

Relative clauses

Jon Tappenden
DipTrans IoLET
legal & commercial translator, English language trainer

Relative clauses cause Polish learners of English problems because of the use of commas in Polish. I have come across this issue many times in my proofreading work. I focus on it in particular in complex texts. While other errors impede comprehension to a limited extent, or may only impact style, this error can fundamentally change the conveyed meaning, often without the author realising it, and a proofreader may not notice it if there is no obvious conflict with the argument the writer is making. Let us start with what is meant by a *relative clause*. We can think of it as dividing a sentence using commas for descriptive purposes:

*There is one woman sitting on the steps. The woman, **who is wearing a blue dress**, is Hilda* (zbędna definicja – non-defining relative clause).

Question to test the concept: Is the sentence above understandable without the clause separated by commas?

There is one woman sitting on the steps. The woman is Hilda.

Now we come to a sentence in which commas are not used:

*There are two women sitting on the steps. The woman **who is wearing the blue dress** is Hilda* (niezbędna definicja – defining relative clause)

Question to test the concept: Are these two sentences understandable without the description **who is wearing the blue dress** ?

There are two women sitting on the steps. The woman is Hilda.

The reader is not given enough information, and has to ask **which woman is Hilda**. Thus the description **who is wearing the blue dress** is necessary for understanding. **Note that no commas are used here.**

Here are more examples. **Look at the comma** that comes before *którzy* and *które*, and then the translation.

Nobel z ekonomii na trudne czasy. Kim są naukowcy, którzy otrzymali

The Nobel prize in economics for times of hardship. Who are the scientists [who were] awarded the...

This could also be phrased this way:

The Nobel prize in economics for times of hardship, and information about the scientists awarded the...

USTAWA z dnia 9 października 2015 r. o wsparciu kredytobiorców, którzy zaciągnęli kredyt mieszkaniowy i znajdują się w trudnej sytuacji finansowej

The Act of 9 October 2015 on aid for borrowers who took out housing loans and have fallen into financial hardship.

This could also be phrased this way:

The Act of 9 October 2015 on aid for borrowers who have fallen into financial hardship due to taking out housing loans.

Prezentujemy listę polskich sędziów, którzy podpisali apel z wezwaniem do pełnego wykonania lipcowych orzeczeń TSUE.

Please find below a list of Polish judges who signed the appeal calling for full compliance with the July CJEU judgments.

Jon Tappenden