

Relative clauses in Tetun Dili: Contact-induced new uses for old constructions

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Language contact: form and function

In cases of intense language contact we can get:

- New forms (obvious). e.g. Tetun Dili originally had no passives. Now passives are common in writing, based on Indonesian, Portuguese and English.
- Change in functions of existing constructions (less obvious). e.g. relative clauses.

Tetun Dili speakers

Co-official language of Timor-Leste with Portuguese, effectively since 1999.

Speakers: 31% of population as main home language, 56% as second or third language. Total 930,000.

Roles of Tetun Dili

Before 1999: mainly oral lingua franca, and liturgical language in the Catholic Church.

After 1999: very rapid expansion to parliament, schools, oral and written media, conferences, written reports. Lots of translation, especially from English and Portuguese.

All adult writers were educated in Indonesian or Portuguese, and lots of writing follows patterns of these two languages.

Structure of relative clauses

Tetun has strict Subject-Verb order, default Subject-Verb-Object, but has Object fronting.

Relativise mainly on Subject, Object or time, using gap strategy. Most common relativiser is *nebee*.

Subject: *Ema nebee hein odamatan nee, taka odamatan.*

person REL wait door this close door

‘The person who guarded the door, closed it.’

‘Orang yang jaga pintu ini, menutupnya.’

Object: *Buat nebee hau aprende mak nee: ...*

thing REL 1S learn FOCUS this

‘What I learned is this: ...’

‘Hal yang saya pelajari yang ini: ...’

Time: *Iha tempu nebee partidu mosu, hau sei kiik.*

LOC time REL party arise 1S still small

‘At the time when political parties started up, I was still young.’

‘Pada saat partai muncul, saya masih kecil.’

Functions of relative clauses cross-linguistically

From Levinsohn (2011), Loock (2007).

1. Restrictive – identify referents from a group, e.g. ‘*the person I met yesterday.*’
2. Describe, e.g. ‘*John’s body which had fallen into a stream*’
3. Restate existing information, e.g. ‘*Jahjo caught the Kijang that he had been chasing.*’
4. Continue the action, e.g. ‘*I gave the book to my brother, who gave it to his wife.*’
5. Opinion, comment by the speaker: ‘*The governor sacked the prime minister, which was a very bad idea!*’

English and Portuguese use relative clauses for all these functions. Indonesian uses it for functions 1-3.

Functions of relative clauses in Tetun Dili oral texts

Restrictive

1. Modify a noun (usually generic, e.g. ‘person’, ‘place’, ‘thing’, ‘time’) to identify a referent. Restrictive, but usually not contrastive.

- (1) *Keta halo buat nebee sira halo.*
don’t do thing REL 3P do
‘Don’t do the things that they do.’

2. When introducing a new character, give identifying information relevant to their role in the story. (Mostly major or minor characters. Not used for the major character or props.)

- (2) *Iha mos ema ida nebee importante iha palasiu governu, nia naran Haman.*
LOC already person one REL important LOC palace government 3S name Haman
‘There was also a person who was important in government house, his name was Haman.’

Describe

3. Describe an already-introduced character, in the predicate. This describes a long-term characteristic.

- (3) *Ester feto ida nebee bonita no furak.*
Ester woman one REL pretty and beautiful
‘Ester was a very beautiful woman.’

4. Describe briefly, e.g. using an adjective or existential *iha*. The NP is always in post-verbal object position. (In non-narrative texts.)

- (4) *Ita haree diskusaun nebee furak tebes, diskusaun klean.*
1PI see discussion REL beautiful true discussion deep
‘We have seen a beautiful discussion, a deep discussion.’

New functions through language contact

These are common in writing and in high-level formal speech.

1. Describe: Give information about a known character or entity. Very common in journalism and writing, very rare in speaking. Some have comma before.

- (5) ... *arguidu Marcos Pinto, nebee mai akompanha hosi ninia advogadu.*
... accused Marcos Pinto REL come accompany from 3S.POS lawyer
'... the accused Marcos Pinto, who came accompanied by his lawyer.' (STL 2/2007)
'... terdakwa Marcos Pinto yang datang didampingi oleh pengacaranya.'

2. Describe: Give the reason for thanks.

- (6) *Obrigada ba Efi nebee hatoo kansaun ida nee.*
thanks to Efi REL pass.on song one this
'Thanks to Efi for offering us this song.' (Radio presenter)
'Terima kasih pada Efi yang menyampaikan lagu ini.'

3. On plural pronouns, to show who is included. Can be restrictive or non-restrictive.

- (7) *Imi nebee ameasa nee, imi sei foin sae.*
2P REL threaten this 2P still just rise
'You who threaten (me), you are still young.'
'Kalian yang mengancam ini, masih mudah.'

4. Restate existing information, to emphasise the description.

- (8) *Iha oras nee kedas senhora nee nia oan nebee diabu tama iha laran diak fali.*
LOC hour this immediate madam this POS child REL demon enter LOC inside good again
'That very hour, the woman's child who had had a demon in her was cured.'
'Pas pada jam itu, anaknya ibu yang kerasukan setan sembuh kembali.'

Not yet noted in Tetun Dili

Structures we have not noted:

- Relative clauses modifying a clause rather than a noun phrase, e.g. *I fell and couldn't get up, which was very embarrassing.* Portuguese and English have it. Indonesian doesn't.

Functions not (yet) noted in Tetun Dili:

- Continue the action, e.g. *'I gave the book to my brother, who gave it to his wife.'* Not in Indonesian.
- Opinion, comment by the speaker: *'The governor sacked the prime minister, which was a very bad idea!'*

These are found in English and Portuguese, but not in Indonesian.

Why use expanded functions for relative clauses?

All Tetun writers are educated in Portuguese or Indonesian, and learned to write in those languages. It is easier to keep the same style of writing, reduced processing load. (Matras 2007)

Options for translators (and for writers who follow discourse patterns of Indonesian or Portuguese):

- Translate relative clauses as such – by far the easiest.
- Translate a relative clause as another type of subordinate clause, e.g. *'Thanks to Efi who organised the food'* as *'Thanks to Efi because she organised the food.'*
 - Advantage is that it keeps the information backgrounded.

- Difficulty is that you need to work out the semantic relationship, which isn't always clear.
- Restructure totally, translating the relative clause as a main clause. This requires careful thought, and often turns presupposed information into an assertion (Ramm 2008).

Impact of using right structure with wrong function

When Tetun Dili relative clauses are used with non-traditional functions, readers have difficulty.

- Readers ignore it totally, as they normally do with things that don't make sense. e.g. an excellent re-teller entirely missed the following non-restrictive relative clause, which adds background information on an identified group.

(9) *Tanba kobrador impostu sira nebee gosta han-matak ema mos*
 because collector tax DEF.PL REL like cheat person also
 'Because even tax collectors who like cheating people

hadomi ema nebee mak hadomi sira
 love person REL FOCUS love 3P
 love those who love them.'

- Readers can assume that a non-restrictive clause is restrictive. Nevertheless logic, assumptions (and theology) can win out over grammar. e.g. traditionally the following relative clause would imply that there is more than one God, with the speaker worshiping one of them. But readers insisted that it did not imply this, based on their theology.

(10) *Maromak nebee hau adora*
 God REL IS worship
 'God whom I worship'

- Readers can be totally confused as to what the sentence is about.

Speakers unsure as to what is 'good' Tetun

When there is so much contact-influenced language, it is difficult for people to give judgments as to what is 'good Tetun'. Common comments are:

- "We have to accept this, as we see it all the time in the newspaper."
- "We couldn't say this, but TV reporters can."

Conclusion: Do discourse study!

Using correct structures with wrong functions doesn't communicate well.

So work out form

- and function.

References

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