed 2001:186f.):

- (21) Wewe      ni      m-tu      tajiri.  
 ABS.PRO.2SG    COP    CL1-person    rich  
 ‘You are a rich person.’
- A-li-ye      m-tu      tajiri    ni      wewe.  
 3SG-be.AUX-REL.CL1    CL1-person    rich    COP    ABS.PRO.2SG  
 ‘It is you who is rich.’

Other instances which can be interpreted as cleft constructions involve *ndio*, which is in the lexicon simply translated as ‘these are they’ (cf. Höftmann & Herms: 1999[2005]). I assume that it is a cleft the translation of which has to be modified according to the context in which it occurs. Furthermore, it can be segmented into *ndi* + the corresponding relative marker of the NP targeted by the cleft process. The following example is taken from the Bible (Jo. 1,9) (*Biblia ndio Maandiko Matakafifu yote ya Agano la Kale nayo ya Agano Jipya katika msemu yva Kiswahili*, see References).

- (21) Ndi-**o**            **mw**-anga        wa                    kweli  
 ndi-REL.CL3    CL3-light        GEN.CL3            CL9.truth  
 u-na-o-mw-angaz-a                    kila    m-tu,  
 CL3-PAST-REL.CL3-OBJ.3SG-elucidate-INDIC    every    CL1-person  
 tena                    ndi-**o** (mwanga wa kweli)    u-li-**o**-kuw-a  
 furthermore    ndi-REL.CL3                    CL3-PAST-REL.CL3-come into existence-INDIC  
 u-ki-ja                    u-limwengu-ni  
 CL3-SIM-come    CL3-world-LOC  
 ‘It is the light of truth which elucidates every person; furthermore, it is the light which came into existence, when it came into the world.’

### 3.3 Others

In this section I will briefly touch onto two phenomena I mentioned earlier. These are relativization which involves tonal changes and relativization via nominalization.

#### 3.3.1 Ngas

Ngas is an Afro-Asiatic language spoken in Plateau State, Nigeria. It has two dialects: Plain Ngas and Hill Ngas. One of its most important features is tone, both in the lexicon and in syntax. Tone also plays a crucial role in relative constructions in this language, as it is the only means which is not optional.

##### 3.3.1.1 Relative constructions in Ngas<sup>8</sup>

In Ngas, a relative clause follows the noun it modifies. The structure is as follows:

Head NP (REL) S (POSTREL) (PL<sub>Head NP</sub>)

Ngas’ relative markers are **mE**, **kò** and **kòomE**, its post-relative markers are **Āà** and **nyi**. These markers are invariant with respect to the number of the head noun. In addition, they are all facultative and can be omitted. The crucial thing with regard to relative constructions is the fact that the relative marker evokes a falling tone on the preceding element. This might be the head noun itself or the last element within the NP. Thus, a high tone becomes high-low-falling and a mid tone becomes mid-low-falling. (Examples from Jungraithmayr & Holubová 2010.)

- (22) ʔyàm            **mE**        [p0    ji]                    **nyi**                    (cf. ʔyàm ‘child’, ‘son’)  
 child.REL        REL        PROG    V.come                    POSTREL  
 ‘This child that is coming’

- (23) g0                    [kè                    mEt]                    **Āà**                    (cf. g0 ‘man’)  
 man.REL            3SG.PF                    V.go                    POSTREL  
 ‘the man who has gone’

- (24) kè                    nī i            nēN                    [wu    kàrèm]                    (cf. nēN, var. nún ‘cow’)  
 3SG.PF                    V.see        COW.REL                    2PL.GA    V.slaughter  
 ‘He/She saw the cow that you slaughter.’

<sup>8</sup> All data and comments presented in this section are from Miroslava Grünwaldt (Holubová).

### 3.3.2 §Ani

§Ani is a Central Khoisan language of the Khoe group. These languages have a rich morphology and use particles as well as bound morphemes. Furthermore, §Ani has clicks and tones (for more details see Vossen 1997).

#### 3.3.2.1 Relative constructions in §Ani

Relative constructions in §Ani are expressed via nominalization of the verb within the “relative clause”.

- (25) §gEE.khòè-**hE**                      tsáè-βà                      dóó-tši-§dè-**hE**                      ...  
female.person-F.SG                      2M.SG-OBJ                      love-2M.SG.OBJ-HAB-F.SG  
'The/A woman who loves you...'  
*literally*: 'The/A woman loving you one...'                      (R.V. p.c.)

- (26) n/né-m                      khoe-**mà**                      §ürú-biye                      "x'ùún-a-§'òm-**mà**  
DEM-M.SG                      person-M.SG                      bush-horse                      kill-JUNC-PAST-M.SG  
  
kx'áò.khòè                      tóòta\*                      \*(<Setswana) (Vossen & Güldemann 2000)  
male.person                      real

'This man who (recently) killed a zebra (is) a real man.'  
*literally*: 'The having killed one man real.'

## 4 Summary

In this overview I have shown that relative constructions in African languages display a wide range of processes involved in its formation. In addition to the more “classical” structures which make use of relative particles we have seen that relative concord markers, participles, tone and nominalization also play a crucial role in this area. In addition, relative constructions in African languages do not obey the clear concept of subordination, but are sometimes in an intermediary state between parataxis and hypotaxis on a possible path of grammaticalization. Given that only four out of a huge number of languages have been presented here, it becomes clear that the formation of relative clauses still remains an interesting object of further investigation.

## 5 Abbreviations

1,2,3PL	first, second or third person plural (SUBJ, OBJ, POSS, REFL)
1,2,3SG	first, second or third person singular (SUBJ, OBJ, POSS, REFL)
ABS.PRO	absolute pronoun
AFF	affirmative
AGENS	suffix for Nomen Agentis
AUX	auxiliary
CL	class marker / concord marker
COP	copula
DEM.REF	referential demonstrative
F	feminine
FUT	future
GA	Grundaspekt
HAB	habitual
INDIC	indicative
INTRANS	intransitive
JUNC	junction
LOC	locative
M	masculine
NEG	negation
NP	noun phrase
OBJ	object
PART	particle
PAST	past tense
PERF	perfect tense
PF	perfective aspect
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
POSTREL	postrelative marker
POSTPOS	postposition
PPA	present participle
PPP	past participle
PRES	present tense
PRO	pronoun
PROG	progressive
REFL	reflexive
REL	relative marker
SG	singular
SIM	marker expressing simultaneous actions
SUBJ	subject
V	verb

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Online Resources

<http://www.bible.is/BAMLSB/Matt/5>