Separating out the properties of correlatives in a cross-linguistic perspective

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This abstract uses data from Atchan (Kwa, Côte d'Ivoire, SVO) to argue for a more nuanced view of the properties definitional to correlative constructions. Correlatives, best known in Indo-Aryan languages, are standardly defined as having a particular complex profile: a ① left-peripheral relative clause which ② involves a relative pronoun or relativizing *wh*-expression, and which ③ is linked to a matrix-clause correlate that necessarily bears a demonstrative (Dayal 1996; Bhatt 2003; Lipták 2009; Beshears 2017, a.o.). I show that Atchan exhibits a construction that *is* a single correlative (similarly to Lipták's claim for Hungarian), but with notable divergences from the standard Indo-Aryan profile: (a) Atchan correlatives exploit a non-movement topicalization strategy, (b) Atchan does not have relative pronouns/*wh*-expressions, and (c) the matrix correlate can bear an anaphoric definite, not just a demonstrative. These observations, respectively, support the following claims. ① Correlative exhibit varying connectivity across languages (Indo-Aryan single correlatives involve movement (Bhatt 2003), while Atchan's do not). ② Relative pronouns are simply not necessary for correlatives, and are rather an incidental consequence of the areal focus of previous work on correlatives. ③ The Indo-Aryan demonstrative requirement is epiphenomenal and results because demonstratives are the only determiners in those languages which can introduce variables; other languages with more complex definiteness systems can employ other elements in the correlate with identical effect.

A correlative construction in Atchan. Alongside post-nominal relative clauses (Jarvis 2025), Atchan exhibits left-peripheral relative clauses that can be linked to a matrix-clause element:

(1) sɛ kʰɛ́̃ mɛ̃ ŋwu ɛ̃mpi, mɛ̃ mpɔ { -ɛ / ló sɛ̂ / sɛ lókɔ̃ / # sɛ }.
man COMP 1SG see.PFV yesterday 1SG love.PFV 3SG.OBJ DEF man man DEM man
'The man$_i$ who I saw yesterday, I love {✓him / ✓the$_{\text{anaph}}$ man / ✓that man / # bareN man}$_i$.'

Note that all tone alternations in the matrix correlate are phonologically predictable.

These clauses resemble Indo-Aryan single correlatives in the following relevant ways. First, they are necessarily left-peripheral (e.g., there is no right-peripheral equivalent, cf. Dayal 1996 on Hindi). Second, they permit dual headness: the left-peripheral relative clause and matrix correlate can both contain an NP restrictor. As in Hindi and Marwari (Beshears 2017), the two restrictors need not be identical (as long as the two refer to the same entity):

(2) sɛ$_i$ kʰɛ́̃ mɛ̃ ŋwu ɛ̃mpi, mɛ̃ mpɔ ló lépʰã$_i$
man COMP 1SG see.PFV yesterday 1SG love.PFV DEF person
'The man$_i$ who I saw yesterday, I love the person$_i$.'

Third, and crucially, the matrix correlate must bear appropriate morphology. As seen above in (1), the correlate can be pronominal or can bear an anaphoric definite DEF or, less commonly, a demonstrative DEM. While Atchan generally permits bare nouns in all syntactic positions, the matrix correlate cannot be a bare noun. A further set of restrictions additionally parallel those identified by Dayal (1996) for Hindi correlatives. For example, numeral correlates are prohibited without an overt partitive structure:

(3) ɛ́̃-mjé$_i$ kʰɛ́̃ mɛ̃ ŋwu ɛ̃mpi, mɛ̃ mpɔ mɔ̃ #(ló$_i$ hrómɛ̃)
PL-woman COMP 1SG see.PFV yesterday 1SG love.PFV two DEF inside
'The women$_i$ who I saw yesterday, I love two #(of them$_i$).'

I conclude that this Atchan construction should be included under the rubric of correlatives and now turn to its implications for properties ①-③.

Property ①: Sources of left-peripheral correlatives. While Hindi single correlatives undergo movement to the left periphery (Bhatt 2003), the Atchan phenomenon shows that this is not true of all correlatives. In particular, the Atchan correlative can be separated from the correlate by an

island boundary (5). It also does not exhibit Condition C effects under reconstruction (cf. Bhatt 2003); as seen in (6), a pronoun in the matrix clause that c-commands the correlate can corefer with an R-expression ('Katie') in the peripheral clause (cf. **She$_j$ hit the man who loves Katie$_j$*).

(4) ɓje$_i$ k$^{\text{h}}$ɛ́́ e-p$^{\text{h}}$íɗja, kati wu [ɛ́́ŋk$^{\text{h}}$ú k$^{\text{h}}$ɛ́́ ló ɓjé$_i$ ntã].
woman COMP PROG-laugh K. see.PFV house COMP DEF woman build.PFV
'The woman$_i$ who is laughing, Katie saw [the house that the woman$_i$ built].'

(5) [sɛ$_i$ k$^{\text{h}}$ɛ́́ ∅$_i$ a pɔ kati$_j$], ɛ́́$_j$ nchrwá ló sɛ̂$_j$.
man COMP ASP love.PFV K. 3SG.SUBJ.PFV hit.PFV DEF man
'The man$_i$ who loves Katie$_j$, she$_j$ hit the man$_i$.'

Instead, as in Hungarian (Lipták 2009), Atchan correlatives rely on an independently-available strategy of matrix topicalization, which in Atchan involves high base-generation (Jarvis 2025). Atchan topicalization generally involves the prosodic break marked as a comma in these examples. In addition, in texts (Loba and Biekre 1997) from a dialect of Atchan with an optional segmental TOP marker, the TOP marker can appear in correlatives:

(6) lep$^{\text{h}}$ã$_i$ ... k$^{\text{h}}$ɛ́́ lo c$^{\text{h}}$re lo é-bo $\boxed{\text{ɔ̃}}$, wú hɛ nɔ̃ ɛ ɗi ló lép$^{\text{h}}$ã$_i$?
person COMP 1PL stay 1PL PROG-wait.for TOP Q 2SG FOC 2SG.SUBJ COP DEF person
'The person$_i$ who we have been waiting for, are you that person$_i$?'

The Atchan data thus support cross-linguistic diversity in the derivation of correlative structures.

Property ②: The syntax of relative clauses. Note that Atchan relative clauses, and thus also Atchan correlatives, do not involve relative pronouns or *wh*-expressions. Instead, the hallmark of (cor)relativization is a specific complementizer. I therefore strongly suggest that the morphology of relativization is not a crucial definitional feature of correlatives, and that the attention paid to these elements is a purely accidental result of the literature's focus on Indo-Aryan. Indeed, on Dayal's (1996) pioneering account of Hindi correlatives, the relative *wh*-item itself is vacuous, with the correlative C head responsible for the correlative's overall semantics. This already hints that there is no reason to necessarily expect relative pronouns or *wh*-expressions in correlatives.

Property ③: Definite/demonstrative requirement. Finally we turn to the observation that bare nouns are excluded as correlates across languages, though Atchan permits an anaphoric definite correlate in addition to a demonstrative. I follow Dayal (1996) and Beshears (2017) in positing that this restriction comes from the fact that correlatives' interpretation involves variable binding.

This is particularly clear for the topicalization-based Atchan correlative. Since Atchan topicalization involves high base-generation, it has an appealing general analysis based in binding (cf. Sells 1984): the sister of the topicalized element is abstracted over, targeting a variable inside the matrix correlate as schematized below:

(7) [$_{\text{topic}}$ man that I saw] λi [I like { ✓ him$_i$ / ✓ DEF$_{\text{anaph}}$ man i / ✓ DEM man i / # ι man }]

On standard approaches, pronouns, demonstratives, and anaphoric definites all introduce individual variables (anaphoric DEF: cf. Schwarz 2009; Jenks 2018, a.o.; DEM: cf. Ahn 2019). When serving as a correlate, each of these expressions thus is compatible with abstraction/topic binding. In contrast, Atchan bare nouns are uniqueness definites (consistent with Ahn's (2019) generalization over a number of unrelated languages). On a Schwarz 2009-style treatment, uniqueness definites do not introduce individual variables. Abstraction over a uniqueness definite will then be ruled out by a ban on vacuous quantification (Kratzer 1995; Bittner 1999; Potts 2002).

On this view, the demonstrative requirement on Indo-Aryan correlates is epiphenomenal: Indo-Aryan languages simply have a less-articulated definiteness system, with the demonstrative the only variable-introducing element. That is, the two main definite forms in Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi are the bare noun and the demonstrative (i.e., there is no additional [anaphoric] definite determiner). For at least many speakers of Hindi, bare nouns are dispreferred in anaphoric uses, and therefore are likely best conceptualized as variable-less uniqueness definites (Ahn

2019), as in Atchan. The demonstrative is thus the only variable-containing expression that can support the variable-binding operation needed for the interpretation of correlatives.

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