

Subject clauses and related structures

Vladislav Smolka

University of South Bohemia

Owing to the extremely complex nature of language phenomena, description of a natural language is a never-ending process. Depending on the level of generalisation, the description yields either a relatively limited number of categories, easy to work with but unable to capture the underlying complexity, or a vast set of minute categories with boundaries so indistinct that it is often hard to say where one ends and the other begins. As the latter is impractical, it is generally accepted that any classification into neat categories is a simplification.

In addition, depending on linguistic tradition, the methodology applied, the influence of the scholar's mother tongue, and many other variables, there may be a number of alternative descriptions of one language phenomenon, and as long as they are consistent, it is difficult to say which gives a truer picture of reality.

All of this is well-known and generally accepted as inevitable. What is often less obvious is the wash-back effect of language description: once language phenomena are classified, the classification influences our perception of language, as we tend to perceive it in the mirror of the simplified and imperfect categories. For this reason it may be useful to re-examine from time to time areas that seem to have been sufficiently explored. One such area is that of the subordinate clauses, namely subject clauses, which constitute one of the basic types of subordinate clauses in an English complex sentence.

The aim of the present paper is to consider cases where the boundary between subject clauses and other types of clauses may be, at least under certain circumstances or in certain contexts, indistinct or blurred, or where different types of clauses share certain features with subject clauses. One of the reasons for the existence of such borderline cases is that, in addition to a set of formal (syntactic) properties, a clause element typically displays a set of semantic properties, and these two indicators may be pointing in sharply different ways. Another reason for classification difficulties is ambiguity, i.e. cases where a given surface structure has two or more interpretations, possibly even within the same context. Such ambiguity is often caused by difficulties in determining pronominal reference. A general underlying reason is the above-mentioned complexity of relationships encountered in attempting a description of a natural language.

The first type of clauses that fall within the scope of this paper are extraposed *that*-, *whether*- and *if*-clauses.

- (1) *It's irrelevant that she is under sixteen.*
- (2) *It's irrelevant whether she is under sixteen.*
- (3) *It's irrelevant if she is under sixteen.*

Example (1) presents the information in the subordinate clause as factual. Example (2) expresses uncertainty about the truth of the proposition in the subject clause. Example (3) seems to indicate the same, but CGEL notes that it is not universally accepted by native speakers of English. This limited acceptability, however, only applies to the interpretation of the structure as a subject clause. The other possible interpretation is an adverbial clause of condition. In such case *if* obviously cannot be replaced by *whether*, and the reference of the pronoun *it* is also different. While in (1) and (2) *it* points cataphorically to the extraposed subject, in the conditional interpretation of (3) it must refer to something else, e.g.:

- (4) *(She needn't have bothered to raise that objection.) It's irrelevant if she is under sixteen.*

It is to be noted here that even in the conditional interpretation of (3) the scope of reference of *it* remains unclear. Besides *that objection*, it could be *her raising that objection* or *(the fact) that she raised that objection*, but this does not seriously affect general understanding.

Only (1) and (2) permit initial placement of the subject clause.

- (5) *That she is under sixteen is irrelevant.*
 (6) *Whether she is under sixteen is irrelevant.*

Reversing the order of clauses in (3) requires repetition of the pronoun *it* and forces conditional interpretation.

- (7) *If she is under sixteen, it is irrelevant.*

Let us now consider another similar example.

- (8) *It is obvious that they feel unsafe.*
 (9) *It is obvious whether they feel unsafe.*
 (10) *It is obvious if they feel unsafe.*

Example (8) expresses certainty about the truth value of the subordinate clause, (9) suggests that their being unsafe manifests itself so clearly that it can be immediately recognized, while (10) may be interpreted as (9) or as a conditional clause, i.e. as long as they feel unsafe, something becomes obvious. In spite of the fact that in (10) the subordinate clause cannot be moved to the beginning unless interpreted as a clause of condition, and the pronoun *it* cannot therefore be considered truly anticipatory, there seems to be a clear logical link to the subordinate clause, i.e. their being unsafe, which is, however, considered as a possibility. The boundary between the conditional interpretation and that as a subject clause becomes blurred.

So far we have been examining examples containing a copular verb. In such cases the semantics of the verb complementation determines the acceptability of a given structure. Replacing *obvious* with *natural* makes the alternative with *whether* illogical.

- (11) *It is natural that they feel unsafe.*
 (12) **It is natural whether they feel unsafe.*
 (13) *It is natural if they feel unsafe.*

In (13) we are once again faced with the question of the reference of *it*. If it refers to something else than *feeling unsafe*, the only possible interpretation is a clause of condition. When *feeling unsafe* is at least subsumed in the reference of *it*, the interpretation combines elements of both the conditional and the subject clause and approaches semantically the non-factual interpretation of a *that*-clause with *should*.

(14) *It is natural that they should feel unsafe.*

This phenomenon is, of course, not restricted to copular predication.

(15) *It makes perfect sense if they feel unsafe.*

The referential link between the initial pronoun and the subordinate clause, as well as the status of the subordinate clause as the true subject, becomes clear if we consider examples containing a passive main clause.

(16) *It is not known if there is more child abuse these days than thirty, fifty or even one hundred years ago.*

This may be taken as a counterpart of an active sentence where the subordinate clause is beyond doubt an object:

(17) *Nobody knows if there is more child abuse these days than thirty, fifty or even one hundred years ago.*

The examples above seem to suggest the existence of a scale connecting subject clauses with conditional clauses where the intermediate position is occupied by *if*-clauses introduced by the pronoun *it* displaying referential links to the subordinate clause, and the subordinate clause is understood as potentially valid. This is not surprising if we consider the semantic similarity between dependent Yes/No interrogative *if*-clauses functioning as subjects and conditional clauses: the former inherently contain conditional relationship in the choice between *yes* (condition fulfilled) and *no* (condition not fulfilled), and it is therefore only natural that the two categories should overlap.

In addition, points of similarity may be found between subject *that*-clauses and the *that*-clauses of cleft sentences (another similar structure, namely adjectival relative clauses, are not treated here because they have been explored elsewhere). It has to be noted that this similarity is purely formal, whereas the functional aspects of both structures are vastly different. As the cleft sentence formally reminds of a copular predication, the central question here is whether it is possible to consider the *that*-clause as the extraposed subject of the sentence, or whether it is at least possible to find any relationship between the initial pronoun *it* and the *that*-clause. Let us consider the following examples from CGEL:

(18) *It is his callousness that I shall ignore.*

While the initial position of the *that*-clause is obviously impossible, a slight alteration yields the form of the pseudo-cleft sentence, where the remainder of the *that*-clause constitutes a substantial part of the subject.

- (19) **That I shall ignore is his callousness.*
 (20) *What I shall ignore is his callousness.*

Another functionally equivalent alteration relates the original *that*-clause to the new subject as its modification.

- (21) *The thing I shall ignore is his callousness.*
 (21a) *That which I shall ignore is his callousness.*

These examples indicate that while it is impossible to consider the *it* of a cleft sentence strictly anticipatory, as it is in the case of extraposed subject *that*-clauses, and therefore the thematic *that*-clause in a cleft sentence cannot be regarded as the true subject, there is a clear connection between the two. It would be wrong to consider the initial pronoun of cleft sentences as empty, although this conclusion may superficially be supported by lack of number concord with plural complements (*cf It's the trams that make such noise.*), and the invariably singular form might be more conveniently thought of as the manifestation of singular concord required by the nominal *that*-clause.

Interestingly, there are ambiguous structures that may be interpreted, depending on their prosody and context, either as cleft sentences or extraposed nominal subject clauses (and in the following example also as an adjectival relative clause, which however lies outside the scope of attention for the purpose of the present paper.

- (22) *It's a game that the team is afraid to lose.*

Apart from the obvious cleft sentence reading, the structure may be understood, in a fitting context, as saying that the members of the team only pretend to be afraid to lose. This becomes more apparent in a slightly modified form:

- (23) *It's (merely/only) a game that the team is afraid to lose.*
 (24) *That the team is afraid to lose is (merely/only) a game.*

The last type of subordinate clauses bearing formal similarity to subject clauses are appositive clauses (in CGEL terminology; this structure is treated differently in Czech grammars, where it is considered a content attributive clause).

- (25) *The fact that he wrote a letter to her suggests that he knew her.*
 (26) *That he wrote a letter to her suggests that he knew her.*

The similarity only occurs in examples where the appositive clause is related to the initial nominal subject. The key point here is the semantic weakness of the head noun. Its main role is formal; it only provides a kind of anchor for the appositive clause, whereas the semantic contribution is negligible (this is further supported by the narrow range of nouns that can fulfil this role). The semantic redundancy is particularly clear in instances where the head noun expresses a very general concept and is not further modified. In such case it can often be omitted without loss of semantic content, as in (26), and the result is an initially placed subject *that*-clause. On the other hand, if the head noun is semantically more specific and further modified, it becomes more important in terms of information, and mere omission is then often questionable or impossible, as in (28). Final placement of the subject *that*-clause sometimes renders the structure more acceptable, although some information is lost.

- (27) *The police report that the drugs had been found appeared in the press yesterday.*
(28) *?That the drugs had been found appeared in the press yesterday.*
(29) *It appeared in the press yesterday that the drugs had been found.*

The three types of structures treated above offer an insight into the sheer complexity of semantic and syntactic relationship in a natural language and indicate the kind of problems that plague any attempt at language description and classification. The semantic level may be thought of as being primary, and the syntactic instruments as mere tools of formal encoding. The existence of scales on the semantic level is obvious, and it is therefore natural that this should be reflected on the syntactic level as well, however, this fact is often obscured by the traditional categories used to describe the language system.

References

- Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad and E. Finegan (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, London: Longman.
Dušková, L. (1999) *Studies in the English Language*, Part 2., Prague: Karolinum – Charles University Press.
Nosek, J. (1966) *Contributions to the Syntax of the New English Complex Sentence*, Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica, Monographia XIII, Praha: Universita Karlova.
Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London: Longman.