35
Relative clauses and pronouns

35.1 General

35.1.1 Forms of relative pronouns
There are four relative pronouns in Spanish: que, quien(es), el que, el cual.

El que and el cual agree in number and gender with their antecedent\(^1\) and can therefore take the forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mascul.</td>
<td>el que/el cual</td>
<td>los que/los cuales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fem.</td>
<td>la que/la cual</td>
<td>las que/las cuales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The plural of quien is quienes, but it has no separate feminine form.

El que is used only after prepositions. Foreign students tend to over-use el cual and neglect the more frequent el que and quien. El cual tends nowadays to be confined to formal styles; it is discussed separately at 35.5.

Cuando, donde and como may also introduce relative clauses, e.g. la calle donde/en la que la vi ‘the street I saw her in/where I saw her’. See 35.10-12 for discussion.

35.1.2 Restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses
This chapter occasionally refers to a distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses.

Restrictive clauses limit the scope of their antecedent: Las chicas que eran suizas se callaron ‘The girls who were Swiss stopped talking’. This refers only to those girls who were Swiss.

Non-restrictive clauses or appositive clauses do not limit the scope of their antecedent: Las chicas, quel/la cual es uno de los monumentos más visitados por los turistas ‘The girls, who are one of the monuments most visited by tourists’.

The antecedent of a relative pronoun is the noun or pronoun that it refers to: in ‘the dog that I bought’, ‘dog’ is the antecedent of ‘that’.

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\(^1\) The antecedent of a relative pronoun is the noun or pronoun that it refers to: in ‘the dog that I bought’, ‘dog’ is the antecedent of ‘that’.

35.1.3 English and Spanish relative pronouns contrasted

Spanish relative clauses differ from English in four major respects:

(a) Prepositions must never be separated from a relative pronoun: ‘the path (that/which) we were walking along’ = el camino por el que caminábamos.

Sentences like *el camino que caminábamos por, occasionally heard in the Spanish of beginners, are almost unintelligible.

(b) A relative pronoun can never be omitted in Spanish: ‘the plane I saw’ = el avión que (yo) vi.

(c) English and French constantly replace relative pronouns by a gerund or participle form: ‘a box containing two books’ une boîte contenant deux livres. This is usually impossible in Spanish: una caja que contiene/contiene dos libros.

The subject is discussed in detail at 20.3.

(d) Spanish does not allow a relative pronoun to be separated from its antecedent by a verb phrase. The type of sentence sporadically heard in English like ‘The man doesn’t exist whom I’d want to marry’ (for ‘The man (whom) I’d want to marry doesn’t exist’) cannot be translated by *El hombre no existe con el que yo quisiera casarme. The correct translations are No existe el hombre con el que yo quisiera casarme or El hombre con el que yo quisiera casarme no existe. The first of these two translations is preferable, and this has important consequences for the word order of Spanish sentences containing relative clauses. See 37.2.1 for discussion.

Further examples: Acudieron corriendo los vecinos, que/quienes/los cuales no pudieron hacer nada ‘The neighbours came running, but could do nothing’ (literally, ‘who could . . .’) not *Los vecinos acudieron corriendo, que . . .; Han vuelto las cigüeñas que hicieron su nido en el campanario el año pasado ‘The storks that made their nest in the belfry last year have returned’, not *Las cigüeñas han vuelto que . . .

35.2 The relative pronoun que

Que is the most frequent relative pronoun and may be used in the vast majority of cases to translate the English relative pronouns ‘who’, ‘whom’, ‘which’ or ‘that’.

However, there are certain cases in which el que, quien or el cual must be used. These are:

(a) In most cases after prepositions; see 35.4.

(b) El cual only: in contexts discussed at 35.5.

Examples of que as a relative pronoun:

los inversionistas que se quemaron los dedos
las hojas que cayeron de las ramas
el libro que compré ayer
las enfermeras que despidieron el año pasado
(see 22.4.2 for use of personal a in this type of sentence)

the investors who burnt their fingers
the leaves (that were) falling from the branches
the book (that) I bought yesterday
the nurses (that) they fired/sacked last year

Note

The word todo requires the relative pronoun el que: todos los que dicen eso . . . ‘all who say that/everyone who says that’.