

The Acquisition of French Relative Clauses by Indonesian Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the acquisition of French relative clauses by Indonesian students learning French at A2 level at a university in West Java. It aims to describe the linguistic competence (grammar and lexicon) in the formation of French relative clauses acquired by students in terms of Universal Grammar of the Minimalist Program of Generative Grammar. Qualitative approach and descriptive method were used. The data collections have been done through grammaticality judgment techniques with the T-F test. The test results showed that (a) each student had already acquired the grammar to derive the abstract structure of CP for relative clauses but (b) each student had different degree of the acquisition of lexical categories in particular the acquisition of Op(erator), complementizer *qui/que* [that] and relative pronouns and (c) point (b) above became the main factor for the existence of two levels of proficiency i.e., the convergent and the divergent levels. However, those two levels were still in line with Universal Grammar.

Keywords: *French, relative clause, Indonesian, convergence, divergence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some of the results of research on the acquisition of linguistic competence of French relative clauses by Indonesian students learning French (as a foreign language) at the A2 level at a university in Indonesia. The aims of this study are (a) to describe the level of the level of convergence (reaches the level of native speakers) and the level of divergence (interlanguage grammar) in the acquisition of relative clauses and (b) provides information on the acquisition of the French in terms of Generative Grammar because previous researches are carried out in the context of Error Analysis theory and (c) the reason for choosing relative clauses as linguistic data is that there is a sharp difference between Indonesian and French relative terms.

Indonesian uses a complementizer *yang* [what/which] can represent the subject or object element, while French utilizes the complement *qui* [who] or *que* [what] whose forms are similar to question words. Another difference is that the forms of relative pronouns inflect for Number [\pm Plural], Gender [\pm Masculine], Animate [\pm Human] and Definite

[\pm Definite] which are not found in Indonesian. Therefore, Prévost (as cited in Renaud, 2012) claimed that the French relative clause structure has the same structure as the interrogative clauses. Radford (2004) also proposed the same claim for English.

1. [DP [D'] [D] [NP] [CP [Specifier] [C'] [C.] [IP [Spec] [I'] [I] [VP [Spec] [V'] [V] [DP/PP]]]]]

The structure of the relative clause above was adopted from Prévost (2009). D(eterminer) P(hrase) is the head element and C(omplementizer) P(hrase) is the relative clause.

According to White (2003), Universal Grammar is part of an innate biologically to build abstract linguistic competence which accounts for the input to build linguistic representations and to understand and produce language and Universal Grammar is considered applicable to foreign language acquisition (other than first language acquisition). According to Coseriu (1985), White (2003), Radford (2004) and Carnie (2021), linguistic competence is abstract knowledge about the grammar and lexicon of a language that is owned by native speakers of a language or foreign language learners. The linguistic competence of native

speakers results in perfect abilities in understanding and producing language. On the other hand, linguistic competence in a foreign language can result in the ability to reach the level of convergence or divergence due to the influence of the previous languages that the learners have.

The grammar part of linguistic competence comes from the principles of Universal Grammar which do not vary. According to Cole and Hermon (1998), Volpato (2010), Carnie (2021), Furuya (2017), Guasti and Cardinaletti (2003), Guasti and Shlonsky (1995), Prentza (2012), Prévost (2009) and Radford (2004) consist of: (1) all languages have the same abstract architecture because the principles of syntax do not recognize optionality, (2) The principle of Full Interpretation emphasizes that all clause elements must be readable by the semantic/Logical Form and pronunciation/Phonetic Form of the target language, (3) Computation for Human Language is used to form or derive clauses in any language through Select, Merge and Move operations for the derivation converges on Logical Form (semantics) and Phonetic Form (Phonology), (4) Principle of Economy Derivation states that no movement / covert movement is more recommended than overt movement. Covert movement is the movement of features owned by abstract morphemes that occurs in the LF. Overt movement always involves moving features and lexical material (pied piping) which takes place in syntax, (5) The functional head contains features with the values [+Strong] and [-Interpretable] which cannot be read by Logical Form because they can trigger covert/overt movement and (6) Covert Movement or Overt Movement is governed by the Feature Checking principal purposes so that the derivation converges. Each element that moves is marked with a trace (*ti*) and its index (*i*) which means that both have the same meaning. All principles are not learned because they come from Universal Grammar.

Another principle is the parameter that governs the differences between languages that lie in the lexicon (White, 2003). According to Radford (2004), lexicon contains functional categories and lexical categories (lexical content) or abstract morphemes such as Op(erator). Each lexical item has featured that student must learn and acquire in obtaining relative clauses. The features that must be studied are the features of functional category D containing the [±Def], Number [±Plural] while the Gender [±Masculine] feature belongs to N(oun) as the complement of D, (2) functional category I(nflection) has features Tense

[±Past], Number [±Plural], Person [+1/2/3P] and Case [+Nominative], (3) functional category C(omplementizer) contains features such as [+Wh] and [-Q]. Each feature belonging to D, I and C has a value of [+Strong] and [-Interpretable]. In addition to the functional categories, lexicon also includes lexical categories such as (a) V(erb) which has the features of Tense [±Past], Number [±Plural], Person [+1/2/3P] and Case [+Accusative], (b) Op has [+Wh] feature which always accompanies the complements *qui*[that] and *que*[that], (c) relative pronouns *où* (time/place), *don't* [whose] and *avec qui* [with whom] have [+Wh] feature. (d) other relative pronouns also have [+Wh] but there are additional features such as *sur laquelle* has feature [+Wh], [-Plural], [-Masculine]. All features belonging to the lexical categories above have the value of [+Interpretable]. Details of the features for other relative pronouns are discussed in chapter 3. In short, linguistic competence that reaches convergence is characterized by mastery of the above features. Complete mastery of features belonging to lexical and functional categories can result in convergent derivation in PF and LF. On the other hand, failure to master the features can cause the derivation to crash or diverge. This is urgent because the acquisition of those features facilitates the Select, Merge and Move operations in combining sentence elements and moving an element from original position to another position in the relative clauses so that the derivation or the formation of relative clauses are acceptable at PF and LF.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Method

This study used the qualitative approach using the descriptive method to explore and understand the linguistic competence of the students who are the subject of this research. This research was conducted at a university in Indonesia.

2.2. Participants

The number of students involved was 55 students who are learning French at A2 level for the 2019-2020 academic year. They have studied relative clauses through French Grammar courses which took place in the first semester because learning material for relative clauses was given formally in the second semester. The objects of this research are the level of convergence and divergence of students of relative clauses.

2.3 The data collection

The data collection used a grammaticality judgment test in the form of a written True-False test taking place with a very tight limited time limit of 10 minutes for each student to provide the answers. The questions given consisted of 16 questions consisting of 8 correct questions and 8 incorrect questions and each was aimed at exploring the level of convergence/divergence. The ability to answer that showed the level of convergence/divergence was seen from the achievement of acquisition of features belonging to the lexical category with features belonging to the functional category.

2.4. Research procedures

The study adhered to the following procedure:

1. Researcher asked every student to meet face-to-face online,
2. Researcher provided written questions to be answered by each student,
3. After the test was completed, the researcher confirmed to each student about the difficulties in working on the test, including understanding the meaning of each word and the features contained in each relative clause. The three steps above were applied to every student.

2.5. Data Analyst

Data analysis was focused on, first, analysis of each question by each student in terms of vocabulary and features. The next analysis is to identify the number of students who were stable at the level of convergence. Identification of the number of students who were at the level of divergence was also conducted. In chapter 4, the results of each analysis and the number of students with levels of convergence and divergence are presented.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The findings from the grammaticality judgment test show that: (1) the majority of the students managed to reach the level of convergence because they acquired functional/ categories and the relevant features which were readable at PF and LF, (2) those students at the level of divergence showed that they already failed to acquire the relevant features of functional/lexical categories so the derivations were rejected by PF and LF, and (3) all convergent and divergent data are still regulated by linguistic competence derived from Universal Grammar.

Table 1. The Acquisition of relative clause involving the complementizer *qui* [that] and *op*.

No	Complementise <i>qui</i> [who]	T	F	Total
1	[DP <i>une femme</i>] [CP [Spec <i>Op i</i>] [C' [C <i>qui i</i>] [IP <i>ti est très belle</i>]]]]] (a lady who is very beautiful.)	51	4	55
2	* [DP <i>un appartement</i>] [CP [Spec <i>ma mère i</i>] [C' [C <i>qui i</i>] [IP [Spec <i>ti</i>] [I' <i>I veut depuis longtemps</i>]]]]] * (An appartement my mother that wanted for a long time.)	11	44	55

*Wrong relative clause

Table 2. The acquisition of relative clause involving the complementizer *que* [that] and *op*

No	Complementise <i>que</i> [that]	T	F	Total
1	[DP <i>Une robe</i>] [Spec <i>Op i</i>] [C' [C <i>que i</i>] [IP [Spec <i>J'</i>] [I' [I <i>ai</i>] [VP <i>achetée ti</i>]]]]] (A gown that I bought)	47	8	55
2	* [DP <i>Antoine</i>] [CP [Spec <i>Op i</i>] [C' [C <i>que i</i>] [IP [Spec <i>Je</i>] [I' [I <i>connais ti Pierre</i>]]]]] * (Antoine that I know Pierre)	15	40	55

*Wrong relative clause

Those findings above are supported by the data presented in Tables 1-8. Most students had the stability to maintain the level of convergence but the number of students who were at interlanguage state (divergence) is significant in number.

3.2. Discussion

The data from Table 1 to Table 8 revealed that of the 55 students, there were 19 students who were not stable in obtaining the relative clause (divergence) because they sometimes gave correct answers to wrong relative clause or provided incorrect answers to correct sentences, but the majority of students reached the level of convergence in acquiring relative clauses. However, both levels of convergence and divergence did not conflict with the principles of Universal Grammar.

Based on table 1, the majority of students who reached the level of convergence could distinguish the correct relative clause in (1) from the incorrect one in (2). This indicated that they were able to acquire the features belonging to C, Op and the complementiser *qui* [who] represents the subject element. The complementiser *qui* [who] that occupied C was done through a based-generated strategy and it has the meaning of relative clause from the covert movement of Op yang memiliki fitur [+Wh] dari Spec IP ke Spec CP to erase [-Q] feature and [+Wh] features which are [+Strong] and [-Interpretable] of C supaya semua fitur milik C menjadi [+Interpretable] pada PF dan LF. Based on the data in (2), most students managed to claim that

data in (2) was incorrect. This means that they can identify that overt movement of DP *ma mère* [my mother] yang tidak memiliki [+Wh] feature from Spec IP to Spec cannot remove the features of C, i.e. [-Q] and [+Wh] which are [+Strong] and [-Interpretable] and consequently there is no meaning relative clause (divergence) in PF and LF. Based on the data from (1) and (2) above, the number of students who are still at the interlanguage level (divergence) is quite significant.

Based on the data in table 2 (1-2), the number of students who are still at the interlanguage level is quite significant even though the number of students who reach the level of convergence is much higher and this shows that they completely master the features of C, Op and complementizer. *que* [that] so that it can distinguish correct relative terms from false ones. In (1), complementiser *que* [what] which did not have [+Wh] feature has occupied C through based-generated operations, but it did not remove [-Q] and [+Wh] features of C. But, when Op which has [+Wh] feature which is [+Interpretable] performed covert movement from object position (ti) to Spec CP marked by index (i), all features of C became readable at PF and LF. In (2), students who have the level of convergence succeeded in asserting that in (2) Op which has a [+Wh] feature in Spec CP only gave relative meaning to *que* [that] as an object representation, not to Pierre.

The data (1) in table 3 revealed that majority students had knowledge that (a) relative pronoun *où* [where] has [+Wh] feature which is [+Interpretable] and (b) C contains [-Q] feature and [+Wh] feature which is [+Strong] and [-Interpretable]. For the derivation to be convergent at PF and LF, the pronoun relative *où* [where] must move to Spec CP overtly to erase the features of C creating convergent data at PF and LF. However, when faced with data (2), lesser students were able to maintain the level of convergence. The error in data (2) is that DP *la place* [the place] is not a relative pronoun so that it does not have the [+Wh] feature which is [+Interpretable]. When overt movement of DP *la place* [the place] to Spec CP, it cannot delete [+Wh] feature of C and accordingly data (2) was unreadable on PF and LF. Students who are still at the interlanguage level are involved quite a lot as a result of instability in mastering the required features.

The data in table 4 shows that the majority of students managed to get the relative pronoun *où* [when] which has [+Wh] feature which is [+Interpretable] at LF. When they performed overt movement for relative pronoun *où* [when] to Spec CP to remove the features of C which were [+Strong] and [-Interpretable], the relative clause is convergent at PF and LF. On the other hand, in (2), the relative clause is wrong because DP *le temp* [time] is not a relative pronoun that has [+Wh] feature. When the students performed overt movement

of DP *le temp* [time] to Spec CP, this movement did not help the features of C to be readable at PF and LF.

The data in Table 5 shows that the majority of students succeeded in obtaining the pronoun relative *dont* which has [+Wh] feature which is [+Interpretable]. This allowed the students to do overt movement of *don't* [whose] from its original position to Spec CP to remove features of [-Q] and [+Wh] which are [+Strong] and [-Interpretable] of C and the result is convergence on PF

Table 3. The acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronoun *où* (adverb of place)

No	Relative <i>où</i> [where]	T	F	Total
1	[DP un livre] [CP [Spec où i] [C' [C] [IP [Spec je] [I' [I trouve] [VP la vraie histoire de notre pays ti]]]]]. (A book where I found the true history of the country.)	52	3	55
2	* [DP le magasin] [CP [Spec la place i] [C' [C] [IP [Spec je] [VP [V' [V fais mes courses ti]]]]]]]. * (the shop the place I do shopping.)	10	45	55

*Wrong relative clause

Table 4. The Acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronouns *où* (adverb of time)

No	Relative <i>où</i> [when]	T	F	Total
1	[DP la grand guerre] [CP [Spec où i] [C' [C] [IP [Spec beaucoup de monde] [I' [I étaient morts ti]]]]]. (Great war where many people were dead.)	47	8	55
2	*J'ai rendu visite à ma grand-mère [DP la semaine dernière] [CP [Spec] [C' [C] [IP [Spec le temps j] [I' I ai] [VP rencontré mon cousin ti]]]]]. *(I saw my grandmother last week the time. I met my cousin.)	12	43	55

*Wrong relative clause

Table 5. the acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronoun *dont*

No	Relative <i>dont</i> [whose]	T	F	Total
1	[DP des fruits] [CP [Spec dont i] [C' [C] [IP [Spec elle] [I' [I a] [VP besoin ti pour cuisiner. (The fruits she needs to cook.)	46	9	55
2	* [DP les amis] [CP [Spec dont] [C' [C] [IP [Spec ti] [I' [I sont] [VP étudiants]]]]]. *(Friends whose are students.)	19	36	55

*Wrong relative clause

and LF. On the other hand, the minority of subjects failed to get the pronoun relative dont so that they were unable to distinguish the true relative clause from the false one as in (2).

The data in Table 6 shows that the majority subjects were able to distinguish relative pronouns *sur lequel* [on which] from *sur laquelle* from the gender features [\pm Masculin]. In (1), after the overt movement to Spec CP, the relative pronoun *sur lequel* [on which] whose feature [+Masculin] matches [+Masculin] features of DP *le bateau*. The derivation in (2) fails to reach

Table 6. The acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronouns *sur lequel*

No	Relative <i>sur lequel</i> [on which]	T	F	Total
1	[DP <i>Le bateau</i>] [CP [Spec <i>sur lequel</i>] [C' [C] [IP [Spec <i>on</i>] [I'] [<i>navigues</i>] [IP <i>est en panne</i>]]]]]. (The boat we are sailing on is broken down.)	51	4	55
2	*[DP <i>Le musée du Louvre</i>] [CP [Spec <i>dans laquelle</i>] [IP [Spec <i>il y a La Joconde est toujours visité. par des touristes</i>]]]]]. * (The Louvre Museum in which there is La Joconde is still visited by tourists.)	9	46	55

*Wrong relative clause

Table 7. The acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronouns *dans lequel*

No	Relative <i>dans lequel</i> [in which]	T	F	Total
1	[DP <i>L'appartement</i>] [CP [Spec <i>dans lequel</i>] [C' [C] [IP [Spec <i>ma mere</i>] [I' [I] <i>habite</i>] [VP [Spec] [V' [V]]]]]]]. (The apartment where my mother lives.)	50	5	55
2	*[DP <i>L'appartement</i>] [CP [Spec <i>dans lequel</i>] * [C' [C] [IP [Spec <i>ma mere</i>] [I' [I] <i>habite</i>] [VP [Spec] [V' [V]]]]]]]. *(The apartment where my mother lives.)	7	48	55

*Wrong relative clause

Table 8. the acquisition of relative clause involving relative pronoun *avec qui*

No	Relative <i>avec qui</i> [whom]	T	F	Total
1	[J'aime [DP <i>l'homme</i>] [CP [Spec <i>avec qui</i>] [C' [C] [IP [Spec <i>tu</i>] [I' [I] <i>es</i>] [VP [Spec] [V' [V] <i>parti</i>] [DP <i>hier soir</i>]]]]]]]. (I love the man with whom you left last night.)	49	6	55
2	*Voici [DP <i>le collègue</i>] [CP [Spec <i>qui</i>] [C' [C] [IP [Spec <i>j</i>] [I' [I] <i>écris</i>] [VP [Spec] [V' [V] [DP <i>le rapport</i>] [PP <i>avec</i>]]]]]]]. *(Here is the colleague whom I write the report with.)	9	46	55

*Wrong relative clause

convergence due to the failure to distinguish relative pronouns in terms of gender, between *le musée* [+Masculine] and the relative pronoun *sur laquelle* [-Masculine].

The data in Table 7 shows that the majority of subjects managed to judge the relative pronouns of *dans lequel* [where] from *dans les quels*. [where] in terms of Number [\pm Plural] features. Relative pronoun *sur le quel* at Spec CP has [-Plural] feature which is similar to the one of DP *l'appartement* which also has [-Plural] feature. Thus, data in (1) is convergence at PF and LF after overt movement of relative pronouns *dans le quel* from initial position to Spec CP to remove features [+Wh] which are [+Strong] and [-Interpetable]. The failure achieved by 12 subjects resulted from divergent derivation because the relative pronouns *dans lesquels* have [+Plural] features that do not match with the one of DP *l'appartement*.

The data in Table 8 shows that the majority of subjects succeeded in acquiring the relative pronoun *avec qui* [with whom] as in (1) which does not do any preposition stranding but as many as 13 people did preposition stranding in French grammar as in (2) which is forbidden.

4. CONCLUSION

The linguistic competence of relative clause linguistics can be acquired by the majority of students because they acquired (a) the functional categories, (b) the lexical categories and (c) their relevant features so that they reach the level of convergence and are able to distinguish correct sentences and identify wrong sentence. The students who were at the level of divergence (interlanguage) were characterized by failure to have the relevant features of (a) the functional categories, (b) the lexical categories. The results of the study indicated that both levels of convergence or divergence of students' proficiency could be explained in terms of the principles of Universal Grammar.

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