

DEPENDENT CLAUSES, THEIR OCCURRENCE AND ROLE IN DIFFERENT TEXT TYPES

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Abstract: The article presents the results of research focusing on the distribution and analysis of subordinate clauses and their usage in four different text types (newspaper, academic prose, fiction, and interview) of spoken and written English. The results obtained from the analysis show the differences between the use of particular types of subordinate clauses as well as their frequency of distribution within the analyzed media. Besides other findings, the results of the analyses show that the occurrence of finite and non-finite clauses as well as their basic function depends on the degree of formality of the text types.

Key words: dependent clauses, subordination, finite clauses, non-finite clauses, complex sentence

Introduction

Studies of language can be divided into two main areas: studies of structure (formal grammar) and studies of use (functional grammar). While the former, traditional linguistic analyses emphasize structure, identifying structural units and classes of a language and describing how smaller units can be combined to form larger grammatical units, the latter emphasize language use. Studies of use focus on how speakers and writers exploit the resources of their language, and study the actual language used in naturally occurring texts. They focus on the language of a text or a group of speakers /writers. Such sources as the language that is used in different text types or by different social groups, or an individual author's style have been a common motivation for studies of use investigating how the language e.g. of newspapers differs from that of fiction (Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad & Randi Reppen, 1998 CUP).

People use different varieties of language in accordance with different situations and contexts, from talking to a friend through reading newspapers, books, writing letters, to giving an academic lecture. The varieties of language we use in these situations are referred to as registers, and describing the characteristics of these registers is also an important area of study. Investigations comparing the language of different texts or groups of texts reveal typical patterns rather than making judgments of grammaticality. Looking for typical patterns requires analysis of a large amount of language collected from many speakers or taken from lots of written texts. Such analyses are aimed at assessing the extent to which a pattern is found, and analyzing the contextual factors that influence variability. This type of analysis that handles large amounts of language and keeps track of many contextual factors at the same time is called corpus-based analysis.

The corpus based approach studies how speakers and writers use the linguistic resources available to them in their language. As an approach to linguistics, corpus-based analysis provides a new perspective on language use and allows discovering and identifying the patterns of different and co-occurring features and variations that characterize the analyzed texts.

The present study looks at the syntactic structures, namely that of subordinate clauses, in different text types or “genres”³ of discourse spoken and written in English. The use of subordinate clauses is examined in a corpus of naturally occurring connected, contextualized discourse.

Characteristics of the Analyzed Corpus

The choice of the texts to be analyzed in the present study was influenced by the categorization of the varieties of English termed ‘registers’ in Biber’s Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, 1999 (LGSWE). Biber⁴ calls the samples of language from registers ‘texts’. The term ‘text type’ here is used to refer to collections or groups of texts of one kind, selected based on external criteria relating to author/speaker purpose. The samples to be investigated were taken from both written and spoken language. As for the written texts, they are printed media, such as different newspaper articles, chapters from a short story and a novel, research papers, and passages from psychology and economics textbooks. Spoken language is represented here by scripted radio talks and broadcast discussions.

The corpus used in the present study for the analysis and the distribution of subordinate clauses comprises four text types (registers) of different degree of formality: fiction, conversation, newspaper language, and academic language, all representing contemporary English language. The texts chosen for our investigation are as follows:

The first, contemporary fiction consists of several chapters taken from two books. The next register, conversational speech from radio broadcasting phone-in talk shows or TV talk shows, which involve question/answer interaction between at least two speakers, was investigated based on the transcripts of interviews with ten different people on different topics. The analysed newspaper columns were sampled from across the various topics found in most newspapers. The texts covered the following major areas: domestic news, foreign/world news, arts (including cinema, theatre, fine arts, fashion, etc.), and social news (including reports about society people, environment, crime, etc.). They were taken from such media as The Guardian, The Observer, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, and The Sunday Times. The last investigated corpus is a collection of research papers, academic articles, and passages from textbooks taken from different websites and study fields, such as economics, medicine, and psychology.

In order to obtain results as valid as possible, the analysed texts, as mentioned above, are approximately of the same breadth that of 30,000 words (see Table 1 below). The whole corpus thus includes more than 120,000 words.

Table 1

register	number of texts	number of words
fiction	2	30 557
conversation	10	30 610
news	43	30 674
academic prose	11	30 533
		122 374

³as Biber, 1998:70 refers to text categorizations made on the basis of external criteria relating to author/speaker purpose

⁴ in LGSWE, 1999

The present study focuses particularly on the occurrence of finite subordinate clauses and their detailed analysis, while the investigation of non-finite clauses is to provide additional information about their frequency of occurrence and the form-function dichotomy in the syntax of the four text types.

Subordination and embedding

Based on the relationship that holds between the clauses within multiple sentences we distinguish between compound and complex sentences. Downing & Locke (1992:279) distinguish two kinds of relationship between clauses in a multiple sentence:

a/ *the syntactic* (structural) relationship of interdependency in which clauses are related to each other basically in one of two ways: the relationship is either of equivalence (the clauses have the same syntactic status) or the relationship is one of non-equivalence (the clauses have different status). When clauses are linked in a relationship of equivalence, we say that the relationship is paratactic. This type of linking is often treated as equivalent of coordination. On the other hand, when units of unequal status are related, we say that the relationship is hypotactic. In hypotactically related clauses, one clause is syntactically and semantically subordinated to another or to a series of clauses.

b/ *the logico-semantic* relations, which are varied since they represent the way the speaker/writer sees the connections to be made between one clause and another. These connections do not simply link clauses within a complex clause, but also clauses within a paragraph and paragraphs within a text. As Downing & Locke state, connection is, therefore, a discourse phenomenon. These logico-semantic relations are of two kinds, that of expansion (the nuclear situation is expanded by means of other situation) and projection (a situation is 'projected through a verb of saying or thinking).

Subordination, generally considered to be an index of structural complexity in language, has been studied by a number of grammarians. Thompson (1984:86) claims that 'subordination' treats as a single phenomenon all clauses which are not independent clauses⁵, and he says that it is a misleading term and doesn't accept it as a grammatical category at all but rather as a "negative term which lumps together all deviations from some 'main clause' norm".

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik's *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (CGEL), subordination is a feature of a complex sentence (10.1:719). It is a way of joining clauses of unequal status, where the independent clause is superordinate to the dependent clause(s)⁶, which depends on the main clause for its meaning. Semantically, the information contained in the subordinate clause is often presented as back grounded or presupposed in relation to the information contained in the superordinate clause (independent). A clause may enter into more than one relationship, it may be subordinate to one clause and super ordinate to another (ibid. 14.3).

- (i) He told me [main-super ordinate to (ii)]
- (ii) *that Peter wouldn't go there* [subordinate to (i)-super ordinate to (iii)]
- (iii) *unless they invite him.*[subordinate to (ii)]

A complex sentence is then a structure consisting of one independent clause that can stand alone as a sentence, and of one or more dependent clauses functioning as an element of the sentence. The subordinate clause, on the other hand, cannot stand alone (see the examples below):

- [1] I was really very surprised *because Tom arrived early in the morning.*

⁵ also called 'main clause'

⁶ called 'subordinate clause', or 'subclause'

- [2] John will lend you his car *if you need it*.
 [3] *That he didn't know about it* was not an excuse.
 [4] She said *that the test was not easy at all*.

The embedded clauses in sentences 1 – 4 function as constituents of the super ordinate clause (a clause of which a constituent is realized by another clause). However, Downing & Locke (1992:278) would think of embedded clauses only in examples [3] and [4] as they occur at subject and object functions (nominal clauses) and represent situations which are participants in a super ordinate situation. In sentence [1] and [2] the subordinate clauses function as adverbs, they are termed adverbial clauses. The relationship of dependency is different from that of the previous cases of embedding. Adverbial clauses themselves show a continuum of a looser-to-tighter integration, a continuum that correlates with their function (Hopper and Closs Traugott, 1994:176). They have not reached the level of incorporation that the nominal clauses have done. They are syntactically and semantically additional to, rather than participative in, the situation expressed in the main clause. Thus, such clauses are not considered as embedded, but dependent.

However, there are some discrepancies in terming of the above mentioned relationships. Downing & Locke (1992) distinguish only two types of relationships between the clauses within a sentence, namely, the relationships of equality (parataxis) and relationships of dependency (hypotaxis), within which they distinguish between two types of relationships, that of dependency and embedding. Hopper and Traugott (1993:170), on the other hand, redefine the terminology of two traditions and expand the parataxis (coordination) versus hypotaxis (subordination) pair into a three-way distinction establishing three cluster points which they characterize by a 'cline of clause combining (parataxis > hypotaxis > subordination). They define 'hypotaxis' as a kind of relationship in which there is an independent clause and one or more clauses that cannot stand by themselves. These are not wholly included within any constituent of the independent clause. On the other hand, 'subordination' according to them is 'embedding', or complete dependency, in which a dependent clause is wholly included within a constituent of the independent clause.

Syntactically, the clearest cases of subordination are those signalled by subordinating conjunctions. They serve not only to mark syntactic boundaries, but also to signal the functional relationship of the combined clauses to each other. However, the nature of relationship is not always marked explicitly (Downing & Locke, 1992:281) and not all subordinate clauses contain such markers. Other signals of subordination are *wh-* words, the word *that*, lack of finite verbs, and inversion. Huddleston (1995:152-3) names the following distinguishing markers: relative words, non-finiteness, ellipsis, and order.

In the following example

- [5] Please, pass me the book *that I borrowed from Ann*.

the relative clause is introduced by a relative word, which is a marker of subordination, and it functions as a dependent structure in the noun phrase (the book). Nevertheless, by some grammarians, it is treated as postmodification within the complex noun phrase constituting the object *the book that I borrowed from Ann*. According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (10.1 Note [a]), such structures add to the complexity of the noun phrase, not to the sentence, thus they are considered to be "constituents of phrases, and therefore only indirectly embedded within a larger clause"(CGEL 2.9:44). Based on their definition that "a simple sentence is an independent clause that does not have another clause as one of its elements⁷", but a clause may be part of one of its phrases (10.1 Note [a]) comes clear that they consider clause structures containing relative clauses to be simple sentences. Hopper and Closs Traugott (1994:190) support this idea, and they state that languages exhibit different degrees

⁷ In other words, a simple sentence does not contain a clause functioning as a subject, object, complement, or adverbial

of integration and interlacing of relative clauses, ranging from clauses which are placed outside the nucleus to clauses which are closely attached to a head noun inside the nucleus. Other grammars would consider such sentences complex as they contain more than one finite clause. The terms simple and complex sentences will be avoided here and Huddleston's brief definition (1988:152) of a subordinate clause as "one functioning as dependent within a larger construction that is itself a clause or a constituent of one" can form a starting point for the analysis as it covers a whole range of dependencies, differing in form and syntactic function and serving various discourse needs.

As for the classification of subordinate clauses, these tend to be classified in grammars according to functional-semantic principles such as whether a clause functions as a noun phrase, modifies a noun phrase, or has adverbial functions. In the present study, they are divided into three major categories: *nominal*, *relative*, and *adverbial*. Comparative clauses are treated within the adverbial group. Structures used for the purpose of focusing or giving information a more prominent position such as *cleft* and *pseudo-cleft sentences* were omitted from our analysis, because although their structure is similar to a relative or nominal clause (cf. CGEL, 18.28) and are introduced by *that*, *zero* pronoun or a *wh*-pronoun, they are neither relative nor nominal clauses.

Finite and Non-finite clauses

Depending upon the structure of their verb phrase, subordinate clauses may be finite or non-finite. According to Biber et al. (1999) the grammatical roles of finite dependent clauses are varied, and it is not always clear to what extent clauses should be regarded as independent or as part of other structures since the degrees of integration range from clear subordination (nominal, adverbial, relative, and comparative clauses) to loosely attached structures, such as reporting clauses, comment clauses and tags (LGSWE 3.11: 193).

A finite subordinate clause is generally marked by a clause link, which may be of various kinds. The most common formal device of subordination is a subordinator, a *wh*-word, or *that*. Except for these 'markers', there are other indicators of subordination, such as subject-operator inversion and absence of finite verb (in case of non-finite clauses). However, not all subordinate clauses contain such markers since some of them (*wh*-word and *that*) are omissible. A complex sentence, syntactically defined, is a unit that consists of more than one clause, of which one is independent and one or more are dependent clauses that may not stand alone. Nevertheless, the dependent clauses exhibit different degrees of dependency. Complex sentences may contain several instances of subordination called multiple subordination, which occurs when a clause enters into more than one relationship and it becomes subordinate to one clause and super ordinate to another. In such cases each subordinate clause is treated separately in the present study.

[6] ... but I don't know *that De Niro had to go sleep in a coffin when he did 'Bang the Drum Slowly'*. [N-IW-155, A- IW-152]

However, several instances of subordination may occur at the same level.

[7] *What they do is what I don't like.*

Such a sentence may seem complex at first sight, but in fact it has a simple three-part structure S-V-C, where both the subject and the complement are expressed by nominal clauses.

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Subordination is considered to be an index of structural complexity in language, and it is important in the study of differences not only between speech and writing but also within different varieties of texts.

Looking at the composition of the sentences in the analyzed texts, they were divided into simple units (sentences with no subordination) and complex units (sentences with subordination). Table 2 provides a detailed picture of the frequency of occurrence of subordinate clauses within sentences in each text type.

Table 2 The distribution of subordination within sentences in %

Text type	Sentences with no SC	1 SC	2 SCs	3 and more SCs	Sentences with subclauses
Fiction	51.9	28.8	12.9	6.4	48.1
Interviews	53.1	26.3	12.5	8.1	46.9
Newspaper	43.2	34.9	16.9	5.0	56.8
Acad. Prose	38.9	34.2	17.6	9.3	61.1
Total in the corpus	47.7	30.5	14.6	7.2	52.3

Within the whole analysed corpus comprising all four text types the result is as follows: 47.7% of all sentences found in the corpus do not contain any subordination, whereas 52.3% of the analysed sentences are complex (no matter what the number of subclauses they contain) 30.5% of sentences contain one subordinate clause. Out of all complex sentences there are 14.6% containing two subordinate clauses, and only 7.2% of sentences with three or more subordinate clauses. Looking at the percentage of occurrence of sentences with no subordinate clause and sentences with one and two subordinate clauses, the text types can be clustered together to form two groups with very close values: fiction and interviews vs. newspapers and academic prose. The same cannot be said about more complex sentences with three and more subordinate clauses. These are most frequently found in academic texts and interviews.

While a similar proportion of sentences containing subordination and sentences with no subordination applies to newspapers and academic texts, in fiction and interviews the percentage of simple units (sentences without subordination) is higher than that of complex ones (sentences containing subordinate clauses). Thus, it can be seen that the longer average length of sentences in academic writings and newspaper texts corresponds with a higher occurrence of subordinate clauses in these texts.

Based on the data in Table 2, the academic writings are seen to contain fewest sentences (38.9% or 539 instances) with no subordination at all. Newspaper articles include 43.2 % of sentences without subordination, which is 608 instances, while most units with no subordination are to be found in interviews (53.1% or 1065 instances) and fiction (51.9% or 914 instances).

The distribution of finite and non-finite subordinate clauses according to text type

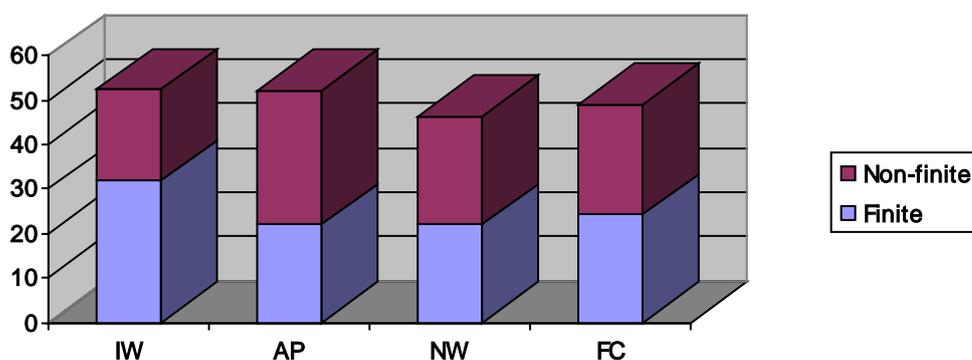
The total number of sentences in the corpus is 6557, which comprises 5820 subordinate clauses. There were found 4374 finite and 1446 non-finite clauses within the four text types. The first impression gained from the overall figures of occurrence of the clauses indicates a quite uneven distribution of the two types of subordinate clauses. The number of finite clauses is almost three times the number of non-finite clauses.

Table 3 and Figure 1 show the number and percentage of occurrence of finite and non-finite clauses within the different text types.

Table 3 The distribution of finite vs. non-finite clauses across text types

Text type	Finite		Non-finite		Total of all Sub-clauses in the corpus	
	No of clauses	% of all finite	No of clauses	% of all non-finite	No	%
Interviews	1389	31.8	298	20.6	1687	29.0
Acad. Prose	962	22.0	437	30.2	1399	24.1
Newspaper	961	22.0	351	24.3	1312	22.5
Fiction	1062	24.2	360	24.9	1422	24.4
Total	4374	100	1446	100	5820	100

Figure 1 The distribution of finite vs. non-finite clauses across text types



The highest incidence (31.8%) of finite subordinate clauses were to be found in interviews, but they are quite evenly distributed between the three other text types. Based on the findings shown in Table 5.2.1 it can be said that in spoken texts there is a preference for finite subordinate clauses. On the other hand, non-finite clauses have the lowest percentage of occurrence in this text type.

While the incidence of non-finite clauses in fiction and newspapers is almost equal (24.9 and 24.3 respectively), in academic texts the non-finite structures are represented by 30.2%, which is the highest rate in the corpus. The figures in Tables 5.2.1 above suggest that the occurrence of finite and non-finite clauses depends on the degree of formality of the text types: the greater the frequency of finite clauses, the less formal the text (interview) and the greater the frequency of non-finite clauses, the more formal the text (academic prose).

The distribution of types of subordinate clauses according to text type

Another area of investigation in this study is the distribution of finite and non-finite subordinate clauses according to text type. A detailed description of the distribution of particular structures (nominal, relative, and adverbial clauses) allowed a comparison with their distribution in other text types.

Table 4 The distribution of types of subordinate clauses according to text type

Text type	Nominal		Relative		Adverbial		Total	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Fiction	475	20.9	482	26.3	465	27.1	1422	24.4
Interviews	766	33.7	463	25.2	458	26.7	1687	29.0
Newspaper	471	20.8	451	24.6	390	22.7	1312	22.5
Acad. P.	558	24.6	438	23.9	403	23.5	1399	24.1
Total	2270	100	1834	100	1716	100	5820	100
Total %	39.0		31.5		29.5		100	

The quantitative analysis of syntactic structures shows to what extent the analysed texts do differ in terms of the frequency of occurrence of particular subordinate clauses. The division into nominal, relative, and adverbial clauses shows that nominal clauses account for 39% of all subordinate clauses in the corpus and are highly represented especially in spoken, conversational texts (33.7%), which would suggest that nominal clauses in general may be an indicator of formality. This finding supports the idea that the greater the frequency of nominal clauses, the less formal the text. Nominal clauses in academic prose, which is considered to be the most formal text type, are represented by 24.6%. However, the incidence of nominal clauses in newspapers and fiction is identical (21.8% and 21.9% respectively), and moreover, it is even lower than in academic prose. It is surprising as they occupy different positions in the formal-informal spectrum.

Relative clauses (restrictive and non-restrictive) account for 31.5% and are the second most frequent type of dependency within the corpus. A comparison of the frequency of relative clauses within text types shows that the figures for their distribution reveal quite even frequency from 23.9% to 26.3%. A slight gradient can be noticed from the lowest figure of 438 instances (23.9%) in the academic writings to the highest, 482 (26.3%), in fiction, so on this level relative clauses cannot be seen to be text type relevant.

Adverbial clauses with 29.5% of all subordinate clauses are relatively evenly represented in all text types, too (from 22.7% to 27.1%), and their frequency does not differ significantly from that of relative clauses. There is almost equal frequency of distribution of adverbial clauses in spoken texts (26.7%) and fiction (27.1%) on the one hand, and between newspaper texts (22.7%) and academic writing (23.5%) on the other hand. A general comparison of the incidence of adverbial clauses within the text types thus suggests that the actual figures for fiction and interviews show not much difference (465 and 458), whereas there are fewer in newspapers and academic prose (390 and 403), which would suggest that the least formal texts have most adverbial clauses.

The proportion of different types of finite to non-finite clauses within the corpus is figured in Table 5 below.

Table 5 The distribution of finite and non-finite subordinate clauses in the corpus

	Nominal	Relative	Adverbial	Total %
Finite	28.6	24.2	22.4	75.2
Non-finite	10.4	7.3	7.1	24.8
Total %	39	31.5	28.5	100

The figures in the table show that there were approximately three times more finite than non-finite clauses found in the analyzed corpus.

Conclusion

The study focuses on the occurrence of grammatical subordination strategies and patterns of inter-clausal relations as they are used in interactional language within the mentioned differing text types of written and spoken English. The aim of this study was to investigate the frequency of occurrence of different types of subordinate clauses as well as the form-function dichotomy in the syntax of four text types. As D. Hudson-Ettle assumes, variation in linguistic performance is determined by the choices made by the speakers/writers of the discourse and that these choices may be the result of a variety of influencing factors. Choices of syntactic strategy may differ in each of the examined text type, which can be only investigated if grammatical descriptions of a large amount of comparable language data are available.

The subordination strategies used in different text types were examined in order to find out to what extent subordination is employed in the differing texts and which forms of grammatical subordination are used in which text type. Similarities and differences in syntactic strategies and the use of dependent clauses in different functions were quantitatively and qualitatively established between the analyzed texts. Based on the obtained data we can conclude that the occurrence of finite and non-finite clauses depends on the degree of formality of the text types. In other words, the greater frequency of finite clauses indicates that the text is less formal, while the greater frequency of non-finite clauses is typical for more formal texts (see Table 3). Furthermore, the relatively high incidence of nominal clauses in conversation compared with the other text types leads us to the conclusion that nominal clauses are more frequently used in less formal texts. Furthermore, the results of the analysis presented here show that the longer average length of sentences in academic writings and newspaper texts corresponds with a higher occurrence of subordinate clauses in these texts.

Taking the longer average length of a sentence as an indicator of syntactic complexity then the academic research texts are syntactically more complex than the spoken text types. In other words, written language consists of longer sentences and thus, it is more complex. It can be explained by the fact that there is more time available for planning written discourse.

The research demonstrates the usefulness of such an analysis as a tool for understanding the usage of the mentioned syntactic structures in different contexts. Detailed descriptions of the distribution of particular structures and comparisons with their distribution in other text types are presented in this study.

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