

FINITE SUBORDINATE CLAUSES REVISITED

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ABSTRACT. *Finite Subordinate Clauses Revisited.* This paper offers a synthesis of the essential features that characterise the three main categories of finite subordinate clauses in English syntax, as well as an outline of a newly designed framework of analysis for that special type of adverbial clause known as *the adverbial clause of comparison*.

Key words: phrase, subordinate clause, sentence, nominal clause, relative clause and adverbial clause.

REZUMAT. *O sinteză a principalelor trăsături ale propozițiilor subordonate în sintaxa limbii engleze.* Acest studiu prezintă o sinteză a trăsăturilor fundamentale ce caracterizează cele trei feluri de propoziții subordonate din sintaxa limbii engleze, oferind, totodată, o nouă schemă de analiză a aceluși caz special numit *subordonata adverbială comparativă*.

Cuvinte cheie: sintagmă, propoziție subordonată, frază, subordonată nominală, subordonată relativă, subordonată adverbială.

Dating as far back as the 1220s, the English term *clause* is the result of a back formation process that yielded this noun from the Latin *clausula* (the feminine form of *clausus*, the past participle of *claudere*, meaning “to close”). In Medieval Latin *clausa* meant “the closing of a rhetorical period” and the word *clause* entered Middle English through Old French sometime between 1175 and 1225. In English syntax a **clause** is a **group of words containing a subject and a predicate which functions either as an independent unit – an independent clause, or as a dependent unit – a subordinate clause. Independent** clauses are always **finite**, whereas **subordinate** clauses may be **finite, non-finite** or **verbless**. A clause which contains one or more subordinate clauses is called a **matrix clause**, and the subordinate clauses contained within it are called **embedded clauses**. Since the matrix clause is not subordinate to another clause, being **superordinate** to all the

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other clauses in the sentence, it is actually “coextensive with the sentence”.¹ A clause that is **subordinate** in relation to the *matrix clause* may, in its turn, be *superordinate* to another **subordinate** clause. In the following example the matrix clause contains three embedded clauses: *David suspects that I might know who the man that he had lunch with yesterday really is.*

{MC David suspects [SUB_1 that I might know [SUB_2 who the man (SUB_3 that he had lunch with yesterday) really is].}

- the matrix clause is coextensive with the sentence
- it constitutes the independent clause
- SUB_1 is subordinate to MC but superordinate to SUB_2
- SUB_2 is subordinate to both MC and SUB_1 but superordinate to SUB_3

Being subordinate word groups, **subordinate clauses** work like nouns, adjectives or adverbs within the sentence they are part of. Consequently, they are classified as **nominal** if they behave like nouns, **relative** if they work like adjectives and **adverbial** if they act like adverbs.

1. Nominal clauses are subordinate clauses that function as nouns and can be introduced by the conjunction *that*, subordinating conjunctions: *if, whether*, relative adverbs: *how, why, when, where*, relative pronouns: *what, whatever, which, whichever, whose, who, whoever, whom, whomever*.

1.1. Nominal clauses introduced by the conjunction *that* are sometimes called “**that**” clauses. Since such clauses complement the word (group) that they modify, the introductory word *that* is a complementizer which performs no syntactic function within the clause and which may sometimes be omitted:

It is clear he loves swimming. (*delayed subject*)

My opinion is he loves swimming. (*subject complement*)

I know he loves swimming. (*direct object*)

I am sure he loves swimming. (*adjective complement*)

That omission is impossible when the clause it introduces is the **subject** of the main clause verb, **preceding it**, or when it functions as an **object complement**:

That he loves swimming is clear. (*subject*)

Jo considers his greatest achievement **that he got his PhD**. (*object complement*)

That omission is not recommended when it stands in apposition to a noun, being a **noun complement**:

The claim **that he likes swimming** is true. (*noun complement*)

From the examples above it is obvious that the syntactic functions performed by “**that**” nominal clauses are: *subject, delayed subject, subject complement, direct object, object complement, noun complement, and adjective complement*.

¹ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/clauses/xclau1.htm>

1.2. Nominal clauses introduced by the conjunctions “whether” or “if” can perform the following syntactic functions: *subject*, *delayed subject*, *subject complement*, *direct object*, *indirect object*, *noun complement*, *adjective complement*, and *complement of preposition*.

Whether they voted is not known yet. (*subject*)

It is not known **whether they voted**. (*delayed subject*)

The question is **whether they voted**. (*subject complement*)

Mo asked **if they had voted**. (*direct object*)

The Romanian Constitutional Court should have given **whether the presumed members of the electorate are dead or alive** due consideration. (*indirect object*)

The question **whether they had voted** was asked by Mo. (*noun complement*)

Mo wasn't certain **if they had voted**. (*adjective complement*)

Our next move depends on **whether they voted**. (*complement of preposition*)

1.3. Nominal clauses introduced by the relative adverbs *how*, *why*, *when*, *where* can perform the following syntactic functions: *subject*, *delayed subject*, *subject complement*, *direct object*, *indirect object*, *complement of preposition*, *noun complement*, *adjective complement*, and *adverbial complement*.

How he did it is none of my business. (*subject*)

It is still unclear **why he did it**. (*delayed subject*)

The question is **why he did it**. (*subject complement*)

I don't know **when he did it**. (*direct object*)

We must give **why he did it** some consideration. (*indirect object*)

Let's not insist on **why he did it**. (*complement of preposition*)

The question **why he did it** troubles us all. (*noun complement*)

I am not certain **where he did it**. (*adjective complement*)

Let's put the register **where the teacher will never find it**.

(*adverbial complement*)

1.4. Nominal clauses introduced by relative pronouns – as different from the other types of nominal clauses which typically refer to states or events – **normally refer to entities** and are sometimes called **nominal relative clauses** (these should not to be mixed up with *adjectival relative clauses*). Whereas *the relative pronouns introducing adjectival relative clauses have an antecedent in the matrix clause*, **the ones introducing nominal relative clauses do not have an antecedent in the matrix clause**. Nominal clauses introduced by relative pronouns (*what*, *whatever*, *which*, *whichever*, *whose*, *whoever*, *who*, *whomever*, *whom*) can perform the following syntactic functions: *subject*, *subject complement*, *delayed subject*, *direct object*, *object complement*, *indirect object*, and *complement of preposition*.

What you see is what you get. (*subject*) + (*subject complement*)

It wasn't clear **which he preferred**. (*delayed subject*)

I can give you **whatever you want**. (*direct object*)

You can call this fruit **whatever you want**. (*object complement*)

I can offer **whoever asks me** a sample of the product. (*indirect object*)

We can't just put our lives in the hands of **whomever they nominate**.

(*complement of preposition*)

2. Adjectival relative clauses are subordinate clauses that behave like adjectives, usually modifying nouns or noun equivalents from the matrix clause. **Relative clauses** are introduced by relative adverbs (*when, where, why*) and, most often, by relative pronouns (*who, whom, whose, which, that*). Relative clauses can be **defining** or **non-defining**.

Defining relative clauses are not separated by comma(s) from the word(s) they modify, can be introduced by *that*, and bring essential information to the sentence they are part of.

My cousin **who lives in London** sends me books every month. (relative clause, defining) => I have more cousins.

The bridge **that my father built in his youth** is still standing. (relative clause, defining)

The relative pronoun introducing defining relative clauses can sometimes be omitted in informal situations, but only if it is not the subject of the subordinate clause. Thus, in the first example omission is impossible, since the relative pronoun *who* is the subject of the relative clause, whereas in the second example the relative pronoun *that* can be dropped: "The bridge **_my father built in his youth** is still standing." Compare also:

The GPS **that cost me \$87** is now broken. (omission impossible)

The GPS **that you lent me** is now broken.=The GPS **_you lent me** is now broken.

Non-defining relative clauses: are separated by comma(s) from the rest of the sentence, cannot be introduced by *that*, and do not bring essential information to the sentence they are part of.

My cousin, **who lives in London**, sends me books every month. (relative clause, non-defining) => I have only one cousin

The bridges of Madison County, **which had been destroyed only two months before**, were already in use again. (relative clause, non-defining)

2.1. Prepositional relative clauses are relative clauses introduced by preposition + relative pronoun. In **defining prepositional relative clauses** the preposition can appear before the relative pronouns *which* or *whom* (but never before *that*), or at the end of the relative clause, especially in informal English, with the exception of clauses containing prepositional verbs, as in such cases the verb and the preposition express a single idea, being, thus, inseparable, so the preposition always follows the verb.

Is this the senator **whom you were telling me about?** (this sounds more natural than the formal variant: Is this the senator **about whom you were telling me?**)

I have examined the book **for which the presidential family is ready to pay a fortune.** (this sounds more natural than the informal variant: I have examined the book **which the presidential family is ready to pay a fortune for.**)

But we must say:

I have examined the book **that the presidential family is ready to pay a fortune for.**

The children **that I have to look after** are already waiting for me. (*to look after* is a prepositional verb, therefore the preposition *after* cannot precede the relative pronoun)

In *non-defining prepositional relative clauses* the preposition comes before the relative pronouns *which* or *whom*.

The president, **with whom you are to meet tomorrow**, will surely offer you the information that you require.

The new house, **in which we are planning to move tonight**, is right there.

2.2. Coordinate relative clauses are non-defining relative clauses used to make comments on the situation expressed in the matrix clause. They have a relationship to the matrix clause that closely resembles coordination, rather than subordination, as in the case of the other relative clauses, hence their name. They are usually introduced by the relative pronoun *which*, or, more rarely, by *who*. If introduced by *which*, their antecedent is, most often, the whole of the matrix clause, namely the rest of the sentence, not just a single word, so they are called by some linguists “*sentence relative clauses*”. However, the term “**coordinate relative clauses**” seems more appropriate, since it covers both kinds of situations, namely **even the clauses whose introductory word does not have as its antecedent the rest of the sentence** in which such clauses appear. The examples below clearly show the coordinating function of these relative clauses:

Joe got married again, **which shocked all of us.** (and this shocked all of us)

The President spoke tactfully, **by which means he succeeded in making everyone agree with his proposal.** (and by this means he succeeded in making everyone agree with his proposal)

The doctor has explained the situation to May’s parents, **who will, hopefully, stop things from degenerating any further.** (and they will, hopefully, stop things from degenerating any further)

3. Adverbial clauses are subordinate clauses that do the tasks that adverbs usually perform in the syntax of a sentence. Thus, they “act as modifiers **in** or **of** the main clause”² (emphasis mine). They can occupy front, mid or end position in

² Carter, Ronald and Michael McCarthy, (2006), *Cambridge Grammar of English. A Comprehensive Guide to Spoken and Written English Grammar and Usage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 560.

the matrix clause, depending on their informative value, and may be introduced by relative adverbs or by subordinating conjunctions. Depending on the meaning they are used to convey, adverbial clauses can be classified into types, each type performing the syntactic function of Adverbial Modifier. Thus, there can be Adverbial Modifiers of Time, Place and Direction, Reason, Condition, Purpose, Result, Concession and Contrast.

3.1. Adverbial clauses of comparison constitute a very special case because they work not as adverbial modifiers, but as complementation items featuring among the postmodifying constituents either in Adjective Phrases or in Adverb Phrases. Consequently, adverbial clauses of comparison are analysed at the Phrase Rank, as part of the Adjective Phrases or of the Adverb Phrases in which they appear, just as we analyse the relative clauses and the nominal clauses featuring as part of the postmodification within Noun Phrases. Some grammarians argue that, unlike relative clauses, adverbial clauses of comparison “may postmodify *not only nouns*, but also adjectives and adverbs”³ (emphasis mine). Thus, Geoffrey Leech, Margaret Deuchar and Robert Hoogenraad offer the following examples:

1. He is not **so** stupid **as some people think**. (*adverb*) **so ... (conjunction) as some people think** – **comparative clause**, postmodifier of the adjective “stupid”

2. You must have been working harder **than I thought**. (*conjunction*) **than I thought** – **comparative clause**, postmodifier of the adverb “harder”

3. In this country, we eat **more** food **than we can grow**. Here, “**more food than we can grow**” is analysed by the above mentioned linguists as Noun Phrase, Direct Object, containing the comparative clause “**than we can grow**”, introduced by the conjunction **than**, as postmodifier of the noun “food”.

Nevertheless, the comparative structure “**than we can grow**” does not describe the head-noun “food”. In my opinion⁴, “**more ... than we can grow**” is an Adjective Phrase whose syntactic function is **modifier of the head-noun “food”** (this is an instance of discontinuous modification); inside this Adjective Phrase, the head, namely the comparative adjective “more”, is complemented by the comparative clause “**than we can grow**”.

That an adverbial clause of comparison should be analysed as the postmodifier of an adjective rather than of a noun is, clearly, a logical claim if we take into account the following facts:

- adjectives modify nouns
- adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs
- modification is a one-way dependency relation
- complementation is a two-way dependency relation

³ Leech, Geoffrey, Margaret Deuchar and Robert Hoogenraad, (2006 [1982]), *English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction*, Second Edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 110.

⁴ See Preda Alina (2011), *Phrasal Syntax*, Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, pp. 23-33.

Moreover, one can easily say “In this country, we eat food.”, and even “In this country, we eat **more** food.”, but we cannot say *“In this country, we eat food **than we can grow**.” This must mean that there is no direct link between the head-noun and the comparative clause, so the **adjective** must be the item postmodified /complemented by the adverbial clause of comparison.

Discontinuous modification may characterize not only Adjective Phrases, but also Adverb Phrases and even Noun Phrases⁵:

A rumour is going around **that the President will not resign**.

A rumour ... that the President will not resign = Subject, a Noun Phrase, having the noun “rumour” as head, preceded by the indefinite article “A” as central determiner, and followed by a Nominal Clause as postmodifier. However, the postmodifier does not immediately follow the head-noun, being separated from it by a Verb Phrase functioning as the predicate of the sentence. Thus, this is a case of discontinuous modification.

An Adjective Phrase is a group of words consisting of an adjective and its modifiers. The constituents of the adjective phrase cluster around its **head**, which must be an **adjective** – either an adjective proper, or an adjective originating from a participle. The modifying constituents that precede the head are either *adverbs* or *adverb phrases* and form what is called *premodification*. The head may be followed either by the adverb **enough**, or by the adverb **indeed**; these adverbs are known as **postmodifiers**. The **postmodification** in an adjective phrase may also include *complementation* items, *phrases* (**prepositional phrases** or/and **infinitive phrases**) or *clauses* (**comparative clauses**) which bring more specific details about the head of the phrase or, in the case of a comparative structure, about its premodifier (cases of discontinuous or split modification). With comparative structures and with some types of infinitive constructions instances of discontinuous (or split) modification may occur. The adjective phrase is discontinuous when its head and all its premodifiers appear before the head of the noun phrase, while the infinitive phrase or the comparative clause follows the head-noun.

An Adverb Phrase is a group of words consisting of an adverb and its modifiers. The constituents of the adverb phrase cluster around its **head**, which must be an **adverb**. The modifying constituents that precede the head are usually *adverbs of degree* (either *intensifying* or *focusing adverbs* – *only, just, relatively, quite, really*, etc.), which form what is called *premodification*. The head may be followed either by the adverb **enough**, or by the adverb **indeed**; these adverbs are known as **postmodifiers**. The **postmodification** in an adverb phrase may also include *complementation* items, *phrases* (**prepositional phrases** or/and **infinitive phrases**) or *clauses* (**comparative clauses**) which bring more specific details about the head of the phrase or, in the case of a comparative structure, even about its premodifier.

⁵ Ibid.

With some types of infinitive constructions and with comparative structures instances of discontinuous (or split) modification may occur. The adverb phrase is discontinuous when its head and all its premodifiers are separated from the postmodifiers by another phrase. Consequently, it is more accurate to state that adverbial clauses of comparison may feature among the postmodification elements inside either Adjective Phrases or Adverb Phrases. Thus, here is my analysis of the examples discussed above:

1. He is not *so* stupid **as some people think**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item featuring as part of the postmodification in the Adjective Phrase *so stupid as some people think*)

2. You must have been working harder **than I thought**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item featuring as part of the postmodification in the Adverb Phrase *harder than I thought*)

3. In this country, we eat *more* food **than we can grow**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item featuring as part of the postmodification in the Adjective Phrase *more ... than we can grow*, an Adjective Phrase that modifies discontinuously the noun “food”, head of the Noun Phrase “more food than we can grow”).

Adverbial clauses of comparison can be *typical comparatives* or *comparatives of degree*. The former are preceded by a comparative form (such as *more, less, fewer, smaller, bigger*, etc.) and introduced by the conjunction *than*. The latter are introduced by: *as...as, so...as, so...that*.

It is never a good idea to spend *more* money **than you can make**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item within the postmodification elements inside the Adjective Phrase *more ... than you can make*)

The queen is *much more* beautiful **than anyone expected**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item within the postmodification elements of the Adjective Phrase *much more beautiful than anyone expected*)

This woman is not *as* kind **as you may think**. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item within the postmodification elements of the Adjective Phrase *as kind as you may think*)

The other team ran *as* fast **as they could**, but failed to beat us. (adverbial clause of comparison, complementation item within the postmodification elements of the Adverb Phrase *as fast as they could*)

3.2. Comment clauses are used to convey the speaker’s or writer’s “opinion or viewpoint on the events in the main clause”.⁶ Comment clauses are a borderline case, being defined not in terms of syntactic properties, as independent and subordinate clauses are, but on the basis of discourse function. Although comment clauses are, from the syntactic point of view, disjuncts for the rest of the

⁶ Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, (2006), *Cambridge Grammar of English. A Comprehensive Guide to Spoken and Written English Grammar and Usage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 564.

matrix clause, they are named based on the role they perform, namely to provide the speaker's or writer's comments pertaining to the content of the matrix clause.

Although usually placed either at the beginning of the sentence, or at the end, in a formal context comment clauses may appear in mid-position, inside the independent clause. More common in speech than in written texts, comment clauses can be non-finite or finite. Non-finite comment clauses are adverbial in nature and rather formal. Finite comment clauses are patterned like independent clauses, but from a communicative point of view they are subordinated to the independent clause.

My husband was, **roughly speaking**, thrown out of the club.

To put it mildly, he was rather upset.

All things considered, they could have done a lot worse.

To be honest, I really hate going to weddings!

(non-finite comment clauses)

Joshua is a nice guy, **I guess**.

Diana was quite upset, **you see**.

We could do without a GPS, **I suppose**.

As you know, my ex-husband is a recovering alcoholic.

(finite comment clauses)

Johannesson points out that there are three types of finite comment clauses:

1. Finite comment clauses which show that the matrix clause voices the speaker's/writer's very own view, opinion or belief: **I think, I believe, I guess, I suppose, I gather**, etc. A comment clause of this type displays "the formal characteristics of a main declarative clause", yet it also resembles a subordinate clause, since "it can occur within another clause"⁷. Consequently, this type can only be used in mid-position or in end-position, because, if such a construction were to be placed in front-position, it would be interpreted as the first part of the independent clause, immediately followed by a direct object in the form of a nominal subclause.

Mike, **I think**, would make a great lawyer. (comment clause)

Mike would make a great lawyer, **I think**. (comment clause)

I think **Mike would make a great lawyer**. (Independent clause, having "I" as subject and the rest of the sentence as predicate, containing the transitive verb "think", followed by the direct object "Mike would make a great lawyer" expressed through a nominal subordinate clause)

2. Finite comment clauses which are used "to modify or mark the discourse function of the matrix clause". As Johannesson shows, their "status as comment clauses is marked in speech by the fact that they typically form separate tone units"⁸, signalled in writing by the presence of a comma. More frequently used in

⁷ <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/engelsk/staff/johannesson/111gram/lectsum.htm>

⁸ Ibid.

speech than in writing, this type of clause emphasises the speaker's desire to offer an explanation, to soften a statement or to seek agreement. As different from the previous type, these clauses can feature in initial position as well, not only in medial and final position.

Providing an explanation:

A: Why are you leaving?

B: Well, I have my finals next week, **you see**, so I need to rest.

Trying to soften a statement:

You see, it's no use crying over spilt milk.

Attempting to seek agreement:

You know, this is the problem we'll have to deal with first.

3. Finite comment clauses which express a comment regarding "the communicative status of the matrix clause"⁹: namely if the matrix clause offers information that is, or may be, already familiar to the addressee, having been mentioned before, incidentally or even repeatedly, etc. Such clauses, being introduced by *as*, display "the formal characteristics of an adverbial subclause"¹⁰:

Beth has given birth to a beautiful baby boy, **as you may have already heard**.

As I keep saying, this is clearly a false problem, unworthy of serious consideration.

In conclusion, when trying to identify the type of the subordinate clause, one should take into account the fact that whilst *a single independent clause* appearing on its own forms *a simple sentence*, within which *the subject, object(s) and/or complement(s) and modifiers are expressed by words or phrases* (nouns, Noun Phrases; adjectives, Adjective Phrases; adverbs, Adverb Phrases; Prepositional Phrases, etc.), in the syntax of **complex** and **compound-complex sentences**, which contain not only independent, but also **subordinate clauses**, one or more of **the above-mentioned syntactic functions may be expressed by clauses**.

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.