Syntactic and Semantic Differences between Nominal Relative Clauses and Dependent wh-Interrogative Clauses

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This paper focuses on the comparison of the treatment of nominal relative clauses and dependent wh- interrogative clauses in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* and *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language.* Especially *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* – the third and latest in a series of comprehensive grammar references – sheds light on problems in distinguishing nominal relative clauses from dependent wh- interrogative clauses by analysing the former as clear noun phrases and the latter as clauses.

Introduction

Nominal relative clauses and dependent wh- interrogative clauses are often difficult to distinguish from each other. This applies mainly to those clauses which start with *what* both as a pronoun, as in *I spent what he gave me,* and as a determiner, as in *I spent what money I had.* Clauses introduced by wh- expressions ending in -ever (e.g. whatever) do not constitute a problem because they are very common in nominal relative clauses, and not usually used in dependent wh- interrogative clauses. Other wh- words, on the other hand, are very frequent in wh- interrogative clauses but rare in nominal relative clauses. Since the distinction between nominal relative clauses and wh- interrogative clauses is considered an advanced point of grammar, it is expected that especially big, that is comprehensive, grammars will treat this issue in depth.

The initial intention of this paper was to focus on the comparison of the treatment of nominal relative clauses and dependent wh- interrogative clauses which start with *what* in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (henceforth CGEL), *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (henceforth LGSWE), and *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (henceforth CAGEL). Studying LGSWE has revealed that the grammar deals with the above-mentioned issues rather superficially. We learn that wh- complement clauses can be either dependent interrogative clauses or nominal relative clauses. It is not even mentioned that these two types of clauses can be difficult to distinguish from each other. The apparent drawback is, however, clarified after reading the preface to the book. The main aim of LGSWE is not to give an in-depth analysis of every grammar item but rather present corpus-based examples and quantitative data representing different language varieties of spoken and written English. The authors state that "In many ways the two books [LGSWE and CGEL] complement rather than compete with each other" (LGSWE: viii). Therefore, in what follows attention is paid to the comparison of the treatment of nominal relative clauses and dependent wh- interrogative clauses which start with *what* in CAGEL and CGEL.

CAGEL takes nominal relative clauses (henceforth NRCs) and dependent wh-interrogative clauses as a problem and makes an effort to treat them very systematically. It refuses the analysis of NRCs as clauses and brings semantic and syntactic evidence to prove that they are not clauses but noun phrases (henceforth NPs). The term that CAGEL suggests, namely fused relatives instead of NRCs, seems quite logical. For example, in *I agree with most of what your father was saying* (CAGEL: 1033), *what* is equivalent to *the things that*, in other words to an NP and relative clause postmodifying the NP. In such constructions it is impossible to identify an antecedent and relative clause which follows because both are fused in *what*.

Semantic similarity between nominal relative clauses and noun phrases
CAGEL compares the semantic similarity of NRCs and NPs by pointing out that both indicate something concrete (objects, people, etc.), as opposed to clauses which indicate something abstract. CGEL states the same about clauses and adds that NRCs are an exception in this respect because they may denote concrete things (CGEL: 1047).

Syntactic similarity between nominal relative clauses and noun phrases
CAGEL also provides syntactic evidence on the basis of which NRCs can be analysed as NPs. It puts together a few points that can be applied when we want to distinguish nominal relatives (as NPs) from dependent wh- interrogatives (as clauses). The points are as follows: subject - verb agreement, subject - auxiliary inversion, extraposition, preposition fronting, and adjective complementation. They will be dealt with in turn. Examples mentioned below are taken from CAGEL (2003: 1068-1077). Where relevant, they are compared and contrasted with the treatment in CGEL.

Subject – verb agreement

 [1] *What books she has are in the attic.*
 [2] *What ideas he has to offer remains to be seen.*

In [1] the plural verb form (*are*) proves that *What books she has* is taken as an NP as in *All the books she has are …* Example [2] shows a similar structure as example [1]. This time, however, *What ideas he has to offer* is counted as a clause due to the singular form of the verb (*remains*), which is commonly used when clauses are used as subjects. Example [1] thus represents an NRC or fused relative, example [2] a dependent wh- interrogative clause. CGEL agrees with a singular verb form used after clauses in a subject position and adds that in this

respect NRCs are an exception because the concord depends on the interpretation of the number of a wh-element (CGEL 2003: 755).

Subject – auxiliary inversion

[3] *Is what she suggests unreasonable?*
[4] ** Is that she proposes to go alone unreasonable?*

The fact that subject – verb inversion is possible in [3] and not in [4] indicates that the nature of *what she suggests* and *that she proposes to go alone* is different. Since the latter is an uncontroversial clause, CAGEL argues that clauses cannot be used in the subject – auxiliary inversion construction, and *what she suggests* in [3] cannot thus be regarded as a clause. This further supports the hypothesis of treating NRCs or fused relatives as NPs. CGEL does not deal with this issue.

Extraposition

[5] *What she suggests is unreasonable*
[6] ** It is unreasonable what she suggests.*
[7] *It is unreasonable that we should have to do it ourselves.*
[8] *It is unclear what she wrote.*

Example [5] shows an NRC, or fused relative, in the subject position. The unacceptability of example [6] as opposed to the acceptability of example [7] again speaks in favour of treating *what she suggests* in [6] as an NP, because NPs in contrast to clauses do not occur in the extraposition construction. In example [8] we deal with extraposition after anticipatory *it*. *What she wrote* in [8] must thus be a dependent wh- interrogative clause. CGEL also admits that extraposed "wh- clauses are best regarded as indirect interrogatives" (2003: 1392).

Preposition fronting

[9] *What she referred to was Riga.*
[10] ** To what she referred was Riga.*
[11] *They ate what they paid for.*
[12] *They ate the things for which they paid.*
[13] *I asked them on what they based their predictions.*
[14] *I asked them what they based their predictions on.*

Since the antecedent and relative pronoun in example [9] are fused, the preposition must follow the verb *referred,* and example [10] with a fronted preposition is unacceptable. If, however, in examples [9] and [10] we substituted *the city which* for *what,* in other words if we substituted an antecedent followed by a relative clause for a fused relative, we would have a choice of placing the preposition before the relative pronoun, *the city to which she referred,* or after the verb, *the city which she referred to.* The comment seems to further support the treatment of *what* constructions in [9] and [10] as NPs. Example [10] would be comparable to **To the city which she referred was Riga,* which is, of course, clearly unacceptable. The same applies to example [11] as is shown in example [12] taken from CGEL (2003: 1060). In [12] *which they paid for* is also possible. Examples [13] and [14] (CGEL 2003: 1051) illustrate a choice in the placement of the preposition, which seems to prove that in [13] and [14] we are dealing with dependent wh- interrogatives. Basically CAGEL and CGEL treat this issue in the same way, with CAGEL adding a rather thorough explanation supporting the treatment of what is traditionally called nominal relative clauses as noun phrases.

Adjective complementation

> [15] **I'm sorry what I did.*
> [16] *I am sorry that you were inconvenienced.*
> [17] *He is not sure (about) what he should say.*

Example [15] is wrong without a preposition – *I'm sorry for what I did* – which again supports the theory of NPs because NPs would have to be related by means of a preposition – *I am sorry for the inconvenience.* Clauses, on the other hand, can be linked without a preposition as is demonstrated in example [16]. In [17] *what he should say* must be a dependent wh- interrogative clause, not an NP. The preposition (about) can be used but it is not obligatory. Again CGEL comes to the same conclusion even though without explicitly putting NRCs into the category of NPs. It merely states that "Like NPs nominal relative clauses require prepositions in adjective complementation […] Prepositions are optional in wh- interrogatives" (CGEL: 1058).

Syntactic functions

Other syntactic issues can be found which prove that NRCs have more in common with NPs than with clauses. The comparison of the range of syntactic functions of NRCs and dependent wh- interrogative clauses reveals a striking resemblance between NRCs and NPs, namely that only these two can play the roles of indirect object and object complement. This is shown in examples [18] and [19]. Dependent wh- interrogative clauses on the other hand cannot occur in such positions.

> [18] *We'll give whoever needs it a second chance.* (indirect object)
> [19] *She made him what he is. (object complement)*

CGEL also states that "nominal relative clauses share with noun phrases a wider range of functions than are available to other nominal clauses" (CGEL: 1056). In different places we can then read that only nominal relative clauses can act as indirect object and object complement.

Other important distinctions between NRCs and dependent wh- interrogative clauses

From other important distinctions between NRCs and dependent wh- interrogative clauses, let us mention at least the possibility of elliptical reduction and the meaning of *what* when used as a determiner.

Elliptical reduction

> [20] *Jill gave him something last night, but I don't know what.*
> [21] *Jill gave him something last night, but he lost what she gave him.*

Example [20] demonstrates ellipsis of a dependent wh- interrogative clause which can be reduced to interrogative *what*. It is not necessary to say *but I don't know what she gave him* because the missing elements can be found anaphorically in the preceding context. In [21] ellipsis cannot be used because we deal with an NRC, or fused relative. Here the distinction between a wh- interrogative clause and an NRC seems to lie mainly in the semantics of the verbs to *know* and to *lose. Know* suggests a gap in our information. This gap could be removed by asking a question, *What did she give him? Lose* indicates a concrete entity that was lost, which is in the very nature of an NRC. CGEL also claims that ellipsis is possible only with wh- interrogative clauses (CGEL: 908).

What **as a determiner**

[22] *This will further erode what economic credibility the government has left.*
[23] *What mistakes she had made were all of a minor nature.*
[24] *He collected what information he could find. (CGEL: 1060)*
[25] *What ideas he has are his wife's. (CGEL: 755)*

In contrast with wh- interrogative clauses, *what* as a determiner in NRCs is used only with uncountable or plural nouns and has a meaning of insufficiency which can be strengthened by means of the quantifiers *few* and *little*. In [22] it would be *what little economic credibility*, in [23] *what few mistakes*. CGEL also points out the meaning of insufficiency, but does not specify uncountable and plural nouns even though the examples given follow the rules mentioned in CAGEL, namely an uncountable noun *information* in [24] or a plural noun *ideas* in [25].

Conclusion

The issues discussed above strongly support the hypothesis of CAGEL that nominal relative clauses or fused relatives are noun phrases and not clauses. Owing to the semantic and syntactic evidence CAGEL brings in favour of treating nominal relative clauses or fused relatives as noun phrases, and also because of the fact that CGEL whenever dealing with nominal relative clauses considers them an exception in one way or the other, it seems that there are more differences than similarities between nominal relative clauses or fused relatives on the one hand and the remaining nominal clauses including dependent wh- interrogative clauses on the other. In the category of clauses, nominal relative clauses certainly represent a peripheral phenomenon. CGEL argues that "Indeed, a major reason for including nominal relative clauses in this chapter [Nominal clauses] is that it is often difficult to distinguish them from the interrogative clauses" (CGEL 2003: 1056). The points put together by CAGEL, namely subject – verb agreement, subject – auxiliary inversion, extraposition, preposition fronting and adjective complementation make the distinction significantly easier. Also the range of syntactic functions as well as other important distinctions, such as the possibility of elliptical reduction of dependent wh- interrogative clauses or the meaning of insufficiency *what* has when used as a determiner in fused relatives, contribute to the treatment of nominal relative clauses or fused relatives as clear noun phrases and wh- interrogative clauses as clauses.

References

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