# Non-extraposed Subject Clauses

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Non-extraposed and extraposed subject clauses display significantly different distributional properties. Some of the structural subtypes favour the initial position while others are almost exclusively extraposed. The paper examines to what extent the position of the subject clause is predetermined by its structural and semantic properties, and to what extent it depends on other factors, such as FSP.

When determining the syntactic role of an extraposed clause in sentences starting in the pronoun *it*, the test of moving the clause into the initial position is often employed to prove or disprove its status as the notional subject of the sentence. It is assumed that if the clause can replace the initial pronoun without a change of meaning, it functions as the notional subject of the sentence, while the pronoun is an anticipatory element, filling in the obligatory slot of the subject in the initial position and pointing forward to the true subject. Although undoubtedly valid, the test may create a false impression of the actual relationship between subject clause extraposition and non-extraposition, perceiving the transition between the two as a strictly mechanical operation.

In reality, the situation is far more complex: there are structures in which there is only one positional option, the other being blocked by syntactic factors, and even structures that syntactically allow for both extraposition and non-extraposition display strikingly different distributional properties of the two patterns, suggesting that they are by no means interchangeable in a given context.

With regard to subject clauses, there is a tension between what is considered the *canonical* initial position of the subject clause and the relatively low frequency of such structures. Traditionally, the non-extraposed variants have been considered as structurally more basic on syntactic grounds. In authentic language corpora, however, instances of extraposed subject clauses significantly outnumber non-extraposed ones, with the exception of *wh-nominal relative clauses* and *-ing clauses*. Which of the variants is therefore perceived as marked depends on the criteria of markedness chosen.

One obvious counterexample to the mechanical concept of the transition between extraposition and non-extraposition is the impossibility of the non-extraposed variant with some structural types of matrix clause predicates, such as passives and interrogatives, and also with predicate verbs like *seem, appear*, *be*, *happen*, *follow*, etc. in the matrix clause.

[1]   *It was decided by all parties that instead of an ostentatious escort we would transport Ruhr quietly by a highly secret route.* (Armstrong 41)

[2]   *"Is it possible that British intelligence is responsible for the deaths of our members?" he asked.* (Armstrong 353)

[3]   *It has always seemed to me that the character of the victim is as important as the character of the detective or the suspect.* (Browne 48)

[4]   *It might well be that some of the very weeds you would see if you visited the place today were seen by Columbus and his men.* (Carson 40)

Verbs like *seem* and *appear* typically function as copular verbs in the S-V-C$_S$ pattern and the structures without a subject complement are infrequent. This is because the typical semantic role of these verbs is to ascribe or attribute to the subject a particular feature expressed by the subject complement. If such a complement is missing, the semantic content of the verb is further weakened, preventing the verb from concluding the sentence. So strong, in fact, is the tendency of these verbs to have the right-hand complementation slot filled, that they resort to subject-to-subject raising:

[5]   *The character of the victim has always seemed (to be) as important to me as the character of the detective or the suspect.*

Significantly, the perceptor alone cannot fill the postverbal slot:

[6]   *\*That the character of the victim is as important as the character of the detective or the suspect has always seemed to me.*

However, if the verb is followed by a non-clausal element, e.g. an adjective or prepositional phrase, such a phrase, even when short, adopts the role of the subject complement, rendering non-extraposition of the subject clause acceptable (albeit not common), as long as the *that-clause* is less dynamic than the subject complement.

[7]   *That the character of the victim is as important as the character of the detective or the suspect has always seemed interesting/of interest to me.*

For these reasons, and in spite of the treatment in literature of such clauses as extraposed subjects, it appears more realistic to consider the *that-clause* the true subject of the sentence only in the presence of a non-clausal subject complement, whereas in the absence of it the *that-clause* itself is best interpreted as the subject complement (Dušková 1988: 596), with the status of the initial pronoun *it* shifted further towards empty *prop it*. This solution makes it possible to consider every instance of *seem* as an intensive verb, while the previous interpretation has to assume the existence of intransitive *seem*.

Let us now consider the separate structural subtypes of subject clauses with regard to their non-extraposed variants.

*-ing clauses*

These clauses differ from all other types by their strong preference for the initial position, probably due to the fact that the gerund constituting the predicate of the subject clause is similar to the prototypical NP-subject. Consistent with this is the resistance of the gerund to extraposition, and when it does occur, it is not clear whether some of the cases should not be treated as instances of right-dislocation rather than of extraposition. The *-ing*

*form* in subject clauses appears to occupy an intermediate position on the scale between the noun and the verb, with different uses being closer to one or the other end of the scale. It appears to be nominal in character when it is preceded by a determiner (an article, a possessive or demonstrative pronoun), premodified by an adjective, or followed by an *of-genitive*.

[8]   *Understanding of Sweeney's purpose came swiftly to the crew.* (Armstrong 151)
[9]   *The plotting and the writing went on for two and a half to three years.* (Browne 44)

These cases are similar to the use of nominal subjects where the noun lacks a determiner, owing to its predominantly actional (i.e. verbal) meaning:

[10]  *Study of the input to the learner and the interaction that determines that input is now seen as a major way to understand how acquisition of languages is possible.* (Hatch 235)

The status of the *-ing form* is particularly unclear when the form is unexpanded (i.e. the noun is not modified or the verb complemented). Sometimes a clue is provided by the context, but in other cases the problem cannot be resolved.

[11]  *Setting is tremendously important to me. Very often it is the setting that sparks off my creative imagination.* (Browne 46)

The difference between dislocation and extraposition is sometimes accounted for in terms of prosody. It is assumed that the extraposed subject along with the matrix clause constitute a single unit of intonation, whereas the dislocation represents a separate intonation contour, divided by a pause. However, analysis of authentic language data reveals that intonation is by no means a reliable criterion, and still less reliable is punctuation, which is, at best, only an approximate equivalent of prosodic features in a spoken text. The following example, with the *-ing clause* separated by a comma, would be equally possible without punctuation. In this particular example, the punctuation is probably used to indicate the broken way of expression, segmentation into small bits at a time (because the speaker finds the topic uncomfortable), rather than an intentional instance of dislocation.

[12]  *I was in the psychiatric wing. It bothers you, finding out I was in there. Because I'm married to your mom.* (Harris 132)

From the FSP point of view, both dislocation and most extraposed *–ing clauses* share the feature of conveying information that is marginal in terms of communicative importance. This quality is more prominent with the dislocation, which is often considered a mere explanatory afterthought, however, subject clauses of the gerund type are also predominantly thematic, irrespective of their position within the sentence. When placed initially, their thematic status enables a linear distribution of communicative dynamism. Most instances of their extraposition (or dislocation) come from informal spoken (or pseudo-spoken) texts, where the linearity of distribution of CD was probably sacrificed for the sake of the processibility principle (i.e. to strain less the listener's memory). The predominantly thematic status of gerunds is in correspondence with their semantic predisposition to express factual, concrete meaning, often known from the previous context. This, along with the fact that gerund clauses commonly contain anaphoric elements, may partly explain their tendency to be shorter than infinitive clauses, and particularly so in the initial position.

[13] *Dusting the can would be a straightforward job.* (Harris 89)

When the gerund is complemented by a subordinate clause, which is by no means common, non-extraposition is avoided.

[14] *It was no good pointing out that you hadn't asked anyone away for a few days; they'd asked you if you'd mind if they came with you.* (Bryers 209)

A vast majority of extraposed gerunds typically occur with a limited range of matrix clause predicates, usually verbonominal ones, expressing evaluation of the content of the gerund clauses, such as *it was (no/quite) good, bad (enough), nice, typical, weird, (no) fun, a problem, all right, etc.* In contrast, this limitation does not apply to matrix clause predicates with non-extraposed gerund clauses.

According to Kaltenböck (2004: 135), wh-subject clauses represent a type of structure where there is no marked preference for either extraposition or non-extraposition. This, however, may be because Kaltenböck, as well as many others, makes no distinction between nominal relative clauses and dependent interrogative or exclamatory nominal clauses, the practical reason being that such a distinction is often difficult (Quirk et al. 1985: 1056). Rather than a clear-cut boundary, there seems to be a scale connecting these types. Yet, avoidance of the finer classification may, in my opinion, result in important distributional properties being missed. Corpus data support the claim that nominal relative clauses are, very much like gerunds, much closer to noun-phrase status than other nominal clauses, and, moreover, are the only type of nominal clauses capable of expressing definite meaning (Quirk, et al. 1972: 738). Accordingly, they tend to be associated with known information, i.e. the theme, and consequently with the initial, non-extraposed position. Unlike gerunds, they are not as limited in terms of actual length, but this is probably due to the finiteness of their predicate verbs. On the other hand, it is precisely lack of definite information that singles out dependent interrogative clauses. At the same time, definiteness or "knownness" is a semantic category which can only be expressed in terms of degree and, moreover, may vary for different participants in the communication, further blurring the limits of the two subclasses of subject clauses. It is thus no coincidence that all the prototypical examples of nominal relative subject clauses in grammars are non-extraposed.

[15] *"What you want is tricky," he said. "Also risky."* (Armstrong 396)

This example makes it sufficiently clear that the content of the wh-clause is established and commonly shared by the participants, and moreover, the nominal relative clause can be transformed into an adjectival relative clause by the insertion of a nominal antecedent, leaving little doubt as to its classification.

[16] *The thing that you want is tricky.*

Much less clear is the givenness or definiteness of the content of the following wh- clause, as indicated by the word *rumor*. The sentence is probably interpreted as a dependent interrogative clause but allows an alternative interpretation as a relative nominal clause, namely that everybody knew how far *it* (i.e. *Falk's power*) reached and was prompted to comment on it.

[17] *How far it reached was a matter of ongoing rumor.* (Armstrong 139)

Similarly, the following sentence would best be treated as an instance of dislocation rather than extraposition; this interpretation is suggested, albeit inconclusively, by punctuation, and more strongly by the paraphrase by means of an adjectival relative clause.

[18] *"It was horrible, what happened to the Leedses."* (Harris 49)
[19] *"It was horrible, the thing that happened to the Leedses."*

The largely nominal character of this type of clauses is manifested by the following example where subject extraposition is avoided even in an interrogative matrix clause.

[20]   *"Does what he said mean anything else to you, anything we can use?"* (Harris 184)

However, compare it with the following sentence, which basically repeats a direct question, but the information content is obviously clear to the current speaker:

[21]   *"What difference does it make to you where my husband goes?"* (Armstrong 457)

The only type of wh-clauses of the nominal relative type that readily employed extraposition was represented by clauses introduced by *how,* perhaps because at least some of the instances were close to *that-clauses,* and the adverb could consequently be replaced with *that,* without a substantial change of meaning.

[22]   *It was funny how, after all this time, there was a streak of jealousy in him, like the trail of a very old comet, but uncomfortable just the same.* (Armstrong 286)

On the whole, while admitting the difficulties encountered in attempts at a finer classification of the *wh-subject* clauses, it still seems that in terms of positional mobility, only the nominal interrogative subtype is open both to extraposition and non-extraposition.

Infinitive clauses are, along with *that-clauses*, by far the most common types of subject clauses. Although they largely favour extraposition (non-extraposed infinitives constituted nine per cent of all infinitives in the present corpus), non-extraposition is not as rare as in *that-clauses* (about two per cent). Among the infinitive clauses, there is one particular structural pattern which does not allow for extraposition, namely a symmetrical structure containing the infinitive both in the subject and in the subject complement.

[23]   *Again and again the message seems to be, to seek the food your soul desires is to release the serpents of destruction.* (Browne 121)

The relationship between the subject and the subject complement is identification, however, the sequence is irreversible because there is an implication of a causal or temporal relationship, and the infinitive in the subject complement is more dynamic than in the subject. In most cases, the infinitive expresses potential, rather than factual meaning, but this tendency of the infinitive may be overridden by the choice of verb implying factual happening.

[24]   *To operate sooner would distort the growth of his face.* (Harris 197)
[25]   *Yes, to read about a murder that involved the handicapped was new to me.* (Browne 42)

The key factor in favour of the non-extraposed variant is the functional aspect; the infinitive is less dynamic than the postverbal part of the matrix predicate. However, the thematic status of the subject alone cannot account for non-extraposition, as non-rhematic extraposed subjects are no exception. What is essential here is that the initial infinitive establishes a link to the previous text, summarizing, recounting or developing some elements of it. The postverbal rhematic part becomes, owing to its final position, more dynamic, constituting something of a marked rheme. Non-extraposed infinitives may take substantially heavier complementation than gerunds, and the longer the subject part in comparison with the matrix clause, the more dynamic the final rheme becomes. In addition, it is not rare to find initial coordinated infinitives.

[26]   *To wonder impatiently why man is not a constant witness of such arrivals is to fail to understand the majestic pace of the process.* (Carson 90)

[27] *To dispose first and investigate later is an invitation to disaster, for once radioactive elements have been deposited at sea they are irretrievable.* (Carson 12)

Sometimes, however, the motivation for non-extraposition may be the length and/or complexity of the structure following the matrix clause predicate in relation to that of the infinitival subject, i.e. the principle of end-weight.

[28] *Although this suggests that plans are stacked like boxes one atop the other, you should not infer that each level influences only the ones below it. To do so would mean that speech setting controls speech event that controls syntax that controls lexicon that controls morphology that controls phonology that controls phonetics, like the house that Jack built.* (Hatch 231)

The acceptability of a given structure is, among other things, a matter of register. In academic writing, examples of the initial infinitive have been found in combination with a passive matrix clause (as an item in an account of rules).

[29] *For obstruents to become voiceless in word final position is more expected than for obstruents to become voiced in that environment* (Hatch 26)

An interesting transition between infinitival and *that-clause* subjects is represented by *that-clauses* introduced by infinitive verbs, primarily verbs of speaking or thinking, such as *say, think, imagine,* etc. Formally, the *that-clause* constitutes the object of the infinitive verb, but in terms of meaning the verb is often secondary, weakening the factual status of the *that-clause.*

[30] *However, to say that this later distinction is not relevant to the identity of a CC is not to imply that the variation is either unimportant or superficial – simply that whatever aspects of text they might motivate, these are not crucial to the text's generic status.* (Halliday and Hasan 105)

[31] *So to say that a passage possesses texture is not to make any claim about the specific structural status of that passage.* (Halliday and Hasan 72)

The introduction of the *that-clause* by the infinitive makes it more acceptable in the initial position than a plain subject *that-clause* would be. The effect is therefore similar to the introduction of a *that-clause* by a semantically weak noun.

[32] *To say that we couldn't isn't entirely true.* (Kaltenböck 141)

[33] *That we couldn't isn't entirely true.*

[34] *The claim that we couldn't isn't entirely true.*

Non-extraposed that-clauses are the least frequent category of the types examined, and seem to be strongly stylistically marked.

[35] *That they all sprang from the same mind is rather obvious in the parallel – though at times not close – development.* (Browne 96)

[36] *That memory is a cognitive process related to language learning is clear in this summary of Neisser's position*: (Hatch 230)

The information presented in the initial subject clause is factual and taken for granted; as in the case of non-extraposed infinitive clauses, the role of the initial *that-clause* is to summarize what has been said or implied before. Interestingly, while the extraposed variant is possible, it would weaken the stylistic effect of building a climax. The extreme scarcity of these

structures suggests that the conditions favouring their use are very special, and at the same time, makes it rather difficult to make judgements of general validity.

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