Observations regarding finite and participial relative clauses in Latin and Ancient Greek

Key words: relativisation strategies; relative clause; participle; historical linguistics

11th International Contrastive Linguistics Conference – Prague, 17-19 September 2025

In its conventional definition, heavily influenced by the legacy of Greek and Latin grammars, the relative clause (RC) is a subordinate clause which is introduced by a relative pronoun, comprises a finite verb form, and whose function is to modify a noun designated as the antecedent. However, since Lehmann's pioneering study (1984), these characteristics have been repeatedly contested. Typologists and functionalists have developed a more precise definition of relativisation strategies: neither the presence of the relative pronoun (Comrie, 1989, pp. 138–164) nor that of a finite verb form (Cristofaro, 2003, pp. 53–60) is sufficient to describe all RCs.

Moreover, it was demonstrated that the participle, when it modifies a noun, can be regarded as a RC in its own right (Sleeman, 2017; Shagal, 2019). These typological advances have had relatively little impact on historical linguistics. For instance, Ramos Guerreira (2009) and Pinkster (2021) both leave the issue of competition between finite and participial RCs in Latin unaddressed, while Burkard et al. (2020, p. 713) briefly observe that, in this language, "das rein attributive Partizip ersetzt einen attributiven Relativsatz". A notable exception is Pompei (2011, pp. 489–492), in which the topic is explored in some depth, albeit without the support of a systematic corpus study. Regarding Ancient Greek, the *status quaestionis* is broadly similar: whilst the finite RCs received extensive attention, as evidenced by Probert's work (2015), the relationship between these RCs and participial ones remains an area of ongoing research.

On the basis of an already compiled corpus of works by Plautus, Caesar, Herodotus and Aeschylus, I propose to examine a number of stylistic, semantic and syntactic criteria in order to understand the distribution between finite and participial RCs in Latin and in Greek. In such a study, the following questions arise naturally:

- the relation between balanced (finite) and deranked (non-finite) verb forms (Stassen, 1985, pp. 76–83) and the Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie, 1977; Comrie & Keenan, 1979);
- the influence of the textual genre;
- the type of discourse unit in which the relative pronoun – or *pivot* (de Vries, 2002) – is located;
- the syntactic weight of these RCs and their word order.

Such an analysis will provide a clearer understanding of the differences between the two types of RCs in Latin and in Greek, while contextualising both languages in a more recent framework that takes typological advances into account.

References

Burkard, T., Schauer, M., & Menge, H. (2020). *Lehrbuch der lateinischen Syntax und Semantik* (6th ed.). WBG.

Comrie, B. (1989). *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Comrie, B., & Keenan, E. L. (1979). Noun Phrase Accessibility Revisited. *Language*, *55*(3), 649–664. https://doi.org/10.2307/413321

Cristofaro, S. (2003). *Subordination*. Oxford University Press.

de Vries, M. (2002). *The Syntax of Relativization*. LOT.

Keenan, E. L., & Comrie, B. (1977). Noun Phrase Accessibility and Universal Grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry*, *8*(1), 63–99.

Lehmann, C. (1984). *Der Relativsatz: Typologie seiner Strukturen, Theorie seiner Funktionen, Kompendium seiner Grammatik*. Narr.

Pinkster, H. (2021). *The Oxford Latin Syntax*. Vol. 2 : *The Complex Sentence and Discourse*. Oxford University Press.

Pompei, A. (2011). Relative clauses. In P. Baldi & P. Cuzzolin (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Historical Latin Syntax*. Vol. 4 : *Complex Sentences, Grammaticalization, Typology* (pp. 427–548). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110253412.427

Probert, P. (2015). *Early Greek Relative Clauses*. Oxford University Press.

Ramos Guerreira, A. (2009). Oraciones de relativo. In J. M. Baños Baños (Ed.), *Sintaxis del latín clásico* (pp. 563–600). Liceus.

Shagal, K. (2019). *Participles: A Typological Study*. De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110633382

Sleeman, P. (2017). Participial Relative Clauses. In M. Aronoff (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.185

Stassen, L. (1985). *Comparison and Universal Grammar*. Blackwell.