

SUBORDINATE CLAUSES – THEIR FORMS AND FUNCTIONS IN DIFFERENT TEXT TYPES

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Abstrakt: The article deals with the formal and functional analysis of subordinate clauses in a corpus of four different text types of varied degree of formality (newspapers, academic prose, fiction, and interviews). The study presents descriptions of the distribution of particular functional types of subordinate clauses and comparisons with their distribution in other text types. It also investigates the ways in which nominal, relative, and adverbial subordinate clauses occur and what functions they serve in the analyzed texts. Besides other findings, the results of the analyses also suggest that the occurrence of finite and non-finite clauses, the position of subordinate clauses, as well as their basic function depends on the degree of formality of the text types.

Key words: text type, subordinate clauses, formal and functional analysis

Introduction

The description of a particular language usually concentrates on accurate representation of the forms and structures used in that language. However, the study of language as a system of communication needs to do more than simply lay out its forms and structures, it needs to show what they are for and how they are used, in other words, how the grammar of a language serves as a resource for making and exchanging meanings (Crystal 1997). Thus, a lot of interesting questions arise in connection with the way language is used, how it is organized to allow speakers and writers to make and exchange meanings, rather than what its components are. It is important to recognize that different types of texts produce different types of language and that the broad distinction between formal and informal or between public and private discourse is not the only categorial distinction.

This study presents a quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of subordinate clauses occurring in a corpus of four different text types. The corpus, a collection of authentic texts, comprises four text types (registers): *conversation-interviews* (IW), *academic prose* (AP), *newspaper articles* (NW), and *fiction* (FC), all representing contemporary British and American English of different degree of formality.⁹ The various texts compiling the subcorpora chosen for our investigation were randomly selected regardless the media, the topics, the level of language, and the age, sex, or social group of the users. The analysed texts within the subcorpora are of different length, but each subcorpus is approximately of the same breadth (30,000 words). The whole corpus thus includes more than 120,000 words. The formal and functional description of the analysed structures offers an overall view on different types of subordinate clauses, on their actual use and shows the extent to which they occur in particular types of discourse.

The Analysis of the corpus

The analysed corpus comprises 6557 sentences that differ in length and number of clauses. The longest sentences occur in academic prose with an average of 22,4 words, while

⁹ It is assumed that the spoken texts were the least formal, followed by the chapters from fiction as the second on the formality scale. The newspaper articles were considered more formal than the former, while the academic writings were positioned as the most formal of these four text types.

the shortest with an average of 15,25 words were to be found in the spoken texts. Of all 6557 sentences in the corpus, 3431 (52,3%) contain at least one subordinate structure. Considering the obtained data, it is obvious that the length of a sentence is related to its complexity. The spoken texts are characterized by shorter and less complex sentences with no subordinate clauses (53,1%), while the sentences in academic prose are longer and more complex; there are only 38,9% of structures in this text type that do not contain any subordinate clause. These numbers indicate that the oral data, consisting mainly of simple sentences, are syntactically less complex than the written text types, most of which contain at least one subordinate clause. Thus, it can be concluded that subordination may be counted as an index of formality. The more formal the text type, the higher number of complex sentences it contains.

The analysis of the dependent clauses from the point of view of their structure revealed that the proportion of finite to non-finite clauses is 75,2% to 24,8%. The distribution of finite clauses shows a cline from fewest in the most formal academic texts and newspapers, followed by fiction to the highest number of finite dependent clauses in the oral data. As for the non-finite structures, their distribution is the other way round; the highest number of non-finite dependent clauses occurs in academic prose, while the incidence of non-finite clauses in the oral data is the lowest, which suggests that certain linguistic features can be assigned the values of formal/informal strategies. Finite adverbial clauses can be taken as a marker of informality and non-finite clauses are a feature particularly characteristic of formal writing.

As to the distribution of the dependent clauses based on their function in the sentence, the most frequently occurring type is that of nominal clauses with 2270 instances, which accounts for 39% of all subordinate clauses found in the corpus. The second most common clauses are relative clauses (31,5%), followed by adverbial clauses (29,5%).

Nominal clauses

In general, nominal clauses are most preferred in the spoken data, where their incidence is much higher than in the written text types. The overall results show that the higher the frequency of nominal clauses, the less formal is the text type; thus it can be assumed that they are a feature of informality. The nominal clauses occurring in the spoken texts are finite rather than non-finite. The percentage of finite nominal clauses (587 instances or 35,3%) is almost 6% higher than that of the non-finite clauses (179 or 29,5%). Finite clauses, which are more compact, most frequently occur in the spoken texts. Non-finite nominal clauses, on the other hand, are very common in formal academic writings. The high incidence of nominal clauses in the texts can be explained by the range and high number of verbs (*say, tell, know, think, want, etc.*) that report speech, attitudes, thoughts and feelings and control the nominal clauses. From this it comes clear that the majority of nominal clauses (finite and non-finite) in each register appear in post-predicate object position, following the mentioned verbs. Except for complementing the verb, the finite and non-finite structures are also commonly used as subject complement, adjective complement, or they function as appositives, subjects and extraposed subjects. Noun complementation (appositive) is most common in academic prose where a lot of information is conveyed through a noun phrase and its explanation. The most common structural types of nominal clauses are *that*- and zero *that*- clauses. The incidence of *that*-clauses is the highest in academic prose and newspapers, where these are used to report speech, thoughts, emotions, mental states or attitudes of the writers, which is typical for the given registers. On the other hand, the incidence of zero *that*-clauses is the lowest in these text types, but the highest in the interviews. Thus, it is assumed that zero *that*-clauses (usually in direct object position) are a characteristic of informality. Extraposed subject and appositive *that*-

clauses are more commonly employed in the more formal text types (academic prose and newspapers). Finite *wh*-clauses are most frequently used in informal texts (interviews and fiction). They can be found in both pre- and post predicate positions and also serve a wide range of functions, of which that of direct object and object of preposition have a strong dominance.

Of all non-finite nominal clauses, *to*-infinitives are by far the most common structures. As far as their distribution across the text types is concerned, the results suggest that they occur mainly in the spoken data and fiction. In these registers, the *to*-infinitives most commonly take object position after such verbs as *want*, *would like*, *try*, *hope*, and *decide*. Another common function of *to*-infinitive clauses is that of extraposed subject, subject complement and adjectival complementation, where the infinitive form is chosen rather than a finite *that*-clause. Nominal *ing*- clauses are typical for formal writing as the highest incidence of these structures was found in academic prose. In this register, they most commonly occur in post-predicate position following an adjective + preposition (*responsible for*, *effective in*, *successful in*, *necessary for*, etc.) to express some attitude or evaluation, in subject position to refer to some cognitive process, or they are controlled by verbs (with or without prepositions) of different semantic classes (*remember*, *suggest*, *start*, *stop*, *keep*, *try* etc.) to describe some process or provide some explanation (*prevent from*, *used for*).

Relative clauses

Relative clauses as a whole regardless of whether they are finite, non-finite, restrictive, or non-restrictive, are almost evenly distributed across the four analysed text types with a cline from the fewest in academic prose (438 instances or 23,9%) to 482 instances (26,3%) in fiction. The differences in the frequency of their occurrence are not significant, thus it can be assumed that relative clauses are not an indicator of formality¹⁰. There are more than three times as many finite relative clauses as non-finite ones. Finite relative clauses have particularly high percentage in interviews and fiction, whereas the lowest figures for finite relative clauses are to be found in academic prose and newspapers. These two more formal written text types, on the contrary, have the highest percentage of non-finite relative clauses, whereas the lowest figures for the non-finite relative clauses are to be found in the spoken texts, where the difference in numbers between finite (418) and non-finite clauses (45) is the biggest of all four text types. These findings suggest that finite clauses are a linguistic feature of informal language, while non-finite structures are a common feature of formal language.

Almost one third (33,2%) of finite relative clauses are introduced by the relativizer *that*. The other most frequently used relativizers are *which* (23,6%), *who* (19,5%), and the *zero* relativizer is also moderately common (16,4%). The choice of the relativizers depends on a number of factors with regard to the information the clause provides (restrictive or non-restrictive), the head (animate or inanimate) of the noun phrase it postmodifies, as well as the position of the gap in the relative clause. *That* is overall the most common in all four registers as it is the most flexible in terms of the gap position though it can be used only with restrictive relative clauses. Its distribution differs across the text types with the highest number in academic prose and interviews. The results are rather surprising as these two text types are of different degree of formality; the former being the most formal, while the latter the most informal. The relativizer *which* can be used with both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses

¹⁰ These results do not correspond with Biber's findings (1999:8.6.1), where there is a significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of relative clauses in different registers. The fewest relative clauses are in conversation and the highest number is in news. The different results can be attributed to the different character of the texts chosen for the analysis and the size of the analysed corpus..

and it is most common in fiction, while *who* referring to animate heads is most frequently to be found in interviews. The three above mentioned relativizers are almost equally distributed only in the newspaper articles. These findings do not totally correspond with Biber's results (1999:8.7.1.2)¹¹, which can be related to the choice and the different character of the media chosen for the analysis in this study. The omission of the relativizer is a common feature of informal text types, namely fiction and interviews. The *zero* relativizer is most frequent here than in news or academic prose, which may be attributed to its colloquial character.

The most frequent type of non-finite clauses are *ed*-clauses with 64 instances or 45,0%. Past participles and *-ing* forms as non-finite relative clauses are more common in written than in oral registers; the highest number of *-ed* participles occurs in academic texts (33,5%) and the lowest in interviews (8,9%). *Ing*-clauses are most common in fiction (32,6%) with proximity to the figures for the other written text types, but the figures for interviews are again very low (8,8%). The results for *to*-infinitive post-modifying clauses are very low in all four registers.

Restrictive relative clauses as a whole have particularly high results (81,6%) compared with non-restrictive relative clauses (18,4%). The highest number of restrictive relative clauses can be found in the oral data and fiction. Most finite restrictive relative clauses occur in the same two registers, which are considered to be the least formal ones; on the other hand, most non-finite restrictive relative clauses are to be found in academic prose and newspapers, which are formal written texts. The analysis has shown that restrictive relative clauses are more likely to take the *zero* relativizer rather than *that* in the less formal text types. As for non-restrictive relative clauses, they are most frequent in the written texts with the highest percentage of occurrence in newspapers and fiction. In these text types, there are a lot of proper names as antecedents, after which postmodification is realised by optional finite relative clauses.

Adverbial clauses

The incidence of adverbial clauses in the analysed corpus is the lowest of the three types of investigated subordinate clauses. The distribution of adverbial clauses shows that they are a feature of less formal registers as the highest number of adverbial clauses is in fiction and the spoken texts. As for the formal characteristics of adverbial clauses, similarly to the other types of subordinate clauses, they are mostly finite introduced by a subordinator. The highest percentage of finite adverbial clauses is to be found in the oral data, which has also the lowest percentage of non-finite adverbial clauses. There are significantly fewer non-finite clauses in the interviews than in any other text type, which proves that the less formal the text the more finite and fewer non-finite clauses it contains. The use of non-finite structures requires more planning than the addition of a final finite adverbial clause to the main clause, and as there is not so much time for planning the speech as it is in writing, the spoken language logically uses fewer non-finite structures (Holger 2001). Adverbial *to*-infinitive clauses, which are a means expressing purpose, are most common across the four registers with preference for the written ones. There are almost twice as many of them as *-ing* clauses, which are most frequently used to express cause/reason and time relationships. The overall distribution of *-ing* participles across the registers is very similar to that of *to*-infinitives; there is a cline in their occurrence from fewest in the spoken texts to most in the written text types, particularly in fiction¹². Only a small number of non-finite adverbial

¹¹ *That* is most common in fiction and least common in conversation. *Which* is most common in academic prose, *who* in news, and the *zero* relativizer in fiction.

¹² This finding corresponds with Biber's results (1999: 10.2.8.4)

clauses are introduced by a subordinator that clarifies the relationship with the main clause. *To-* infinitive clauses with purposive meaning sometimes take the subordinator *in order* (in academic prose), and the most common overt marker for *-ing* clauses with temporal meaning is *after* (in newspapers and fiction). However, the semantic role of a considerable number of non-finite clauses, especially *-ing* clauses, which do not take a subordinator, cannot be clearly specified. These clauses are called supplementive clauses, and they occur most frequently in fiction. They provide additional description by presenting circumstances that supplement the action or state in the main clause, which has to be figured out from the context (Biber 1999:3.12.4). The typical position of non-finite adverbial clauses is final position, but there are some instances of initial placement, especially of supplementive *-ing* clauses with temporal meaning. This position is most common in fiction, where it denotes a background activity within which the action in the main clause takes place.

Finite adverbial clauses are particularly frequent in the less formal text types, such as interviews and fiction, and they express a wider range of semantic functions than non-finite adverbial clauses. Such semantic categories as concession, contrast, result, or proportion are realized exclusively by finite adverbial clauses. Finite adverbial clauses are for the main part temporal, conditional and of cause/reason. The figures for time clauses are relatively high compared with the other most frequently occurring semantic categories, which can be attributed to their usefulness in relating certain actions or events to other activities described in the main clause. There are twice as many time clauses (524 or 40%) as conditional clauses (265 or 20,3%), whereas adverbial clauses of cause/reason are represented by 238 instances (18,3%). The incidence of other semantic categories of finite adverbial clauses is lower than 5,5%. In general, fiction and interviews, the less formal text types, are characterized by more time clauses than newspapers and academic prose. There are, however, noticeable differences in the distribution of the other semantic categories across the text types. The highest number of cause/reason clauses (36%) is to be found in the oral data, while they are almost evenly distributed (20-22%) in the written registers. Conditional clauses are very common in academic prose and interviews, but least common in fiction. Of the other categories, manner clauses and concessive clauses are moderately common, the former especially in interviews and fiction, the latter in academic prose. Finite adverbial clauses are introduced by subordinators, the most common of which is the subordinator *when*, indicating time relationships. Adverbial clauses of cause/reason are usually introduced by *because*, and conditional clauses almost exclusively by *if*. Concession is most commonly introduced by *although* and *even though*, the former being more formal and thus more frequently used in academic prose, while the latter, its less formal equivalent, is preferred in newspapers and fiction. The typical subordinator used to express manner and comparison is *as if*. The subordinators *since* and *as* have multiple meanings; *since* can convey time and cause/reason relationships, the subordinator *as* is used to convey time, cause/reason and manner. In general, in the analysed corpus, *since* is used to express cause/reason rather than time, especially in academic prose. *As*, on the other hand, is more common in time and manner clauses in fiction and newspapers, where it is combined with other structures to clarify particular relationships (as *long as*, *as soon as*, *as if*, *as though*).

Similarly to non-finite adverbial structures, finite adverbial clauses prefer final position in the sentence, but the distribution of different semantic categories slightly differs across the text types. Whereas time, cause/reason, and manner clauses have a strong preference for final position in both written and oral texts, the positional distribution of conditional clauses is different. In the interviews, conditional clauses show a slight preference for initial position, where they similarly to initial time clauses create links to previous discourse and limit and qualify the interpretation of the main clause (Ford 1993). In newspapers and fiction, they have no preference for either position, while in academic prose

they show a preference for final position and thus serve to complete the sentence information. The overall results of all semantic categories of adverbial clauses show that final position is strongly preferred especially in newspapers and fiction.¹³

Conclusion

The study provides a comprehensive formal and functional corpus-based description of subordinate clauses as well as an analysis of their distribution in different contexts. It also investigates the ways in which nominal, relative, and adverbial subordinate clauses occur and what functions they serve. Since the study and acquisition of language and its grammar cannot be based only on sentence-level descriptions, the present study is based on a corpus of four different text types of different degree of formality. The aim of this study was to describe the syntactic structures and investigate how they are used within different naturally occurring texts of spoken and written discourse. The results of the present study constitute a contribution to the application of user-based approach to the formal and functional analysis of specific language structures, namely that of subordinate clauses. It can be hoped that future linguists, EFL professional teachers and researchers in the field of the structure of the English sentence will benefit from our analysis and will use it as a resource for their studies.

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¹³ Biber (1999:833) finds conditional clauses in written registers with slight preference for initial position, which does not correspond with our findings. This can be contributed to the different nature and amount of the selected texts for our analysis.

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