
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translation of Nominal Relative Clauses in News Texts: A Contrastive Analysis between Arabic and English

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by third-year English language students at Al-Aqsa University in translating nominal relative clauses in news texts between Arabic and English. Nominal relative clauses, introduced by forms such as *whoever* and *whatever*, present significant translational challenges due to structural and functional differences between the two languages. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study analyzed students' translations of authentic-like news sentences using Skopos Theory and Newmark's semantic and communicative translation framework. The findings revealed recurrent difficulties related to structural transfer, grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, and communicative appropriateness. Students frequently relied on literal translation, resulting in unnatural or inaccurate renderings. The study highlights the importance of functional translation strategies and contrastive linguistic awareness in improving the translation of complex grammatical structures in news discourse.

KEYWORDS

Nominal Relative Clauses, News Translation, Arabic–English Translation, Translation Difficulties, Relative Clauses, Contrastive Analysis, Skopos Theory, Communicative Translation, Translation Strategies, Translation Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Translation between Arabic and English continues to present major linguistic and communicative challenges, particularly in the translation of complex grammatical structures such as relative clauses (Biber et al., 1999; Yule, 1998). These structures play a central role in news discourse because news language depends heavily on precision, clarity, brevity, and effective transmission of information. Any grammatical inaccuracy or structural ambiguity in translated news texts may distort meaning, weaken readability, or reduce communicative effectiveness. Consequently, translating relative clauses between Arabic and English requires not only grammatical competence, but also pragmatic awareness and sensitivity to textual function.

Relative clauses in Arabic and English differ considerably in terms of structure, syntactic organization, and relativization strategies (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Zagood, 2012). English relative clauses typically rely on explicit relative pronouns and gap-based structures, whereas Arabic frequently employs agreement-based relativization, resumptive pronouns, and more flexible sentence organization. These structural differences become particularly problematic when learners attempt literal transfer from one language into another. As a result, students often produce translations that are grammatically inaccurate, semantically incomplete, or pragmatically unnatural.

Among the most challenging forms of relativization are nominal relative clauses, which function as independent noun phrases rather than modifiers of explicit antecedents (Greenbaum, 1996). Constructions such as “whoever leaked the documents” and “whatever the committee decides” represent syntactically condensed structures that combine referential and grammatical functions simultaneously. Because Arabic does not always provide direct structural equivalents for such constructions, translators

frequently resort to restructuring, paraphrasing, lexical expansion, or literal rendering (Catford, 1965; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). These translation choices often reveal significant linguistic and communicative difficulties.

The rationale behind this study emerges from the limited attention given to nominal relative clauses in Arabic–English translation research despite their complexity and frequency in formal discourse, particularly in journalistic language. Most previous studies have examined relative clauses as a broad grammatical category without isolating nominal relative clauses as an independent translational challenge (Doaa, 2012; Zagood, 2012). Consequently, there remains a clear need for focused investigation into how learners process and translate these structures in authentic news contexts.

This study therefore investigates the difficulties faced by third-year English language students when translating nominal relative clauses in news texts between Arabic and English. It explores the grammatical, lexical, structural, and pragmatic problems that emerge in students' translations and examines the extent to which cross-linguistic interference influences translation performance. The study adopts Skopos Theory to analyze whether students prioritize structural equivalence or communicative effectiveness during translation (Vermeer, 1989).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both translation studies and contrastive linguistics. It provides deeper understanding of the challenges Arab learners face in translating nominal relative clauses and highlights the relationship between syntactic structure and communicative function in news translation. The findings may also contribute to improving translation pedagogy, curriculum design, and practical training in Arabic–English translation courses. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What difficulties do English language students face when translating nominal relative clauses in news texts between Arabic and English?
2. To what extent do structural differences between Arabic and English affect students' translation strategies and communicative accuracy?

2. Literature Review

Relative clauses are important syntactic structures used to provide additional information about nouns and noun phrases (Yule, 2000; Biber et al., 1999). According to Yule (2000), a relative pronoun introduces a subordinate clause and refers to a noun known as the antecedent. Biber et al. (1999) further explain that relative clauses contain a structural gap corresponding to the relativized element, which contributes to textual cohesion and interpretation. Relative clauses therefore represent essential grammatical mechanisms in both spoken and written discourse.

Among the various forms of relativization, nominal relative clauses represent a distinct and particularly complex category (Greenbaum, 1996). Greenbaum (1991) defines nominal relatives as clauses introduced by forms such as *whoever*, *whatever*, and *whichever*, where the relativizer functions simultaneously as the head of the noun phrase and the clause introducer. Unlike restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, nominal relative clauses do not depend on explicit antecedents. Instead, the entire clause functions independently as a noun phrase. For example, in the sentence "Whoever succeeds will receive support," the clause itself occupies the syntactic position of the subject.

This structural independence increases the cognitive and syntactic complexity of nominal relative clauses, especially in translation contexts involving languages with different relativization systems. Arabic and English differ significantly in their treatment of relative clauses (Badawi, 2004; Comrie & Keenan, 1979). English generally relies on explicit relative pronouns and omission of resumptive pronouns, while Arabic often permits or requires resumptive elements and exhibits greater flexibility in sentence organization (Badawi, Carter, & Gully, 2004). Consequently, Arabic-speaking learners frequently transfer Arabic structural patterns into English translations.

Previous contrastive studies have consistently identified relativization as a problematic area for Arab learners of English (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Doaa, 2012). Kharma and Hajjaj (1985) argue that learners often produce non-target-like structures due to direct grammatical transfer from Arabic. Hamdallah and Tushyeh (1998) similarly found that students struggle with pronoun usage, clause embedding, agreement patterns, and sentence restructuring when translating relative clauses. Amer (2010) further emphasizes that structural differences between Arabic and English create persistent difficulties in achieving grammatical equivalence and naturalness.

Despite the extensive discussion of relative clauses in previous literature, nominal relative clauses remain underexplored as a distinct translational category. Most studies focus on restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses or investigate resumptive

pronouns in general without examining how learners translate independent nominal relativizers such as *whoever* and *whatever* in authentic discourse contexts.

The present study also draws on functional approaches to translation, particularly Skopos Theory proposed by Vermeer (1989), which emphasizes communicative purpose and translational adequacy in target-language production. Skopos Theory emphasizes that translation should be guided by communicative purpose rather than strict structural equivalence. From this perspective, grammatical restructuring may be justified if it serves the intended function of the target text more effectively. Nord (1997) extends this approach by emphasizing that translation adequacy depends on readability, audience expectations, and communicative clarity.

In addition, the study benefits from Newmark's distinction between semantic and communicative translation (Newmark, 1981). According to Newmark (1981), semantic translation focuses on preserving source-text form and meaning, whereas communicative translation prioritizes naturalness and comprehensibility in the target language. This perspective also aligns with Nida's (1969) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence. Nominal relative clauses frequently resist direct semantic translation because of their condensed and structurally complex nature. As a result, translators often resort to communicative restructuring in order to produce more natural and readable target texts. The present study therefore combines structural linguistic analysis with functional translation theory in order to examine how students negotiate meaning, structure, and communicative purpose when translating nominal relative clauses between Arabic and English.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the difficulties faced by English language students in translating nominal relative clauses in news texts between Arabic and English. Qualitative analysis is particularly suitable because the study focuses on identifying translation patterns, interpreting linguistic choices, and examining the nature of grammatical and communicative problems in students' translations.

The participants consisted of six third-year English language students from Al-Aqsa University. The participants were selected because they had already completed advanced grammar and translation courses and possessed intermediate to advanced competence in both Arabic and English.

The research instrument consisted of a translation task involving authentic-like news sentences containing nominal relative clauses. The task included translation in both directions: from English into Arabic and from Arabic into English. The selected sentences focused specifically on constructions containing nominal relativizers such as *whoever* and *whatever*.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through a contrastive and functional framework. The study adopts Skopos Theory as the primary analytical model to evaluate whether students' translations achieved communicative adequacy and textual clarity. Newmark's semantic and communicative translation framework was also used to identify whether students relied on literal translation strategies or communicative restructuring.

The analysis focused on identifying recurrent translation difficulties and categorizing them into major themes and sub-themes, including lexical problems, grammatical problems, structural problems, pragmatic problems, contextual issues, and difficulties related to the use of relative pronouns.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Structural and Syntactic Problems

One of the most dominant difficulties observed in the students' translations involved structural transfer from Arabic into English and vice versa. Many students attempted to preserve the surface structure of the source text without sufficient restructuring to suit the grammatical norms of the target language. This problem appeared particularly in the translation of nominal relative clauses functioning as subjects.

Several students translated "Whoever leaked the confidential government documents" into Arabic using extended explanatory structures such as "أيا كان الشخص الذي قام بتسريب" rather than more concise nominal forms such as "من سرب". While the meaning remained understandable, the translation became unnecessarily expanded and stylistically less natural for journalistic discourse. From a Skopos perspective, the communicative purpose of news translation requires conciseness and immediacy, both of which were weakened by excessive expansion.

Similarly, some students produced structurally awkward English translations such as "Whoever proves to be involved in financial corruption will be hold to competent court" and "Whoever share in publishing misleading news." These constructions reveal direct interference from Arabic sentence structure and difficulties with English clause embedding.

Another recurrent structural issue involved inappropriate sentence restructuring. Some learners transformed nominal relative clauses into explanatory or conditional constructions that weakened syntactic cohesion and altered textual rhythm. For example, translating "Whatever emerges from the climate summit discussions" as "مهما كانت نتائج مناقشات قمة المناخ" shifted the clause from an open nominal reference to a generalized conditional meaning. These findings indicate that students often struggled to balance structural equivalence with communicative naturalness. Many relied heavily on literal syntactic transfer rather than adapting the structure to suit the target language and communicative purpose.

4.2 Problems Related to Relative Pronouns and Nominal Relativizers

The analysis also shows difficulties related to the accurate interpretation and translation of nominal relativizers such as *whoever* and *whatever*. Some students demonstrated clear understanding of the functional role of these forms and translated them appropriately into Arabic using structures such as "من" and "ما". However, other students misunderstood their semantic function and expanded them unnecessarily into phrases such as "أَيًّا كان الشخص الذي".

Although such expansions preserved meaning to some extent, they reduced stylistic fluency and created overly explanatory translations inconsistent with journalistic discourse. According to Skopos Theory, successful translation should prioritize communicative effectiveness and naturalness rather than excessive formal explanation.

In Arabic-to-English translation, several students succeeded in preserving the nominal relative structure appropriately through forms such as "Whoever participates" and "Whatever the government decides." However, grammatical inconsistencies frequently appeared in agreement patterns, verb forms, and clause cohesion. Examples such as "Whoever share" and "Whatever the results revealed may lead" demonstrate difficulties in maintaining correct syntactic agreement within nominal relative constructions.

These findings suggest that students possess partial understanding of nominal relativization but continue to struggle with maintaining grammatical accuracy while preserving communicative fluency.

4.3 Lexical and Word Choice Problems

Lexical problems represented another major category of difficulty in the data. Several students selected words that conveyed approximate rather than contextually accurate meanings. For example, some translations rendered "misleading information" as "إشاعات مضللة", although the original phrase referred more generally to inaccurate or deceptive information rather than rumors specifically. Similarly, "obstruction of justice" was translated by some students as "تعويق العدالة" or "عرقلة في تحقيق"

العدالة", both of which sound unnatural or semantically incomplete in formal Arabic legal discourse. More natural renderings such as "عرقلة سير العدالة" appeared only in stronger translations.

In English translations, lexical inaccuracies were also evident. Examples included "financial corporation" instead of "financial corruption," "economic situations" instead of "economic situation," and "misleading in use" instead of "misleading news." These errors indicate problems related to vocabulary selection, collocational competence, and contextual lexical awareness.

From a communicative translation perspective, these lexical choices weakened precision and reduced textual professionalism. News discourse depends heavily on accurate terminology, and lexical inaccuracy can significantly alter meaning and reduce credibility.

4.4 Grammatical Problems

The data revealed frequent grammatical errors affecting tense consistency, article usage, agreement, plurality, and passive construction. Article misuse appeared repeatedly in forms such as "a international support," "the humanitarian a project," and "the competent court in coming days." Students also struggled with pluralization and countability, producing forms such as "a wide changes" and "economical situations."

Verb agreement problems were particularly frequent in nominal relative clauses. Examples such as "Whoever share" and "may faces" demonstrate difficulties in maintaining subject-verb agreement. Passive constructions also created problems, particularly in forms such as "will be hold to competent court."

Tense inconsistency represented another recurring issue. One student translated "ما تكشفه نتائج التحقيقات" as "الأخيرة" as "Whatever the results of the recent investigations revealed," shifting the sentence from present relevance to past tense and altering the temporal meaning. These grammatical problems suggest that students' difficulties extend beyond relative clauses themselves to broader issues involving English grammatical competence and sentence control.

4.5 Pragmatic and Contextual Problems

Several translations revealed weaknesses in preserving the pragmatic and stylistic conventions of journalistic discourse. News language generally requires clarity, neutrality, conciseness, and formal tone. However, some translations became excessively explanatory, ambiguous, or stylistically awkward. For instance, expansions such as “... أيًا كان الشخص الذي قام بتسريب” weakened the concise and direct style expected in news reporting. Similarly, certain lexical choices sounded conversational rather than journalistic.

Some students also failed to preserve the institutional and formal tone of legal and political terminology. Expressions related to investigations, legal procedures, and political negotiations require context-sensitive vocabulary and stylistic precision. From a Skopos perspective, these findings demonstrate that many students focused primarily on lexical equivalence rather than communicative function. As a result, several translations remained grammatically understandable but pragmatically ineffective.

4.6 Translation Strategies and Functional Performance

The analysis demonstrates that students generally relied on two dominant translation strategies: literal translation and communicative restructuring. Some students adhered closely to source-text structure, producing translations that preserved grammatical form but sounded unnatural in the target language. This tendency reflects semantic translation strategies in Newmark's framework.

Other students adopted communicative restructuring by simplifying or paraphrasing nominal relative clauses to improve readability and fluency. Although some restructuring strategies improved naturalness, others resulted in semantic shifts or excessive expansion. The strongest translations were those that balanced structural accuracy with communicative effectiveness. These translations preserved the function of nominal relative clauses while adapting them naturally to the target language and maintaining journalistic style.

5. Conclusions

This study investigated the difficulties faced by third-year English language students at Al-Aqsa University in translating nominal relative clauses in news texts between Arabic and English. The findings revealed that students experienced considerable challenges related to structural transfer, grammatical accuracy, lexical selection, contextual appropriateness, and the use of nominal relativizers.

The analysis demonstrated that many students relied heavily on literal translation and direct structural transfer from the source language, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies and stylistically unnatural translations. Problems related to subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, article usage, passive construction, and lexical precision were particularly common.

The findings also showed that nominal relative clauses represent a significant translational challenge because of their structural independence and lack of direct equivalence between Arabic and English. Students frequently struggled to preserve both grammatical structure and communicative function simultaneously.

Through the lens of Skopos Theory, the study revealed that successful translation depends not only on structural equivalence but also on achieving communicative adequacy and textual naturalness. The strongest translations were those that effectively balanced meaning, grammatical accuracy, and journalistic style.

The study therefore highlights the importance of integrating functional translation approaches into translation pedagogy. Greater emphasis should be placed on communicative translation strategies, contextual lexical awareness, and contrastive grammatical analysis in order to help students translate nominal relative clauses more accurately and naturally.

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