

Reexamining Relativization Strategies in Afaan Oromoo: Western Dialect in Focus

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Abstract

This study investigates the relativization strategies employed in Afaan Oromoo, with a particular focus on the Western dialect. The research is conducted within a typological framework, aiming to identify how the language encodes the syntactic role of the head noun within relative clauses. Data for the study were gathered through a combination of elicitation from native speakers and introspection by the researcher, who is a native speaker of the dialect. The findings reveal that Afaan Oromoo employs a range of relativization strategies depending on the grammatical function of the relativized noun phrase. These include the pro in-situ strategy, where agreement markers on the verb refer back to a null pronominal subject or object; the gapping strategy, in which the relativized element is omitted altogether; the use of resumptive pronouns, in which a pronoun-like element remains in the original position of the relativized noun phrase, carrying the appropriate case marking to indicate its grammatical role; and the stranded postposition strategy, in which locative postpositions are left behind in the syntactic position of the relativized noun phrase. Except for the gapping strategy, these relativization mechanisms have not been identified or described in previous studies. Moreover, contrary to claims made in earlier works, such as Abdo (2011), the findings demonstrate that Afaan Oromoo does not utilize a relative pronoun strategy. Overall, the study contributes new insights into the typology of relative clause formation in Afaan Oromoo and enriches the broader understanding of relativization strategies in Cushitic languages.

Key words: clause, relative clause, relativization strategy, relativization

1. Introduction

Afaan Oromoo is a member of the Lowland East Cushitic branch of the Cushitic languages, which falls under the larger Afroasiatic language family. It is one of the major languages spoken on the African continent, primarily in Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent in parts of Kenya and Somalia, particularly in regions bordering Ethiopia (Eberhard et al., 2019). Within Ethiopia, Afaan Oromoo is the most widely spoken language and serves as the official working language of the Oromia National Regional State. It is also the medium of instruction in primary and junior secondary education, in teacher training colleges, and in universities that offer Bachelor's, Master's and PhD/DEd programs in Afaan Oromoo. The language is written with a Latin-based orthography known as *Qubee*, which was officially adopted in the early 1990s.

According to Feda (2015), who analyzed the lexical distance among the various dialects of Oromo spoken in Ethiopia, six primary dialects have been identified: the western

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dialect (spoken in Wollegga, Illubabor, and Jimma), the central dialect (spoken in Shoa), the northern dialect (spoken in Rayya and Wollo), the southeastern dialect (spoken in Arsi and Bale), the southern dialect (spoken in Borana and Guji), and the eastern dialect (spoken in Hararghe areas). Although these dialects display notable phonological and lexical differences, there is general consensus that the dialects are quite closely related, with significant mutual intelligibility (Banti & Shimelis, 2023).

The phonological inventory of Afaan Oromoo includes 24 consonant phonemes and five vowel phonemes (Gragg, 1976: 174). Both consonant gemination and vowel length are contrastive and therefore phonemically significant. Consonant clusters and geminates occur only in word-medial positions, and vowel sequences consisting of adjacent vowels with differing qualities are generally avoided. While pitch-related features have not been studied extensively, some sources suggest that Afaan Oromoo employs a two-level tonal system—high and low—which serves both lexical and grammatical functions (Banti & Shimelis, 2023: 260).

Morphologically, Afaan Oromoo is characterized by concatenative processes, where grammatical categories and syntactic relations are marked primarily through the use of affixes. The language is predominantly suffixing, though a few prefixes are also attested. Syntactically, Afaan Oromoo exhibits a head-final structure, with verbs typically appearing at the end of the clause. Subordinate clauses precede main clauses in verb phrases, while in noun phrases, modifiers—including adjectives, relative clauses, and determiners—follow the head noun. This indicates that, although Afaan Oromoo has an OV word order in main clause constructions, its relative clauses are postnominal — a characteristic typically associated with VO languages (Payne 1997: 326). Possessor nouns also follow the possessed noun, a trait that further distinguishes the language's syntactic profile (Banti & Shimelis, 2023: 291).

The topic of relativization strategies in Afaan Oromoo has been explored for several decades, appearing peripherally in descriptive grammars of various dialects and more thoroughly in certain theoretically oriented studies. In his sketch grammar of 'Oromo of Wellegga', Gragg (1976:191) identifies *kan* as the usual relative pronoun used in forming relative clauses. In addition to *kan*, the language employs *waan* for inanimate antecedents, and *warra* and *jara* for indefinite plural antecedents. Gragg also notes the use of third person pronouns in relativization. Beyond these forms, he did not identify any additional relativization strategies in the dialect.

Owens (1985:131), in his study of 'Harar Oromo', identifies *χan* and *tan*—respectively the masculine and feminine equivalents of *kan*—as optional associative morphemes that function as relative clause markers. According to Owens, these markers are optional when the head noun is overtly expressed, but they become self-standing (i.e., obligatory and nominal in function) when the head noun is omitted. Furthermore, he asserts that the gapping strategy is the sole method for determining the function of the head noun within a restrictive clause. He outlines the structure of relative clauses as follows:

- Antecedent NP (*χani/tani*) + gap + verb (dative/instrumental) (Owens 1985:131).

In his theory-driven analysis of Afaan Oromoo relative clauses, Baye (1989) identifies

several syntactic positions that can undergo relativization, including subject, direct object, indirect object, and oblique roles. He further notes that Afaan Oromoo commonly employs a gapping strategy in various relativization contexts—meaning the position of the head noun within the restrictive clause is left empty, rather than being filled by resumptive or overt relative pronouns in all instances. Challenging earlier analyses, he contends that *kan* should not be treated as a relative pronoun, but rather as a complementizer in the language.

Abdo (2011) concurs with Baye (1989) regarding the syntactic positions that can undergo relativization—such as subject, direct object, and indirect object—but extends the list to include oblique, genitive, and object of comparison. However, he diverges from Baye (1989) in his analysis of *kan/tan* and third-person pronouns, which he treats as relative pronouns, aligning with earlier accounts by Gragg (1976) and Owens (1985). According to him, relativization strategies employed in Afaan Oromoo are relative pronoun and gapping strategies.

This study attempts to advance earlier contributions by introducing several previously unrecognized relativization strategies, identified through newly collected data from the Western dialect of Afaan Oromoo.

The study bases its analytical framework on the typological study of relative clauses proposed by Keenan and Comrie (1977), and further developed by scholars including Comrie (1989), Payne (1997), Song (2001), Kuteva and Comrie (2005), Andrews (2007b), and others. The following paragraphs outline the core concepts of relative clause structures and relativization strategies.

A relative clause, often known as an adjective clause, is “a subordinate clause which delimits the reference of an NP by specifying the role of the referent of that NP in the situation described by the RC” (Andrews 2007a: 206). Payne (1997: 325) states that a relative clause might consist of multiple relevant components. These include the head, an NP that the clause modifies, the restricting clause (also referred to as the relative clause), the element inside the relative clause that is coreferential with the head noun (also called the relativized NP), and the element that connects the restricting clause from the head noun (also called a relativizer).

Depending on several typological criteria, relative clauses can be grouped into various types (Payne 1997: 325). Based on their syntactic placement with respect to the head NP, they are categorized as prenominal (occurring before the head NP), postnominal (occurring after the head NP), internally headed (the head occurring within the relative clause), and headless (those that refer to the noun they are modifying). Postnominal relative clause is the most prevalent type crosslinguistically and tends to occur in languages with VO word order in main clause constituent order (Payne 1997: 326). In relation to the information coded by the relative clause about the head NP, relative clauses are classified as either restrictive (coding essential information about the head NP) or non-restrictive (coding non-essential or additional information about the head NP).

Relativization strategy is a way of identifying or indicating the role of the referent of the head noun within the relative clause. This is often referred to as ‘case recoverability problem’ (Keenan 1985). Crosslinguistically, languages use different strategies to mark the role of the head NP within the relative clause. These are described below:

The gapping (obliteration) strategy: According to Comrie (1989: 151), the gap strategy is characterized by leaving the relativized NP position empty. This means that the relative clause contains no explicit case-marked reference to the head noun. The following example from English provides a clear illustration of the strategy.

(1) ‘*The man [I saw] was polite*’

The subject of the main clause in example (1) — ‘The man’—is modified by the relative clause [I saw]. On the other hand, the noun phrase (NP) ‘The man’ functions as the object of the relative clause verb ‘saw’. However, it does not appear explicitly in the object position of ‘saw’ within the relative clause. Instead, that position is left empty, resulting in the surface structure: ‘The man [I saw ____] was polite’. This omission of the object is known as “the gapping strategy”.

The pronoun-retention strategy: In this strategy, the head noun is retained within the relative clause in the form of a pronoun (Comrie 1989: 147). In other words, the position of the relativized noun phrase in the relative clause is overtly occupied by a resumptive pronoun. Reference to the head noun in the main clause is provided or retained in appropriate personal pronominal form in the relative clause as illustrated in the following example from Modern Hebrew:

(2) *ha-sarim she [ha-nasi shalax otam la-mitsraim]*
DEF-ministers REL DEF-president sent **them** to-Egypt
‘The ministers that the president sent **them** to Egypt.’ (Keenan 1985: 146)

As seen in example (2), the head of the NP—*ha-sarim* ‘the ministers’ which is modified by the relative clause [*she [ha-nasi shalax otam la-mitsraim]*] ‘that the president sent them to Egypt’—also serves as the object of the verb *shalax* ‘sent’ in the relative clause. However, it does not appear directly in the object position of the relative clause verb. Instead, its syntactic position is filled by the object pronoun *otam* ‘them’. The retention of the object pronoun in the object position of the verb *shalax* ‘sent’ indicates that the head NP within the relative clause functions as the direct object. This type of relativization is known as ‘the pronoun-retention strategy’. Crosslinguistically, the pronoun-retention strategy is primarily used by the postnominal externally-headed relative clause type languages (Song 2001: 218).

Relative pronoun strategy: Like the pronoun-retention type, pronominal elements are used to indicate the relativized NP (subject, object, oblique, etc.) inside the relative clause. However, such pronouns are not inserted in the syntactic position of the relativized NP; rather, they are moved to the clause initial position (Comrie 1989: 149). The following Russian examples, cited from Comrie (1989: 149), illustrate this point.

(3) a. *ja videl devujk-u*
I saw girl-ACC
'I saw a girl.'

b. *devujk-a /kotor-uju ja videl*
girl-NOM who-ACC I saw

(4) a. ja dal knigu devuʃk-e
 I gave book girl-DAT
 ‘I gave the book to the girl.’

b. devuʃk-a [kotor-oj ja dal Knigu]
 Girl-NOM Who-DAT I gave book
 ‘The girl to whom I gave the book’

The examples above illustrate that in the simple declarative sentences (3a) and (4a), the direct object *devuʃk-u* ‘girl-ACC’ and the dative object *devuʃk-e* ‘girl-DAT’ appear syntactically after the verb. In the corresponding relative clauses modifying the head noun *devuʃk-a* ‘girl-NOM’, these objects are represented by case-marked pronouns: the accusative *kotor-uju* ‘who-ACC’ in (3b) and the dative *kotor-oj* ‘who-DAT’ in (4b). However, as the examples show, these pronouns do not remain in the original NP positions of the accusative and dative nouns. Instead, they are fronted to the beginning of the relative clause. This is the only feature in which the relative pronoun strategy is separated from the pronoun-retention type.

Non-reduction (full NP) strategy: The non-reduction strategy is a type of relativization strategy in which ‘... the head noun appears in full, unreduced form, in the embedded sentence, in the normal position and/or with the normal case marking for a noun phrase expressing that particular function in the clause’ (Comrie 1989: 147). According to Kuteva & Comrie (2005: 211), the non-reduction strategy has two subtypes: correlative and head-internal relative clauses. In the first subtype of the non-reduction relativization strategy (correlative strategy) the head noun functions as a complete noun phrase within the relative clause and is referenced again in the main clause, mostly by a pronoun or another pronominal element. In the following example from Pirahā—an endangered language spoken in Brazil—the noun phrase *boito* ‘boat’ appears in its complete form in both the main clause and the embedded relative clause (Everett 1986: 276, cited in Kuteva and Comrie 2005: 211).

(5) boitóhoi bog-ái-hiab-i s aoaxái [boito báosa Xig] i sai (hix)
 boat come-ATEL-NEG-EP ? INTER boat barge bring EP NOML COMPL
 ‘Might it be that the boat (which) tows barges is not coming?’

In the second subtype of non-reduction (full NP) strategy (internally-headed), “the head is represented by a full noun phrase inside the relative clause, and has no explicit representation in the matrix clause” (Comrie 1998: 62–63) cited in Kuteva and Comrie (2005: 211). Consider the following example from Maricopa, a severely endangered Yuman-Cochimi language spoken by the Native American Maricopa people, who call themselves the Piipaash (Gordon 1986: 255, Cited in Kuteva and Comrie 2005:211).

(6) a:ny=lyvi:=m 'i:pa: jn-kw- tʃk'am-ʃ fma: m
 yesterday man 1SG-REL-slap+dist-SBJ sleep real
 ‘The man who bit me is asleep.’

As observed, the head noun phrase *i:pa:* ‘man’ appears solely within the relative clause and is absent from the external head position.

Other relativization strategies: Relativization strategies discussed in the foregoing

subsections are crosslinguistically the most commonly attested ones. Yet there are additional strategies for indicating the head noun's function in the relative clause (Andrews 2007b: 223). One approach involves indicating the syntactic or semantic role of the relativized noun phrase on the relative clause's verb. This means that the relative verb carries inflection for a noun phrase that is not phonetically expressed (indicated by [pro] in example (7) below) in its original position, a strategy sometimes called 'pro in-situ'. The fact may be demonstrated by the following Amharic example.

(7)	[rut	məs 'haf	[pro]	jə-sett'-ətʃf-at]	təmari
	R	book		REL-give-3F.SG.SBJ-3F.SG.OBJ	student
'The student to whom Ruth gave a book'					

Structure (7) illustrates that the syntactic role of the phonetically null NP ([pro]), which is coreferential with the head noun of the entire NP, is indicated by the object agreement marker *-at* (3SG.F.OBJ)² on the relative clause verb *sətt* - 'give'.

The second type of less common relativization strategy is the stranded adposition strategy. In this strategy, adpositions that mark the case of the relativized noun phrase may be left behind, or stranded, within the relative clause. Functionally, these stranded adpositions serve a similar role to that of resumptive pronouns. This is demonstrated by the following example from English.

(8) *[The chest [which [John put the money in [e]]]]*

As can be seen from example (8) the empty [e] position after the preposition *in* is the syntactic position of the relativized NP 'the chest'. By staying behind within the relative clause, the stranded preposition serves to recover the case of the relativized NP.

Crosslinguistic trends in the use of relativization strategies: Languages show variations in the way they express the role of the head noun within the relative clause. The preference of one strategy over the other is mostly based on the position of the head noun vis-a-vis the relative clause. As noted by Keenan (1985: 154) and cited in Song (2001: 217), the gapping strategy is predominantly found in languages with prenominal relative clause type, though it also appears, to a lesser degree, in languages with the postnominal relative clause type. The pronoun-retention strategy is confined mainly with postnominal externally-headed relative clause type. The relative-pronoun strategy is also said to occur most commonly in postnominal languages like the European languages; and is actually relatively rare across languages globally (Comrie 1989: 14). On the other hand, languages may also combine different relativization strategies. For instance, some European languages like German employ the gapping and the relative pronoun strategy. Similarly, languages like Arabic, Hebrew, Korean and Persian employ the gapping strategy in conjunction with the pronoun retention strategy (Song 2001: 221). But note that these strategies are used to relativize NP with different syntactic/semantic roles (subject, object, oblique). Such languages are regarded as employing 'composite' relativization strategies.

² Note that such object markers are also productively used on main verbs in Amharic.

Accessibility hierarchy: Accessibility Hierarchy is introduced by Keenan & Comrie (1977) to account for crosslinguistic restrictions on relativization. Accordingly, they outline SBJ > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > OCOMP as universal ranking of syntactic positions based on their accessibility to relativization (Keenan & Comrie 1977 cited in Song 2001: 223). The rule states that if a language can relativize on a certain position, it can also relativize on all higher positions. For example, if a language allows relativization on indirect objects (IO), it must also allow the same on direct objects (DO) and subjects (SBJ). If it allows relativization on obliques (OBL), it must also allow relativization on indirect objects (IO), direct objects (DO) and subjects (SBJ). This hierarchy has been supported by typological evidence across a wide range of languages and has influenced theories of grammar and language acquisition.

2. Methodological considerations

This study is both descriptive and typological linguistic investigation as it aims to analyze the relativization strategies in the Western dialect of Afaan Oromoo. The data for the study were primarily drawn from native speakers of this dialect, ensuring that the analysis reflects authentic usage patterns. Two primary methods were employed for data collection: the elicitation of specific syntactic structures through consultation with native speakers (language consultants), and the researcher's own introspective analysis as a native speaker of the variety. These complementary approaches allowed for both naturalistic and controlled data to be gathered.

The collected data are systematically presented using a three-line interlinear glossing format, which is standard in linguistic analysis. In the first line, the example sentences or phrases appear in Qubee, the official orthography of Afaan Oromoo,³ and are segmented to highlight individual morphemes. The second line provides a detailed interlinear gloss, giving morpheme-by-morpheme translations. The third line offers a free translation of the entire clause into English, conveying the (intended) meaning. Following the presentation of each example, a detailed syntactic analysis is provided to explain the relativization strategies used in the language. This methodological approach ensures that the data are not only clearly presented but also thoroughly analyzed, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the relativization patterns observed in the Western dialect of Afaan Oromoo.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Relativization strategies in Afaan Oromoo

This section explores the relativization strategies utilized in Afaan Oromoo by examining how noun phrases in subject, direct object, indirect object, oblique, and genitive positions are expressed within relative clauses, based on a detailed analysis of primary linguistic data.

3.1.1. Subject relativization

³ The IPA symbols for certain letters in the standard Afaan Oromoo orthography are given at the end of this article to assist readers with pronunciation. Letters not included in the list have the same sounds as in English.

In Afaan Oromoo, the NP in the main clause that has the subject role in both the main and the relative clauses is signaled by agreement markers on both the relative and the main verbs. Within the relative clause, the subject position remains empty. Consider the following example:

(9)	<i>intal-li</i>	<i>[[[pro]]</i>	<i>baratt-oota-a(f)</i>	<i>kitaab-ilee</i>	<i>erg-it-e]</i>
	girl-NOM	SBJ	student-PL-DAT	book-PL	send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>badhaasa</i>	<i>fudh-at-t-e</i>		
	yesterday	award	receive-MID-3SG.F.SBJ-PF		
'The girl who sent books to the students received award yesterday.'					

The structure in example (9) is a combination of the following two simple clauses.

- a. *Intalli badhaasa argatte* 'The girl received award.' and,
- b. *Intalli barattootaaf kitaabilee ergite* 'The girl sent the books to the students.'

When the noun phrase *intal-li* 'girl-NOM' appears in a sentence consisting of a main clause and a subordinate (relative) clause as shown in (9), it is overtly expressed in the main clause. In contrast, in the relative clause, it is not overtly realized; instead, it is represented by a null pronominal element (commonly denoted as [pro]). Despite its absence in the surface structure of the relative clause, its syntactic role as the subject is recoverable through the agreement marker on the relative verb. This agreement serves as a grammatical cue, indicating that the missing subject in the relative clause is co-referential with the noun phrase in the main clause, which is modified by the relative clause itself. Since the syntactic role of the head noun within the relative clause is indicated by agreement markers on the relative verb, it can be concluded that the relativization strategy employed in Afaan Oromoo for subject relativization involves marking a null subject through verbal agreement. In this construction, the subject is not overtly expressed but is instead represented by a phonetically null element, whose presence is inferred from the agreement morphology on the relative verb. This strategy is commonly referred to as the 'pro-in-situ' strategy, as the null subject remains in its original syntactic position without displacement. This analysis challenges the view put forward by Abdo (2011: 47), who argues that subject relativization in Afaan Oromoo is achieved through the use of a relative pronoun and gapping strategies (cf. § 3.3 for a detailed argument against the "relative pronoun strategy").

3.1.2. Direct object relativization

As discovered in earlier studies (Baye 1989; Abdo 2011), one of the noun phrases (NP) positions that is accessible for relativization in Afaan Oromoo is the direct object position. This means that an NP functioning as the direct object within a relative clause can be relativized and serve as the head of a relative clause. Let us examine how the syntactic function of this head noun phrase is represented within the restrictive clause.

(10)	<i>kitaab-ilee-n</i>	<i>[[intal-li</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>batatt-oota-a(f)</i>	<i>[e]</i>
	book-PL-NOM	girl-NOM	yesterday	student-PL-DAT	[e.DOBJ]
	<i>erg-it-e]</i>	<i>kan</i>	<i>seerlugaa-ti</i>		

send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF PROP grammar.GEN-LNK.^{COP4}
 “(The) books which the girl sent to (lit. for) the students yesterday are grammar books.”

The matrix clause in example (10) constitutes a copular construction, in which the subject is the noun *kitaabilee* “(the) books”, overtly marked with the nominative case. This noun serves as the head of the noun phrase and is further modified by an embedded relative clause: [*intalli kaleessa barattootaaaf [e] ergite*] — ‘which the girl sent to the students.’ Within this relative clause, the relativized noun (*kitaabilee*) functions syntactically as the direct object of the verb *ergite* (‘sent’). However, as the example demonstrates, there is no overt morphological marker on the verb itself to indicate the presence of a direct object. This lack of object agreement morphology is not anomalous but rather aligns with a broader pattern in Afaan Oromoo grammar, where verbs generally do not exhibit direct object agreement.

Essentially, the relative verb *ergite* exhibits agreement solely with its subject, *intalli* ‘the girl’, which is third person singular and feminine. The verb form reflects this subject agreement while offering no morphological indication of the relativized object’s features. In the absence of direct object agreement morphology, it becomes analytically challenging to postulate the existence of a null pronominal element (pro) in the object position of the relative clause — a strategy found in some languages to account for relativized constituents. Instead, the grammatical role of the head noun within the embedded clause is not overtly marked but must be inferred from structural cues.

Specifically, the syntactic function of the head noun *kitaabilee* within the relative clause is indicated through the presence of a syntactic ‘gap’ represented by [e] — an unexpressed or empty but expected position in the verb’s argument structure. This gap corresponds to the direct object position that would normally be filled when the clause is non-relative as shown in (11) below:

(11) *intal-li kaleessa baratt-oota-af [kitaab-ilee] erg-it-e*
 girl-NOM yesterday student-PL-DAT book-PL send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The girl sent the books to the students yesterday.’

The absence of an overt constituent in this position serves as a crucial diagnostic for relativization and points to the use of what is commonly referred to as the ‘gapping strategy’ in the typology of relative clause formation. Through this strategy, Afaan Oromoo signals the grammatical role of the relativized direct object noun not through overt morphology or resumptive elements, but rather through syntactic structure — specifically, the ‘gap’ left in the embedded clause where the relativized element would otherwise appear. This analysis aligns with earlier grammatical descriptions, such as those by Owens (1985) and Abdo (2011). However, it diverges from these accounts in noting that direct object relativization does not involve the use of a relative pronoun, contrary to their claims.

3.1.3. Indirect object relativization

In Afaan Oromoo, it is also possible to relativize indirect (beneficiary) objects within a sentence. Similar to the process of subject relativization, the presence of the indirect

⁴ In this context, the raised gloss ^{COP} indicates, in my view that the Oromoo copula is realized as a low tone imposed on the linker element. This analysis is preliminary and will be explored more fully in future research.

object in a relative clause is marked by a specific morphological element that appears on the relative verb. This morphological marking signals the grammatical role of the head NP within the clause. The following example demonstrates the process of this type of relativization.

(12)	<i>baratt-oot-ni</i>	<i>[intal-li</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>[pro]</i>	<i>kitaab-ilee</i>
	student-PL-NOM	girl-NOM	yesterday	IOBJ	book-PL
	<i>erg-it-e=ef⁵</i>		<i>baratt-oota</i>	<i>afaanii-ti</i>	
	send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF=IOBJ		student-PL	language.GEN-LNK. ^{COP}	

‘The students that the girl sent the books yesterday to are language students.’

Just as in example (10), the matrix clause in example (12) is a copular construction, in which the noun phrase (NP) headed by *barattootni* ‘The students’ functions as the subject of the copula. This head noun is modified by the relative clause [*intalli kaleessa kitaaba ergiteef*], which translates as ‘that the girl sent the books yesterday’. Within this relative clause, the grammatical role of the head noun is marked by the presence of the indirect object enclitic *=(v)f⁵* attached to the relative verb. This enclitic, which refers back to a phonetically null antecedent, is morphologically similar to the dative case marker used elsewhere in the language to signal indirect objects. Consider the dative noun phrase (NP) in bold in the following non-relativized counterpart of the relative clause presented in (12).

(13)	<i>intal-li</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>kitaab-ilee</i>	<i>baratt-oota-af</i>	<i>erg-it-e</i>
	girl-NOM	yesterday	book-PL	student-PL-DAT	send-3SG.F.SUJ-PF

‘The girl sent the books to the students.’

Because the relative verb already carries this morphological marker, the syntactic position that would normally be occupied by the indirect object marked with *-af* in (13) above is filled by a covert pronoun (pro), rather than an overt noun phrase (cf. 12). In other words, the indirect object is not explicitly expressed in the clause but is instead represented by an unpronounced element whose case is recoverable from the verbal morphology. This pattern suggests that the strategy employed to relativize an indirect object in such constructions is ‘pro-in-situ’.

3.2. Relativization of NPs in Oblique case

The definition of the oblique case is subject to varying interpretations within linguistic scholarship. Some linguists define the oblique case as encompassing all case forms other than the nominative, typically associated with subjects (e.g., Blake, 2004: 30). Others group the direct object with the subject under a broader nominative-accusative alignment, distinguishing oblique cases as those used for indirect objects, instruments, locations, and similar roles (e.g., Comrie, 1981: 66). Still others adopt a narrower definition, treating oblique cases strictly as those that are neither subject nor direct object (see Andrews, 2007a: 152ff). In the present analysis, the term oblique is used to refer to grammatical functions other than subjects, direct objects and indirect objects. In Afaan

⁵ The symbol (v) indicates a lengthened vowel. In Afaan Oromo, vowel lengthening as a result of affixation is a common and well-attested phonological phenomenon (Banti & Shimelis 2023: 280).

Oromoo, oblique roles are marked in two main ways: through case suffixes and by using noun phrases in postpositional phrases. Specifically, functions like the instrumental and genitive are indicated with case suffixes, while relations such as location, source, and goal are conveyed using noun phrases combined with postpositions. The following sections will focus on the strategies used to form relative clauses involving obliques.

3.2.1. Relativization of instrumentals

Instrumental refers to a case from which typically expresses the means by which something is done. In Afaan Oromoo, an NP marked for instrumental case can be relativized. Consider the following example:

(14)	<i>konkolaataa-n</i>	<i>[intal-li</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>itti-in</i>	<i>baratt-oota-af</i>
	car-NOM	girl-NOM	yesterday	LOC-P-INST	student-PL-DAT
	<i>kitaab-ilee</i>	<i>erg-it-e]</i>	<i>kan</i>	<i>mootummaa-ti</i>	
	book-PL	send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF	PROP	government.GEN-LNK. ^{COP}	
'The car with which the girl sent the books to the students yesterday belongs to the government.'					

The matrix clause in example (14) illustrates, once again, a copular construction in which the noun phrase headed by the nominative case-marked *konkolaataan* ‘the car’ serves as the subject of the copula. This head noun is further specified by a relative clause: [*intalli kaleessa barattootaaf ittiin kitaabilee ergite*], which translates as ‘with which the girl sent the books to the students yesterday’. Notably, the relativization strategy employed in this clause does not involve gapping or the use of an overt relative pronoun—both of which are commonly documented in typological studies of relativization (cf. Abdo 2011: 50–52). Neither, it employs the pro-in-situ strategy because there is no morphological element marking the instrumental NP on the relative verb. Instead, the role of the relativized noun *konkolaataa*, ‘car’ within the embedded clause is indicated through the use of the locative postposition *itti* ‘at, to’, which in this context functions as a resumptive marker. This postposition, when combined with the instrumental case marker *-(v)n*, reflects the original grammatical function of the noun phrase in the embedded clause—namely, an instrumental adjunct. This can be seen from the following non-relativized counterpart of the above relative clause.

(15)	<i>[intal-li</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>konkolaataa-dha-an</i>	<i>baratt-oota-af</i>
	girl-NOM	yesterday	car-LNK-INST	student-PL-DAT
	<i>kitaab-ilee</i>	<i>erg-it-e]</i>		
	book-PL	send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF		
'The girl sent the books to the students with a car yesterday.'				

As illustrated in the examples, the locative postposition in (14) appears in the exact syntactic position as the instrumental case-marked noun in (15), carrying the noun’s case suffix. The instrumental case-marked locative postposition is required in the relative clause, as the role of the head noun cannot be identified without it. This pattern closely resembles what is described in typological literature as a ‘resumptive pronoun’ strategy, where a pronominal or pronominal-like element is retained in the relative clause to indicate the position of the relativized noun phrase. However, in Afaan Oromoo, this role is fulfilled not by a pronoun, but by a postposition carrying instrumental case. Although the element used to indicate the role of the head noun within the relative clause is not strictly a pronominal form, it appears more appropriate to classify the relativization

strategy as a ‘resumptive pronoun’ strategy by considering the element as a pronominal-like form.

One important point to highlight at this point is that, in most languages, adpositions—whether prepositions or postpositions—do not inflect for case in the same way that nouns and adjectives do. That is, they typically remain morphologically invariant and do not take case suffixes or other inflectional markers to indicate grammatical roles. However, in Afaan Oromoo, certain words identified as postpositions—such as *itti* ‘at,’ ‘on,’ ‘to’, *irra* ‘on’, and *jala* ‘under’ etc. appear to behave differently. These elements exhibit morphological variation that resembles case inflection, suggesting that they may not be entirely invariant. This pattern deviates from the cross-linguistic norm and raises interesting questions about the grammatical status of such postpositions in the language. Whether these forms should be considered true postpositions with case inflection or something else altogether remains an open question, and it is an area that calls for further detailed investigation.

3.2.2. Relativization of genitives

In Afaan Oromoo, the genitive case is marked through three distinct morphological strategies, depending on the phonological structure of the noun. First, if the possessor noun ends in a short vowel, the genitive is indicated by lengthening that final vowel. Second, for possessor nouns that already end in a long vowel, a high (H) tone is added to mark the genitive relationship (Banti & Shimelis 2023: 291). Third, when a possessor noun ends in a consonant, the genitive is formed by attaching the long vowel suffix *-ii*. I will illustrate the relativization of genitive NPs using a possessor noun that ends in a short vowel, as all three types of genitive marking patterns behave similarly in the context of relativization. To facilitate comparison, the non-relative and relative structures are presented in (16) and (17), respectively.

(16)	<i>intal-li</i>	<i>nam-icha-a</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>heerum-t-e</i>
	girl-NOM	man-SGL.M-GEN	yesterday	marry.F-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
‘The man’s daughter married yesterday.’				

(17)	<i>namich-i</i>	<i>[intal-li]</i>	<i>isa-a</i>	<i>kaleessa</i>	<i>heerum-t-e]</i>
	man-NOM	girl-NOM	his-GEN	yesterday	marry.F-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
<i>dhuf-Ø-e</i> come-3SG.M.SBJ-PF “The man whose daughter married yesterday came.”					

In the non-relativized structure shown in (16), the genitive possessor noun phrase *namicha* ‘the man’s’ appears after the possessed noun *intal-li* ‘the girl-NOM’, which bears nominative case marking. However, when the genitive-marked possessor noun functions as the head noun in a relative clause, as illustrated in (17), its original position—following the possessed noun—is occupied by the genitive-marked third person singular masculine pronoun *isaa* ‘his’. This substitution indicates that the role of the relative clause’s head noun within the relative clause is expressed through a pronoun that carries the appropriate genitive case marking. Such a pattern suggests that the relativization strategy employed for genitive noun phrases in Afan Oromo is the “resumptive pronoun” strategy. This finding contradicts Abdo’s (2011: 54) claim that genitive relativization in the language relies on the use of a relative pronoun combined with a gapping strategy.

3.2.3. Relativization of locatives

In Afaan Oromoo, spatial relations such as location, destination, direction toward, and direction from are typically expressed through postpositional constructions. These grammatical functions are realized within noun phrases that are governed by postpositions like *itti*, meaning ‘at’ or ‘to’, *irra* ‘on’, among others. These postpositions often serve as the heads of postpositional phrases and take a complement noun phrase. However, in actual usage, postpositions such as *itti* and *irra* are frequently subject to phonological reduction and become encliticized—that is, they attach phonologically to the preceding noun or another constituent within the noun phrase.⁶ This encliticization is a common morphosyntactic feature in Afaan Oromoo. Consider the following examples to illustrate this phenomenon:

(18) *intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *mana barumsaa-a=tti* *erg-it-e*
 girl-NOM book-PL House education-GEN=LOC send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The girl sent the books to the school.’

(19) *intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *minjaala=rra* *kees-s-e*⁷
 girl-NOM book-PL table=on put-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The girl put the books on the table.’

(20) *intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *maxxansaa=rra-a* *bit-t-e*
 girl-NOM book-PL publisher =on-ABL buy-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The girl bought the books from the publisher.’

As seen in examples (18), (19), and (20), the postpositions *itti* and *irra*, which function as the heads of their respective postpositional phrases, appear attached to the complement noun phrases they govern. However, when the complement noun phrases are relativized and occur as heads of a relative clause, the postpositions are stranded—remaining in their original syntactic position within the relative clause, as illustrated in the examples below:

(21) *mana barumsaa-a* *[intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *itti* *erg-it-e]*
 house education-GEN girl-NOM book-PL LOC send-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The school which the girl sent the books to’

(22) *minjaala* *[intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *irra* *kees-s-e]*
 Table girl-NOM book-PL on put-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The table which the girl put the books on’

(23) *maxxansaa* *[intal-li* *kitaab-ilee* *irra-a* *bit-t-e]*
 publisher girl-NOM book-PL on-ABL buy-3SG.F.SBJ-PF
 ‘The publisher which the girl bought books from’

In examples (18), (19), and (20), the noun phrases *mana barumsaa* ‘school’, *minjaala* ‘table’, and *maxxansaa* ‘publisher’ appear as complements of postpositions, respectively =*tti* ‘to’, =*rra* ‘on’, and =*rraa* ‘from’ in non-relative (i.e., main clause) constructions,

⁶ However, there are also other postpositions in Afaan Oromoo—such as *jala* (‘under’), *bira* (‘beside’), and others—that do not undergo phonological reduction or encliticization. Unlike *itti* and *irra*, these postpositions retain their full phonological form regardless of their syntactic environment, maintaining a more independent status within the postpositional phrase.

⁷ The underlying representation of this form is *kaaj-t-e*. The vowel change occurs due to vowel raising triggered by the palatal glide *j*.

where they fulfill distinct syntactic functions: locative, superessive, and ablative roles, respectively. However, in examples (21), (22), and (23), these same noun phrases reappear as heads of relative clauses. When they assume this new position as heads, their syntactic roles shift from their original functions in the non-relative structures. Despite this positional change, the original grammatical roles of these noun phrases are not lost or ignored within the relative clauses. Instead, they are retained and clearly marked by means of phonologically full postpositions: *itti* ‘to’, *irra* ‘on’, and *irraa* ‘from’ that remain in place—that is, the postpositions are “stranded” at the location where the postpositional phrase would have appeared had the complement NPs not been promoted to the head position. This syntactic phenomenon—where the adposition is separated from its complement, which has been fronted as the head of the relative clause—is typologically known as the “stranded adposition strategy” (see § 1). It serves as a mechanism to maintain clarity of grammatical relations within the relative clause, even after movement of the noun phrase. In Afaan Oromoo, the process of relativizing noun phrases that serve as complements to other postpositions—such as *jala* “under”, *bira* ‘beside’, *dura* ‘before’, and *booda* ‘behind’—also employs the same “stranded adposition strategy”.

3.3. Does Afaan Oromoo use a relative pronoun strategy?

As discussed in §2 above, numerous scholars who have analyzed the grammar of Afaan Oromoo argue that the pronoun *kan* functions as the primary relative pronoun used in the formation of relative clauses (Gragg 1976; Owens 1985; Abdo 2011). In the Harar dialect of Afan Oromo, *kan*, which is gender neutral in the Western dialect of Afaan Oromoo, exhibits gender-based variation, appearing as *χan* in the masculine form and *tan* in the feminine (Owens 1985). In addition to *kan*, Gragg (1976) identifies other elements—namely *waan*, *warra*, *jara*, and even third-person personal pronouns—as fulfilling relative pronoun functions in specific syntactic environments. Abdo (2011) further supports this observation, noting that these forms can be employed to mark relative clauses. However, I contend that these forms do not function as relative pronouns in the strict syntactic sense. Rather, they serve a pronominal role by occupying the syntactic position of the head noun phrase of the relative clause. To clarify this argument, let us consider the following examples:

(24) *oduu-n* [nam-ich-i] *na=tti* *him-e]* *dhugaa-dhà*
news-NOM [man-SGL.M-NOM] 1SG=LOC tell-PF] True-LNK.^{COP}
‘The news the man told me is true.’

(25) *kan* [nam-ich-i] *na=tti* *him-e]* *dhugaa-dhà*
PROP [man-SGL.M-NOM] 1SG=LOC tell-PF] true-LNK.^{COP}
‘What the man told me is true’.

(26) *waan* [nam-ich-i] *na=tti* *him-e]* *dhugaa-dhà*
thing [man-SGL.M-NOM] 1SG=LOC tell-PF] true-LNK.^{COP}
‘What (lit. the thing) the man told me is true.’

(27) *inni* [nam-ich-i] *na=tti* *him-e]* *dhugaa-dhà*
he.SBJ [man-SGL.M-NOM] 1SG=LOC tell-PF] true-LNK.^{COP}
‘The one (lit. he) the man told me is true.’

(28)	<i>*oduu-n</i>	<i>[waan</i>	<i>nam-ich-i</i>	<i>na=tti</i>	<i>him-e]</i>	<i>dhugaa-dhà</i>
	news-NOM	thing	man-SGL.M-NOM	1SG=LOC	tell-PF]	true-LNK. ^{COP}

*‘The news the thing man told me is true.’

(29)	<i>?oduu-n</i>	<i>[kan</i>	<i>nam-ich-i</i>	<i>na=tti</i>	<i>him-e</i>	<i>dhugaa-dhà</i>
	news-NOM	PROP	man-SGL.M-NOM	1SG=LOC	tell-PF	true-LNK. ^{COP}

? ‘The news what the man told me is true.’

In example (24), the noun *oduu-n* ‘news-NOM’, marked for nominative case and serving as the subject of the matrix copular clause, functions as the head of a noun phrase that is modified by the relative clause *namichi natti hime* ‘the man told me’. In the subsequent examples (25), (26), and (27), this head noun is replaced by various other elements: the pronominal particle *kan*, the noun *waan* ‘thing’, and the third-person pronoun *inni* ‘he.SBJ’, respectively. Each of these substitutes occupies the same syntactic position as the head noun *oduu-n* ‘news-NOM’ and is likewise modified by the relative clause. They neither establish a connection between the head noun and the relative clause nor indicate the syntactic role of the head noun within the relative clause. This structural relationship is evident from the free translations provided for each example, which clearly demonstrate how the relative clauses continue to function adjectivally, qualifying the new head elements in the same way they modified *oduu-n* in the initial instance. In this study, therefore, these elements are not analyzed as relative pronouns. Rather, they are considered to be pronominal or nominal elements that occupy the syntactic position typically filled by the head noun in relative constructions. Unlike relative pronouns, which function to link the relative clause to its antecedent and indicate the role of the head noun within the clause, these elements do not fulfill such a grammatical function. If they were indeed functioning as relative pronouns, we would expect structures like (28) and (29) to be undoubtfully well-formed and acceptable. However, the ungrammaticality of (28) and the marginal acceptability of (29) support the analysis that treats these elements as nominal or pronominal forms that occur in place of the head noun. That the pronominal particle *kan* can function independently in syntactic positions normally filled by noun phrases in other types of constructions—as illustrated in the examples below—provides additional support for this claim.

(30)	<i>konkolaat-ich-i</i>	<i>konkolaataa</i>	<i>mootumma-a-ti</i>
	car-SGL.M-NOM	Car	government-GEN-LNK. ^{COP}

‘The car is government’s (lit. This car is a government car.’

(31)	<i>konkolaat-ich-i</i>	<i>Kan</i>	<i>mootumma-a-ti</i>
	car-SGL.M-NOM	PROP	government-GEN-LNK. ^{COP}

‘The car is government’s.’

In example (30), the copular construction includes a nominative case-marked noun as the subject and a possessive noun phrase as the predicate or copular complement. In example (31), the same nominative case marked noun appears again as the subject, but the possessed (head) noun within the possessive phrase—*konkolaataa* ‘car’—is replaced by the pronominal particle *kan*. The purpose of this replacement is to avoid repeating the same referent in both subject and predicate positions.⁸ The use of *kan* in this position

⁸ While Baye (1986: 91) analyzes *kan* as a possessive marker in such contexts, Banti and Shimelis (2023: 280) interpret it as a dummy head or determiner. In this study, however, *kan* is treated as a pronominal particle that replaces the head noun in both relative and possessive constructions. This analysis is supported by the fact that genitive marking appears on the non-head (possessor) noun—indicated by vowel lengthening

supports the view that such particles function as substitutes for full noun phrases, including heads of relative and possessive constructions. Importantly, their distribution indicates that they do not serve as relative pronouns within the relative clause, but instead occupy the syntactic position of the head noun outside the relative clause.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided a detailed reexamination of the relativization strategies employed in the formation of relative clauses in Afaan Oromoo, with a particular focus on the western dialect. The analysis has demonstrated that Afaan Oromoo utilizes a range of strategies—typologically referred to as “composite strategies”—which vary depending on the grammatical role of the noun phrase being relativized. Subject and indirect object noun phrases are relativized using a pro in-situ strategy. This involves agreement morphology on the relative verb that refers back to a null pronominal antecedent. In contrast, direct object noun phrases are relativized through a gapping strategy, wherein the relativized position within the clause is left empty. This strategy differs from the pro in-situ strategy due to the fact that direct objects are not marked by agreement elements on the verb. Furthermore, the study has demonstrated that instrumental and genitive noun phrases are relativized via resumptive pronouns, which bear the appropriate case markers to signal their syntactic function. Locative noun phrases, on the other hand, are handled through the use of stranded postpositions, indicating a distinct relativization strategy in this functional domain. These findings confirm that Afaan Oromoo employs a diverse set of relativization mechanisms to indicate the grammatical role of the head noun within relative clauses. Notably, this study challenges previous claims, such as those made by Abdo (2011), by showing that the language does not utilize a relative pronoun strategy for relativizing noun phrases. Overall, the research contributes to a more nuanced typological understanding of relativization in Afaan Oromoo and highlights the language’s syntactic complexity in handling different types of noun phrase relativization.

Abbreviations

1	first person	LOC	locative
2	second person	LOCP	locative particle
3	third person	M	masculine
ADD	additive	MID	middle
ATEL	atelic	NEG	negative
COP	copula	NOM	nominative
COMPL	complementizer	NOML	nominalizer
DAT	dative	NP	noun phrase
DIST	distal	OBJ	object
DOBJ	direct object	PL	plural
EP	epenthetic	PF	perfective
F	feminine	POSS	possessive
GEN	genitive	PROP	pronominal particle
INST	instrumental	RC	Relative clause

or a high tone—further suggesting that *kan* does not function as a possessive marker. Additionally, it is worth noting that *kan* serves a subordinating role when used within verb phrases (cf. Baye 1986: 102ff).

INTER	interjection	REL	relativizer
IOBJ	indirect object	SGL	singulative
LNK	linker	SG	singular
LOC	locative		

The IPA symbols for selected letters in the standard Afaan Oromoo orthography are presented below to assist readers with pronunciation. The remaining letters occurring in the data correspond to the same sounds as in English.

Letters in the standard Afaan Oromoo IPA representation
orthography

c (C)	tʃ
ch (Ch)	tʃ
dh (Dh)	d
ny (Ny)	n
ph (Ph)	p'
q (Q)	k'
sh (Sh)	ʃ
x (X)	t'

Gemination and vowel length are indicated by doubling the corresponding letters, except in the case of digraphs.

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