

SYNTACTIC FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS OF SUBORDINATE CLAUSES IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The paper discusses subordinate clauses in English, specifically, finite and non-finite nominal clauses and finite and non-finite adnominal relative clauses. Attention is devoted to the various syntactic features of these clauses, as well as to their different functions. Nominal clauses function as clause elements; additionally, they can function as postmodifiers. By contrast, adnominal relative clauses function only as postmodifiers. They provide either specific or supplementary information about the noun phrase head.

Key words: subordinate clauses, syntactic features, nominal clauses, adnominal relative clauses

1. INTRODUCTION

The three structural types of clauses in English, specifically finite clauses, non-finite clauses and verbless clauses are discussed in the paper. Furthermore, crucial attention is devoted to syntactic and functional analysis of nominal and relative clauses. The paper points out the fact that only nominal clauses, both finite and non-finite, can function as complement clauses completing the meaning of a verb or adjective in the main clause. The nominal complement clauses are discussed in the paper both from a structural and functional viewpoint. Moreover, the necessary attention is devoted to all types of relative clauses, adnominal relative clauses, sentential relative clauses and nominal relative clauses.

The paper focuses on adnominal relative clauses, both finite and non-finite, functioning as restrictive or non-restrictive postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads, sentential relative clauses functioning as non-restrictive comment clauses and, lastly, nominal relative clauses functioning as clause elements.

2. CLAUSES CLASSIFIED BY VERB STRUCTURES

There are three structural types of clauses in English, namely finite clauses, non-finite clauses and verbless clauses. A finite clause contains a lexical verb which is inflected for tense (a tensed verb). On the other hand, a non-finite clause contains a lexical verb which does not indicate tense (a non-tensed verb). There are four structural types of non-finite clauses: *to-infinitive* clauses, *bare infinitive* clauses, *-ing participle* clauses and *-ed participle* clauses. Non-finite clauses are subordinate clauses; that is, they cannot stand alone. "References to time (and person and number) are normally interpreted from content or from information in the finite clause to which the non-finite clause is related" (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 546). A verbless clause is a clause without a verb element.

Compare:

- [1] *There are plenty of job opportunities for engineering students.*
- [2] *Wear your coat or you'll catch cold.*
- [3] *I didn't hear the answer; I was listening to the radio.*
- [4] *I don't know when I'll see her again.*
- [5] *Did you notice him leaving the party early?*
- [6] *Do you know the people who live across the road?*
- [7] *She had a book review published in the student magazine.*
- [8] *When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*

In [1] the simple sentence consists of one main clause which is not dependent on any other clause and can stand on its own. A compound sentence may be defined as a sentence consisting of two or more independent finite clauses joined syndetically or asyndetically. Compound sentences in [2] and [3] consist of two finite independent clauses linked together by syndetic and asyndetic coordination respectively.

A complex sentence contains one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. Complex sentences in [4] and [5] consist of two clauses: one of them is a main clause and the other one is a subordinate clause. However, the structural type of these subordinate clauses is different. In [4] the subordinate clause is a finite nominal interrogative clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction *when*. On the other hand, the marker of subordination in [5] is a non-finite nominal *-ing participle* clause. Subordinate clauses in [6] and [7] are attributive relative clauses. In [6] the subordinate relative clause is finite. However, the subordinate relative clause in [7] is a non-finite *-ed participle* clause. The adverbial subordinate clause of time in [8] is a verbless clause because it does not contain a verb element.

The structural analysis of the sample sentence examples confirms that simple sentences are independent finite clauses. Compound sentences consist only of independent finite clauses. However, nominal subordinate clauses, attributive relative clauses and adverbial clauses which are parts of complex sentences may appear both as finite and non-finite clauses. Verbless clauses are typically only adverbial clauses.

3. SYNTACTIC AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF CLAUSES

Subordinate clauses in English are classified not only according to their different structural types, but also according to the functions they express in a sentence. On the basis of semantic functions, the following types of subordinate clauses are distinguished in English: nominal clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses and comparative clauses. Nominal clauses are classified into four types: nominal *that*-clauses, nominal *wh*-clauses, nominal *to-infinitive* clauses and nominal *-ing participle* clauses. Nominal *wh*-clauses are further subdivided into nominal interrogative clauses (*wh*-interrogative clauses, *yes/no* interrogative clauses, interrogative alternative questions), nominal relative clauses and nominal exclamative clauses. All types of nominal clauses are complement clauses. They complete the meaning relationship of an associated verb or adjective in the main clause. Like noun phrases, nominal clauses may function as clause elements. "But the occurrence of nominal clauses is more limited than that of noun phrases, because semantically the clauses are normally abstract; that is, they refer to such abstractions as events, facts, and ideas. The one exception is the nominal relative clause, which may refer to persons and things and may in fact be alternatively analysed as a noun phrase" (Greenbaum – Quirk, 1990: 304).

On the other hand, relative clauses, specifically, adnominal (or attributive, adjective) relative clauses serve as postmodifying clauses. They may function as restrictive or non-restrictive postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads. The other type of relative clauses are sentential relative clauses. Sentential relative clauses, in contrast to adnominal relative clauses, do not postmodify the noun phrase heads. They refer to a whole previous clause.

The aim of this paper is the analysis of various syntactic features as well as structural types and semantic functions of nominal clauses and relative clauses; therefore, adverbial clauses and comparative clauses are not discussed in this contribution.

3.1 Syntactic and Functional Analysis of Nominal Clauses

As it was claimed, all types of nominal clauses are called complement clauses because they complete the meaning relationship of an associated verb (verb complementation) or adjective (adjective complementation) in the main clause. Carter and McCarthy (2006) use the term verb complementation and refer only to those "items" which are dependent on the verb and which are necessary for the sentence to be complete, both from the viewpoints of its structure and meaning. These "items" which

are dependent on the verb and which are necessary for the sentence to be complete may be expressed by various types of phrases (phrasal complementation) or by clauses (clausal complementation).

The term clausal complementation is used to denote the process of embedding a clause as a complement of another clause. The clause, which is embedded in the complement position of the other clause, is referred to as a complement clause. On the basis of semantic functions, there are four types of subordinate clauses. However, only nominal clauses, both finite and non-finite, can function as complement clauses completing the meaning of a verb or the meaning of an adjective in the main clause. The clause types can be distinguished by their complementizers, the words introducing various types of nominal clauses.

Both structural types of nominal clauses, finite and non-finite, can complete the meaning relationship of monotransitive verbs (monotransitive complementation), ditransitive verbs (ditransitive complementation), complex transitive verbs (complex transitive complementation) and copular verbs (copular complementation).

Compare:

[9] Walsh confirmed *that the money had been paid*.

[10] I don't know *where he lives*.

[11] Just imagine *going all that way for nothing!*

[12] Have you arranged *to meet Mark this weekend?*

Nominal clauses in [9] - [12] complete the meaning relationship of monotransitive verbs *confirm*, *know*, *imagine*, *arrange*; that is, all these subordinate clauses function as direct objects in monotransitive complementation. However, the clause types in these example sentences are different. The subordinate clause *that the money had been paid* in [9] is a nominal *that*-clause, the subordinate clause *where he lives* in [10] is a nominal *wh*-interrogative clause and the subordinate clause *going all that way for nothing* is a nominal *ing*- participle clause. Lastly, the subordinate clause *to meet Mark this weekend* in [12] is a nominal *to*-infinitive clause.

The other types of complementation by nominal clauses, specifically ditransitive complementation, complex transitive complementation and copular complementation, are illustrated in the sample sentences below.

[13] The Chief of Police told reporters *that two people were killed in the blast*.

[14] I certainly believe it *to be very rare*.

[15] The rainbow seemed *to end on the hillside*.

In [13] the nominal *that*-clause *that two people were killed in the blast* completes the meaning relationship of a ditransitive verb *tell*. However, in [14] the nominal *to*-infinitive clause *to be very rare* completes the meaning relationship of a complex transitive verb *believe*. Lastly, in [15] the nominal *to*-infinitive clause *to end on the hillside* completes the meaning relationship of a copular verb *seem*.

As it was declared, nominal clauses are used to complete the meaning relationship of an associated verb or adjective in the main clause. In the following sample sentences nominal clauses complete the meaning of an adjective in the main clause.

[16] I'm absolutely certain *that I left the keys in the kitchen*.

[17] I'm not certain *when it will be ready*.

[18] I am glad *to be back home*.

In [16] the nominal *that*-clause *that I left the keys in the kitchen* completes the meaning relationship of the adjective *certain* and functions as an adjectival complement. However, the same adjective in [17] is complemented by a nominal *wh*-interrogative clause. The adjective *glad* in [18] is complemented by

a nominal *to-infinitive* clause *to be back home*. As illustrated in [16] - [18] adjectives requiring complementation by nominal clauses can be complemented by their various clause types.

3.2 Syntactic and Functional Analysis of Relative Clauses

Quirk et al. (1985) subdivide relative clauses into adnominal relative clauses, sentential relative clauses and nominal relative clauses. Adnominal relative clauses are the central types of relative clauses. They serve characteristically as postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads. The relativizer, the word introducing an adnominal relative clause, points back to the noun phrase head, which is generally referred to as the antecedent.

“Modification can be restrictive or non-restrictive. That is, the head can be viewed as a member of a class which can be linguistically identified only through modification that has been supplied (restrictive). Or the head can be viewed as unique or as a member of a class that has been independently identified; any information given to such a head is additional information which is not essential for identifying the head, and we call it non-restrictive” (Greenbaum – Quirk, 1990: 364). Adnominal relative clauses have one of two main functions: restrictive or non-restrictive postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads. “Restrictive postmodifiers serve to identify the intended reference of the head noun. In contrast, the reference of head nouns with non-restrictive modifiers has either been previously identified or is assumed to be already known. In these cases, the postmodifier is an independent unit that adds elaborating, descriptive information which is not required to identify the head” (Biber et al., 1999: 602). According to Quirk et al., (1985: 1239) “non-restrictiveness is a feature of modification which provides only additional information to the referent of a noun phrase which has been previously defined, or is inherently, independently identifiable without need for further identification”. Brinton (2000: 231) claims that “in a non-restrictive relative clause, the head noun is sufficiently restricted or limited in order to be identified; the relative clause simply adds additional (or parenthetical) information”. Biber et al. (1999), Brinton (2000), Greenbaum (2006), Quirk et al. (1985), Wekker – Haegeman (2005) classify adnominal relative clauses according to their functions as restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses. Carter and McCarthy (2006), on the other hand, use the terms defining and non-defining relative clauses. It should be pointed out that the choice of relativizers depends on the relation of the relative clause to its antecedent (restrictive or non-restrictive) and on the gender type of the antecedent (personal, non-personal). The relativizer *that* can be used only in the restrictive relative clauses for both personal and non-personal reference. Adnominal relative clauses may appear as finite or non-finite clauses.

Compare:

[19] She was the one *who did most of the talking*.

[20] Alison Jones and her husband David, *who live in Hartlepool*, are celebrating their golden wedding anniversary.

[21] Did you see the letter which came today?

[22] Anyone *following this advice* could find himself in trouble.

[23] Ask anybody *nearing the age of retirement* what they think.

The adnominal relative clause *who did most of the talking* in [19] is a finite restrictive postmodifier identifying the intended reference of a personal antecedent *one*. On the other hand, the adnominal relative clause *who live in Hartlepool* in [20] is a finite non-restrictive postmodifier providing additional information to the referent of a noun phrase. In [21] the adnominal relative clause *which came today* is a finite restrictive postmodifier of a non-personal antecedent. However, adnominal relative clauses in [22] and [23] are restrictive postmodifiers expressed by non-finite *-ing participle* clauses.

Sentential relative clauses, in contrast to adnominal relative clauses, do not function as postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads, they refer to a whole previous clause. “Sentential relative clauses comment on a whole previous sentence or series of clauses, or a speaker turn, or a longer stretch of discourse. They are introduced by *which*. Their most frequent function in informal spoken language is to express

evaluation” (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 566). Sentential relative clauses are separated by intonation or punctuation from the clauses they are attached to.

Compare:

[24] One of the boys kept laughing, *which annoyed Jane intensely*.

[25] The treatment, *which is being tried by researchers at four hospitals*, has helped patients who have been failed to respond to other remedies.

[26] They say he enjoys the lessons, *which he doesn't*.

[27] British Rail, *which has launched an enquiry*, said one coach was badly damaged.

[28] Things are looking up, *which surprises me*.

All relative clauses in [24] - [28] are expressed by finite clauses, all of which are non-restrictive clauses introduced by the same relativizer, the relative pronoun *which*. However, relative clauses in [25] and [27] are adnominal finite non-restrictive clauses postmodifying the non-personal antecedents (*the treatment, British Rail*) and relative clauses in [24], [26] and [28] are sentential non-restrictive relative clauses functioning as comment clauses.

Nominal relative clauses are, in contrast to adnominal relative clauses and sentential relative clauses, complement clauses. They complete the meaning relationship of an associated verb. Like noun phrases, they function as clause elements.

Compare:

[29] *What he said* was perfectly true.

[30] I'm *what's generally called a traitor*.

[31] I'll do *whatever you want*.

Nominal relative clauses in [29] - [31] have various functions. In [29] the nominal relative clause has a pre-predicate position and functions as the subject of a sentence. In [30] the nominal relative clause follows a copular verb and functions as the subject complement.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper discussed three structural types of clauses in English, specifically finite clauses, non-finite clauses and verbless clauses. We concluded that simple sentences are independent finite clauses and compound sentences consist only of independent finite clauses. However, nominal subordinate clauses, attributive relative clauses and adverbial clauses which are parts of complex sentences may appear both as finite and non-finite clauses. Verbless clauses are typically only adverbial clauses.

The required attention was devoted to syntactic and functional analysis of clauses. On the basis of semantic functions, the following types of subordinate clauses are distinguished in English: nominal clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses and comparative clauses. However, the aim of this paper was the analysis of various syntactic features as well as structural types and semantic functions of nominal clauses and relative clauses; therefore, adverbial clauses and comparative clauses were not discussed in this contribution.

The paper focused on nominal clauses both from the structural and functional points of view. All types of nominal clauses are called complement clauses because they complete the meaning relationship of an associated verb (verb complementation) or adjective (adjective complementation) in the main clause. We concluded that both structural types of nominal clauses, finite and non-finite, can complete the meaning relationship of monotransitive verbs, ditransitive verbs, complex transitive verbs, and copular verbs and may function as clause elements.

Moreover, the paper discussed adnominal relative clauses, sentential relative clauses and nominal relative clauses and pointed out their similar and different features. These clauses were discussed both

from the structural and functional viewpoints. Adnominal relative clauses, both finite and non-finite, serve as restrictive or non-restrictive postmodifiers of the noun phrase heads, sentential relative clauses function as non-restrictive comment clauses and, lastly, nominal relative clauses function as clause elements. The theory of syntactic features and functions of nominal clauses and relative clauses in English is discussed and analysed using sample sentences taken from Online Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.

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