Australian relative clauses revisited: a new sample study

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This paper studies relative clause (RC) constructions in a sample of Australian languages, focusing on (i) their degree of embeddedness, and (ii) distinguishability from adverbial clause constructions. Both features have been central to earlier discussions of RCs in Australian languages, which are commonly perceived as widely displaying non-embeddedness and multifunctionality (e.g. Hale 1976; Nordlinger 2006; Hendery 2012: 22–23, 2023; Dryer 2013), as in (1), where the clause 'flies are eating [it]' has a peripheral position w.r.t. the main clause, and has both relative and temporal interpretations. While the typological picture has since been enriched (Nordlinger 2006; Hendery 2023), these questions have not been thoroughly investigated from a continent-wide perspective. From a sample of 50 Australian languages, we show that both embedding and dedicated relative functions can be found in about half of the languages, even while adjunction and multifunctionality are also widespread.

In order to capture a wide range of data, we identify RC constructions in our sample as consisting of a predicate that is linked to another clause, and delimiting or expanding on the reference of a nominal expression in that clause, whether or not this is its only function (cf. Hendery 2023; Keenan 1985; Andrews 2007).We find that most languages have more than one RC construction type, and that constructions may vary along the lines of finiteness, the presence and type of overt linkage marking, and position w.r.t. the main clause.

First, we use concrete and testable criteria to identify embedding, which we view as a constituency relationship between an RC and its (pivot) head, or if headless, the degree to which the RC functions as a clausal argument. The former manifests most clearly when the RC interrupts the main clause, as in (2), or when the RC and its head are obligatorily adjacent (as in Wambaya [Nordlinger 2006]). Besides syntactic evidence, there can also be morphological evidence: e.g. in Arrernte (3), phrasal case marking delineates the constituent boundaries of the NP as including the RC. Embedded structures are available in at least half of the languages in our sample.

Secondly, we find that dedicated RCs are more common than first assumed. In approximately one-quarter of languages in our sample, there are dedicated RC markers that can be distinguished from adverbial clause markers, such as in Mawng (see Singer 2006: 152–153). About one third of the languages have a relative construction that, in the absence of dedicated relative markers, can be distinguished by other means, like particular positional requirements. In Arabana–Wangkangurru, embedded position only permits a relative interpretation (2), whereas peripheral position allows for at least relative and temporal interpretations (1). Finally, the majority of languages have at least one multifunctional construction type where only usage in discourse context may specify a relative interpretation – confirming the prevalence of this pattern across Australia.

Arabana–Wangkangurru (Pama–Nyungan: Karnic)

(1) *antha*   **walpu**   *mirra-nta*   **[nguringuri-ri tharni-ngura].**
    I   **leg**   scratch-REFL   **[fly-ERG   eat-CONT]**
    'I'm scratching my leg, which is being bitten by flies.' (Hercus 1994: 178)
    OR: '…because / while flies are biting (it)' (authors)

(2) *arlantara-ru*   **[nyinta   [wami-ya-kura   kaRu]]**   *kilta-rnda.*
    cyclone-ERG   **[tree   [grow-P-CONT.PST   there]]**   uproot-PRS
    'Cyclones uproot any trees that have been growing there.' (Hercus 1994: 158)

Mparntwe Arrernte (Pama–Nyungan: Arandic)

(3) *re*   *lhe-ke*   **[** *artwe* **[** *unte-rle*   *pwerte*   *ine-ke-rle* **]** **]**-*kerte*

    3sg.S   go-PST.COMPL   **[man**   **[2sg.S-REL**   **money** **get-PST.COMPL-REL]]-PROP**

    'She left with the man who you got money from.' (Wilkins 1989: 427)

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