EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SPANISH RELATIVE PRONOUNS BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

by Dr. Jon Aske

Relative clauses

Relative clauses (aka adjective clauses) are clauses that modify nouns, that is, that say something about a noun. (A clause, of course, is anything that has a verb in it.)

Thus, for instance, the sentence

Ese hombre que tú viste ayer es mi profesor de español
“That man you saw yesterday is my Spanish teacher”

has two verbs and can be thought of as being composed of two clauses:

a) Ese hombre es mi profesor “That man is my teacher”

b) Tú viste a ese hombre ayer “You saw that man yesterday”

Clause (b) is inserted in clause (a) to clarify what man you’re talking about, that is, to modify the noun phrase el hombre. You might as well have used an adjective (or pointed with your finger) to clarify what man you’re talking about, e.g.

Ese hombre grande es mi profesor de español
“That big man is my Spanish teacher”

Look at a slightly more complicated example, since here a preposition is involved before the noun phrase that woman:

That woman is my aunt
I made this painting for that woman

= The woman [for whom I made this painting] is my aunt
(= The woman [I made this painting for] is my aunt)

Or in Spanish:

Esa mujer es mi tía
Hice ese cuadro para esa mujer

= La mujer para la que yo hice ese cuadro es mi tía

Relative Pronouns (Pronombres de relativo)

A relative clause is connected to the noun it modifies by a relative pronoun, which stands for the noun inside the relative clause. They may be preceded by a preposition, if any.

In English, these are the pronouns which connect a relative (adjective) clause to a noun phrase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Pronoun</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td>The doctor <strong>who</strong> saw me was very quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whom</td>
<td>The man <strong>who(m) I saw yesterday</strong> was very quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which</td>
<td>The book <strong>which I left here</strong> was red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that</td>
<td>The book <strong>that you gave me</strong> was very interesting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice in the first two examples the two different types of relative clauses: **restrictive** and **parenthetical**. A parenthetical relative clause is like an aside comment and is between commas.

Notice in the last two examples that in English sometimes we do not have to use any relative pronouns at all (basically when there is a subject in the relative clause and there is no preposition).

Unfortunately there isn’t a one-to-one correspondence between Spanish relative pronouns and English relative pronouns. But the rules aren’t that complicated. Here they are:

1. No preposition, no comma intonation

For both **people** and **things**: use **que**, e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish Example</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El libro <strong>que</strong> compré ayer es muy interesante</td>
<td>&quot;The book I bought yesterday is very interesting&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El hombre <strong>que</strong> vi esta mañana era muy alto</td>
<td>&quot;The man I saw this morning was very tall&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. With no preposition (or A personal)  
AND with comma intonation  
(parenthetical remark; aside comment)

1. **Things or people**: use either  
a) **que** (recommended)  
b) **el/la/los/las cual(es)** (fancier, used in writing more)

   Mi libro, **que** lo compré ayer, no tiene fotografías  
   Mi libro, **el cual** lo compré ayer, no tiene fotografías  
   My book, *which* I bought yesterday, doesn’t have pictures

   Mi hermano, **que** vio esa película, dice que es interesante  
   = Mi hermano, **el cual** vio esa película, dice que es interesante  
   "My brother, *who* saw that movie, says it's very interesting"

   (Notice that with parentheticals we need the object pronoun inside the relative clause; not so in regular relative clauses.)

2. **People**: use **quien(es)** (fancier, used in writing more)

   Mi hermano, **quien** vio esa película, dice que es interesante

3. With preposition or A personal (with or without comma intonation)

1. For **things** or **people**: you can use either  
a) **el/la/los/las que**  
   (In some cases, typically with short prepositions, the article can be left out, but it is safer to just leave it in)

   Estas es la pluma con **(la) que** escribo mis cartas  
   Esta es la chica **para la que** escribí la carta

   b) **el/la/los/las cual(es)** (fancier)

   Estas es la pluma con **la cual** escribo mis cartas  
   Esta es la chica **para la cual** escribí la carta

2. For **people** only, you can also use **quien(es)** (fancier)

   Esta es la chica **para quien** escribí la carta

   NB: In English the **preposition** may be left at the end of the relative clause, e.g. That’s the pen **(that)** I write my letters **with** (as opposed to That’s the pen **with which** I write my letters). That is not possible in Spanish. The preposition MUST go with the relative pronoun.

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**Headless Relative Clauses**

Spanish allows the dropping of a predictable noun in a noun phrase when there is an article and a modifier (adjective, prepositional phrase, or relative clause):

- la camisa verde y **la (camisa) roja**  
- el libro de Juan y **el (libro) de Lucía**  
- el libro que compré y **el (libro) que** vendí.

Sometimes the predictability comes from the general context, not from the immediately preceding text, e.g.

- los ricos “the rich” (understood: los hombres ricos)  
- los guapos (understood: los (hombres (y mujeres)) guapos)

One special case is when the modifier is a relative clause:

- el que estudia, saca buenas notas  
- los que estudian, sacan buenas notas.  

   (said in class; understood: el estudiante que estudia ...)

   This is equivalent to **the one(s) who studies, those who study**

A fancier alternative to this **el/la/los/las que** in these ‘headless relative clauses’ is **quien(es)**.

   **Quien** estudia, saca buenas notas  
   **Quienes** estudian, sacan buenas notas.

   A variant of this is used when you are talking about things (not people) non-committal about the gender of the thing you are talking about, namely use **lo** instead of **el/la/los/las**.

   **lo** bueno  
   the good thing/part, what’s good  
   (but not = ‘the good one’, which would be **el bueno/la buena**)

   **lo** que quiero  
   what I want; the thing that I want  
   (but not ‘the one I want’, which would be **el/la que quiero**)