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David Gil - Department of Linguistics, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig
Riau Indonesian:
A VO Language with Internally-Headed Relative Clauses

Downing (1978:399) and Cole (1987) have proposed that internally-headed relative clauses occur only in languages in which the basic word order is OV, or in which the other relative clauses are right-headed. This paper provides a counterexample to this claim, from the Riau dialect of Indonesian, a colloquial variety of Indonesian spoken in East Central Sumatra, described in Gil (1994, 1999, to appear b,c).

In Riau Indonesian, word order is quite free, but in general, VO order occurs with greater frequency than OV. Moreover, adpositions invariably occur before their NPs, further supporting the characterization of the language as basically VO. Relative clauses in Riau Indonesian may be left headed (the most common option), right headed, or internally headed, as illustrated in examples (1) - (5) below.

(1) Saya beli ikan tadi?
1:sg buy fish pst:prox
[Interlocutor says he ate all the fish; speaker asks which fish; interlocutor says the red and white ones; speaker, verifying reference, asks]
"The fish I bought before?"

(2) Kemarin ada kawan sini mana?
previous.day exist friend here where
[Hotel receptionist, at hotel, where, last time, I had come with friend]
"Where’s your friend who you were with last time?"

(3) Damsir beli celana sama si
Damsir buy trousers accompany pers:non.voc
Man sudah bulu-bulu
fam-Mansudir pfct distr-feather
[About a pair of trousers]
"The trousers that Damsir bought with Mansudir are already frayed"

(4) Saya ada beli kaca mata dulu, mana dia?
1:sg exist buy glass eye pst:dist where 3
[Looking for glasses]
"The eye-glasses I bought before, where are they?"
Ada perempuan tadi, ininya nampak exist woman pst:prox dem:prox-assoc ag-see
[Commenting on a women with a low front to her blouse, speaker points to his own chest and says]
"The woman before, her [this] was showing"

(The above examples are all taken from a naturalistic corpus of spontaneous speech specimens; the context in which each example was uttered is indicated in square brackets.) In the above examples, the entire internally-headed relative-clause construction is indicated in bold-face, and the head of the construction is underlined. In each of the above examples, the head of the relative clause occurs internally to the construction, flanked by the attributive material. There is no relative pronoun or any other kind of relative marking.

Thus, the above examples provide a counterexample to the claim that internally-headed relative clauses occur only in languages with OV basic word order, or otherwise right-headed relative clauses. Similar constructions are attested in other colloquial varieties of Malay and Indonesian, including Kuala Lumpur Malay, Jakarta Indonesian and Ternate Malay, though not in Standard Malay and Indonesian. In addition, internally-headed relative clauses occur in another geographically proximate language variety with VO word order and left-headed relative clauses, namely, Colloquial Singapore English, also known as Singlish — see Gil (to appear a) for examples and discussion.

References