

Clauses in English

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and describe the structure and function of Subordinate Clauses in English. It recognises three general types: Noun Clauses, Adjective Clauses and Adverbial Clauses.

Noun Clauses, generally speaking, perform a role similar to, but not identical to, that of Noun Phrases. Several structural types are recognised and described, and their various functions listed.

Adjective, or Relative, Clauses occur as one of the possibilities at Post-Modifier in Noun Phrases. They are introduced by "Relative Pronoun, or by Prepositional Phrases consisting of a Preposition followed by "whom" or "which", as appropriate. The distinction between Defining and Non-Defining Clauses is recognised and explained.

Adverbial Clauses are the most varied and complex of Subordinate Clauses. They may occur either as, (1) Sentence Modifier, to provide a link, or to provide circumstantial information in relation to the event described in the main Sentence, or, (2) as part of the Verb Phrase, to provide circumstantial information- time, manner, etc- in relation to the action or state identified by the main Verb.

The paper concludes with several illustrative diagrams, which display "recursion" in Subordinate Clauses.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้บรรยายโครงสร้างและหน้าที่ของอนุประโยคต่างๆ (Subordinate Clauses) ในภาษาอังกฤษ เพื่อเป็นพื้นฐานความรู้ให้แก่ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษและผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษทั่วไป รายละเอียดในการบรรยายแบ่งออกเป็น 3 ส่วน คือ อนุประโยคนาม (Noun Clauses) อนุประโยคคุณศัพท์ (Adjective Clauses) และอนุประโยคกริยาวิเศษณ์ (Adverb Clauses) ผู้เขียนได้บรรยายโครงสร้างต่างๆ พร้อมทั้งหน้าที่ของอนุประโยคดังกล่าว และสรุปด้วยการใช้แผนภาพแสดงลักษณะการเกิดซ้ำ (recursive) ของอนุประโยคต่างๆ ข้างต้น

All grammatical sentences of English are ultimately variants of one simple structure, consisting, at the most abstract level, of a Subject and a Predicate.

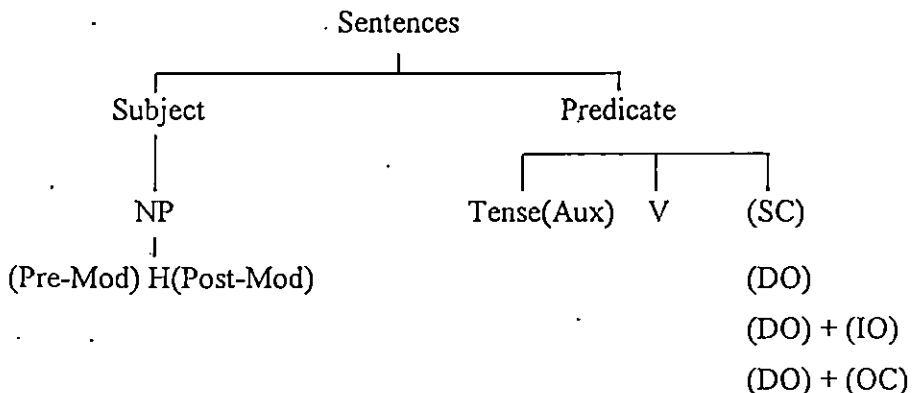
Subject position is characteristically filled by a Noun Phrase, though there are other possibilities, as we shall see. Noun Phrases consist of a Head, which may be preceded by a Pre-Modifier and followed by a Post-modifier.

The Predicate has as its essential element a Finite Verb: that is a Verb which chooses in the Tense system. The Verb may be preceded by an Auxiliary, and may be followed by:

1. A Subject Complement (SC) : e.g. ;
He was a happy man.
2. A Direct object (DO) : e.g. ;
John met the Prime Minister.
3. A Direct Object and an Indirect Object (IO) : e.g. ;
The man gave John (IO) an apple (DO).
4. A Direct Object and an Object Complement (OC) : e.g. ;
They elected him (DO) President (OC).
The gift made him (DO) happy (OC).

All of which may be followed by an Adverbial (Adv) of some kind; e.g. ;
I could see the house at some distance.

The structure described thus far may be diagrammed very simply as follows:



The positions of Subject, Subject Complement, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Object Complement may all be filled by Noun Phrases. And there is one further position that may be so filled, that of Object of a Preposition (O.Prep), in a Prepositional Phrases: e.g. ;

of the man, in a moment, etc.,

Such phrases may occur at Post-Modifier; e.g. ;

The man in the moon

Or at Adv: e.g.;

He spoke in a loud voice.

We must also recognise one further structure; one in which the Noun Phrase does not directly occur, though it may occur indirectly as part of a Prepositional Phrase. The position in question is that of the Adjective Complement(AC): e.g.;

He was happy in his new house.

He was lucky to be alive.

The information content of a Sentence is increased by expansion of the simple structure described above. One way to do this is by embedding subordinate Sentences in the structure. Such embedded Sentences are traditionally called Clauses, and it is customary to recognise three types: Noun Clauses, Adjective Clauses and Adverbial Clauses. In what follows we shall be considering the function of these Clauses; looking at their structure and their possibilities of occurrence in relation to the structure described above.

Noun Clauses

The grammatical roles filled by Noun Clauses are, generally speaking, those filled by Noun Phrases: Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object, Subject Complement and Object of a Preposition. There are, however, several types of Noun Clause and they do not all cover the complete range. Furthermore, some may occur in at least one position that Noun Phrases do not appear to share: that of Adjective Complement.

Perhaps the most common Noun Clause is the one introduced by "that". In this role "that" is not part of the following clause, but functions simply as a Subordinating Conjunction. Examples are;

Subject : That she was tired was obvious.

Direct Object : He claimed that all was well.

Subject Comp. : The hope was that he would succeed.

Noun Clauses introduced by "that" do not appear to occur as Indirect Object or Object Complement. They do, on the other hand, occur as Adjective Complement: for example;

We were certain that he would come.

I was surprised that he agreed.

In impersonal Sentences such as;

It was felt that he should be invited.

The "that" Clause is regarded as an extraposed subject.

Another very common structure is one in which the "that" Clause follows certain Nouns: e.g.;

The fact that he was late...

The news that John was safe...

The idea that we should agree...

etc.

It is not altogether clear how this structure should be interpreted. One possibility is to regard the Noun and the "that" Clause as being in apposition; that is, in non-technical language, as parallel terms. This is a structure of fairly common occurrence with Noun Phrases: for example;

The king, a very wise ruler...

Mary, a young woman of my acquaintance...

Alternatively, the "that" Clause might be regarded as a Noun Complement, on the model of Adjective Complement. Compare, for example;

Certain that he would arrive...

The certainty that he would arrive...

However, in terms of the structural analysis shown above, it is clear that what we have here is the case of Noun Clause as Post-Modifier in a Noun Phrase.

In passing, it is important to distinguish "that" Noun Clauses from Adjective Clauses introduced by "that" acting as a Relative Pronoun, which also occur as Post-Modifier: e.g.;

The scene that I witnessed

Compare, for example;

The man that I could see...

The fact that I could see...

Noun Clauses introduced by "if" share with "that" Clauses the separation of the introducing element from the structure of the following Clause. However, unlike "that" Clauses, Noun Clauses introduced by "if" occur regularly only as Direct Object: e.g.;

She asked if I was alone.

I claims if it is going to rain.

The "if" Clause may be regarded as a "yes/no" question embedded in a statement and, accordingly, it seems not to follow verbs which suggest certainty: e.g.;

* He said if I was alone.

* She claims if it is going to rain.

Similar to "if" Clauses are Noun Clauses introduced by "whether". Once again the introducing element is separate from the Clause, and the Clause itself represents an embedded "yes/no" question. But "whether" Clauses may occur as Subject as well as Direct Object: e.g.;

Subject: Whether he succeeds or not is immaterial.

Direct Object: I wonder whether he means it.

Again we must introduce a note of caution against possible confusion. Both "if" and "whether" are used to introduce Adverbial Clauses: e.g.;

If he is late I shall be annoyed.

Whether or not I agree they'll go ahead.

We shall be considering Adverbial Clauses at length later in this paper, however.

Noun Clauses introduced by "if" and "whether" may, as we suggested above, be regarded as "yes/no" questions embedded in a Sentence. There are also Noun Clauses which may be regarded as embedded "wh-questions". There are two types. First, there are the Clauses introduced by "when", "where" or "how". Second, there are Noun Clauses where the introducing element is part of Clause Structure, as Subject, Direct Object or Indirect Object. These Clauses are introduced by "what", "who" or "whoever".

Noun Clauses introduced by "when", "where" or "how" may occur as:

Subject: Where(when/how) he did it is a mystery.

Direct Object: He refused to say where(when/how) he saw it.

Subject Comp.: The question is where(when/how) it will end.

Adjective Comp: We were unsure where(when/how) we should go.

Object of Prep: They compromised on where(when/how) to do it.

Such Clauses do not appear to occur as Indirect Object or Object Complement.

We note once more that "where", "when" and "how" Clauses are liable to confusion with different kinds of Clause introduced by the identical forms.

Noun Clauses introduced by "what", "who" or "whoever" differ from "when", "where" and "how" Clauses in that the introducing element functions as a Noun Phrase, operating as Subject, Direct Object, etc. in Clause structure; for example, in:

What comes next will surprise you.

"what" is the subject of the Clause it introduces, whereas in:

What he said surprised me.

It is the Direct Object. In both cases, of course, it comes first in the sentence, as is the case with "wh-questions". On the other hand, there is no verbal inversion, such as occurs with "wh-questions".

Clauses introduced by "what" have a relatively wide range of occurrence: e.g.;

Subject : What worried me was his silence.

Direct Object : He told me what he wanted.

Subject Comp : The result was what he had feared.
 Object Comp. : She made him what he was.
 Object of Prep. : They were grateful for what was said.

They do not appear to occur, however, as Indirect Object or Object Complement.

The reference of "what" is, of course, to things rather than persons. Where reference to persons is involved, the introducing element has to be "who" or "whoever". These two forms complement one another in covering virtually the whole range of possible functions: e.g.;

Subject : Whoever did this will pay.
 Direct Object : He didn't know who I was.
 Indirect Obj. : I will tell whoever is there what to do.
 Subject Comp : He was who he claimed to be.
 Object Comp. : I reminded him who he was.
 Object of Prep : He lied about who would be there.
 Adjective Comp : He was aware who they thought he was.

Not all these possibilities are equally probable, of course, and, in particular, Object Complement is likely to be a rare occurrence.

In common with the introducing elements of other Noun Clauses, "who", but not "whoever" also introduces other Clauses, specifically Adjective Clauses, where it acts as a Relative Pronoun.

Finally, it should be noted that structures based on Infinitives and "-ing" forms of the Verb also function as alternatives to Noun Phrase in a number of position: e.g.;

Subject : To fail was more than he could bear.
 Direct Object : He offered to resign.
 Subject and
 Subject Comp : Seeing is believing.
 Object of Prep : He worried about failing his exams.

Such structures may be regarded as Phrases (Infinitive Phrases and "-ing" Phrases), or as non-finite Subordinate Clauses. There appears to be no absolute justification for choosing one classification rather than the other.

We turn now to consideration of Adjective Clauses.

Adjective Clauses

Adjective Clauses, or "Relative Clauses", as they are sometimes called, occur only as one of the possible Post-Modifiers in Noun Phrases. They are introduced by "Relative Pronouns": who (and its marked case form "whom"), "which" and "that".

The Relative Pronouns themselves, as well as introducing the Adjective Clause, also function as either Subject or Direct Object. They

differ from one another only in that "who" refers to persons, "which" to things, and "that" to either: for example;

The man **who/that** came to dinner...

The man **who(m)** that we saw...

The book **which/that** interested you...

The book **which/that** you bought...

Where it is the Direct Object in the Adjective Clause, the Relative Pronoun may be, and often is, omitted: for example;

The man **we** saw...

The book **you** bought...

But never when it is the subject:

*The man came to dinner...

etc.

Adjective Clauses may also be introduced by Prepositional Phrases consisting of a Preposition and "whom" or "which", as appropriate, but not "that". For example;

The man **to whom** you gave the book...

The book **about which** we spoke...

This kind of Prepositional Phrase has to be distinguished from that involving a Noun Clause: for example;

They disagreed **about who** should go.

They met the man **about whom** they disagreed.

In the first of these Sentences the Prepositional Phrase consists of a Preposition followed by a Noun Clause. Hence the form "who". In the second Sentence, however, we have a Preposition followed by a Relative Pronoun introducing an Adjective Clause, the whole acting as Post-Modifier to the Head Noun, "man", and, accordingly, we have the marked form "whom".

The form "whose" may also introduce an Adjective Clause. Its function, however, is not that of a Relative Pronoun, but rather that of a Relative Adjective. For example;

The man **whose house** was burgled...

Here "whose" is Pre-Modifier to the Head Noun "house".

Confusion sometimes arises with Adjective Clauses over the distinction between "Defining" and Non-Defining" Clauses. The difference is a subtle one, in fact one which is lost on most native speakers. Compare;

The passengers **who were saved** were lucky.

The passengers, **who were saved**, were lucky.

In the first of these Sentences we have a Defining Adjective Clause, "who were saved", and what is asserted is that only certain passengers were saved, and they were lucky. But in the second Sentence what we have is Non-Defining Clause, and the assertion is that all the passengers

were saved, and they were all lucky. In writing the two types of Clause are distinguished by the use of commas before and after the Non-Defining Clause, where the Defining Clause has none. In speech the difference is marked by brief pauses before and after the Non-Defining Clause.

Again we note the possibility of structures based on non-finite Verb forms functioning in a similar fashion to finite. Subordinate Clauses; in this case as Post-Modifiers: for example;

The man to watch...

The woman sitting in the window...

A man broken by events...

Once more we have the choice. We may regard these structures either as Phrases or as non-finite Clauses.

Adverbial Clauses

The final Clause type is the most varied and complex of Subordinate Clauses; ie., Adverbial Clauses. These Clauses, like Adverbs, may function as Adv, as Sentence Modifier or as Word Modifier, but evidently, because of their greater scope for elaboration, they contribute a greater load of information to whichever of these roles they fill.

Adverbial Clauses are usually introduced by Subordinating Conjunctions. Unlike Relative Pronouns these are not part of the structure of the following Clause, but act simply to introduce the Clause and signal what kind of circumstantial information it specifies. Most grammarians would recognise the following types: time, place, condition, concession, purpose, result, manner and reason. Some of these categories are really quite general and cover a number of sub-types, and other types are added by some grammarians.

Time Clauses are introduced by conjunctions whose meanings are, or may be interpreted as, associated with time: after, as, as soon as, before, now, until, when, whenever, while, etc. For example;

As soon as he spoke, they recognised him.

He broke down when he hears the news.

Since he came, he has been a nuisance.

He arrived before we were ready.

Adverbial Clauses of place are typically introduced by "where", or "wherever": for example;

Where there is disagreement, little gets done.

Wherever he went, he made friends.

Conditional Clauses are introduced by "if" or "unless". The former is regarded as specifying a positive condition, the latter a negative one, equivalent to, "if...not": for example;

If he comes we'll have a good time.

Unless he comes we won't have a good time.

If the terms are right, a contract will be signed.

Unless the terms are right, no contract will be signed.

Conditions may also be introduced by various formulas: provided that, on condition that, etc. Sometimes "when" may also be interpreted as specifying a condition rather than a time; as in, for example;

When he learns to behave, we'll let him come.

A distinction has to be made between "real" and "unreal" conditions. The former is an open condition, in the sense that it may or may not be fulfilled, whereas the latter is not expected to be fulfilled. An unreal condition is specified by the use of the Past Tense of the verb in the Conditional Clause, followed in the main sentence by a Modal in the Past Tense. Thus, compare;

Real: If he wins we'll all be in trouble.

Unreal: If he won, we would(could, might, should) all be in trouble.

Specifying unreal conditions is generally perceived by modern grammarians as an important use of the Past Tense, suggesting, again, that it is unwise to identify Tense too closely with Time-Reference.

Concessions are usually specified using "though" or "although", but other forms may also be used: while, even if, despite the fact that, etc. Examples are;

Though he was poor, he was honest.

Even if it's late, we still want to go.

Purpose may be specified by "(so) that", or "in order that": for example;

He worked hard, (so) that he might retire early.

He spoke softly, in order that the others might not hear.

Purpose should not be confused with "Result", though the same form may be used in both cases. Compare, for example;

Purpose: He polished the mirrors so that they would shine.

Result: He polished the mirrors so that they shone.

Result Clauses are also frequently introduced by "that", where "so" occurs in the main sentence, modifying an Adjective or an Adverb. For example;

He was so angry that he exploded.

She plays so beautifully that he was entranced.

Clauses of Manner are typically introduced by "as": for example;

Do it as you have been shown.

He cooked the fish as the islanders do it.

Reasons or Causes are commonly introduced by "as", "because" or "since": for example;

Since he was impatient, we set out at once.

As we were late, they started without us.

They voted Labour because they were tired of the Tories.

As we saw is the case with Noun Clauses and Adjective Clauses, so also with Adverbial Clauses there are non-finite structures which perform similar functions. There are several types.

1. Structures based on an "-ing" form and introduced by a conjunction: for example;

When mixing the paste, care must be taken to avoid skin contact.

After denying it for some time, he eventually confessed.

Before jumping to conclusions, you must consider all the evidence.

2. Structures based on an "-ing" form, but with no conjunction: for example;

Realising he was late, he quickened his pace.

Feeling in need of a rest, he stopped at the inn.

Such structures are almost Adjectival in force. Certainly they are usually felt as predicated of the Subject of the main Sentence, so that, for example;

*Turning the corner, Tower Bridge came into view.
is felt to be unacceptable. The explanation usually given is that the "-ing" form has an "understood" Subject, which must be identical to that of the main sentence; which would really seem to be only another way of saying that the "-ing" Phrase has Adjectival force. On the other hand, the following Sentence seems perfectly acceptable, though the explanation clearly does not apply;

Considering all the circumstances, there was only one thing to do.

3. Structures based on a Past Participle, introduced by a conjunction; for example;

When completed, forms should be returned to the office.

Where found, mistakes are always rectified.

Though wounded, he fought on.

Again the main force appears to be Adjectival, with the Participial Phrase modifying the subject of the main sentence.

4. Structures based on Infinitives: for example;

He did it to deceive the enemy.

To avoid the crowd, he went the long way round.

Clearly, what we have here are Purpose Clauses. However, Sentence modifying comments based on Infinitives: such as;

To be frank...

To sum up...

are also quite common.

5. Structures consisting of an Adjective Phrase introduced by a Conjunction: for example;

When happy, he was an agreeable companion.

Whether right or wrong, he stood by his decisions.

If angry, he would shout and bluster.

This type of structure might best be accounted for as being derived from a Copula Sentence by deletion of the Copula and the Subject; the latter being identical with the Subject of the main Sentence. Thus;

When (he was) happy...

Whether (he was) right or wrong...

and so on.

Adverbial Clauses appear to occur very frequently as Sentence modifiers, where they may, like Adverbs, act as links or as comments of the speaker/writer. For example;

Link: If these factors are taken into account, it all becomes clear.

Unless we proceed in this way, we may get the wrong answer.

Comment: When it comes right down to it, we can't compete.
When all is said and done, there is no choice.

However, the most general purpose of Clausal Sentence modification appears to be to provide, through their informational content, a circumstantial context – temporal, concessive, etc. – for the main Sentence. That is, they identify a framework of relevant circumstances within which what is asserted by the main Sentence is true. For example;

As soon as he was finished, he left for home.

Before we could stop him, he began to sing.

Wherever they are, they are safe.

If all our conditions are met, we will sign.

Generally speaking, Clausal Sentence modifiers are not omissible. Certainly, since they are not part of the structure of the main Sentence their omission will still leave a grammatical Sentence, and, grammatically speaking, therefore, they can be omitted. But, clearly, omission must mean the loss of relevant circumstantial information. Thus, for example, in the following Proposition:

Before he came to England, he worked in the car industry.
what is being asserted is not simply that he “—worked in the car industry”, but that he did this “Before he came to England-”. Omission of the Sentence modifier, therefore, would remove an important part of the message, though it would leave a perfectly acceptable Sentence, grammatically speaking.

Adverbial Clauses also occur, though less frequently, at Adv: for example;

It is designed to give the animal a sense of security while they re-establish family groups.

He left it where he was supposed to.

Ministers do not tremble as they did under Thatcher.

As is the case with Adverbs and other Adverbials, more than one Adverbial Clause may occur at Adv.: for example;

He hid the money where nobody would find it, as he had been told.

He waited where he was until someone collected him.

And Adverbial Clauses may also occur in combination with other Adverbials; Adverbs, Prepositional Phrases and non-finite Clauses: for example;

He sat patiently in the car until help arrived.

He found the dog sitting quietly where he had left it.
and so on.

Adverbial Clauses may occur initially, medially or finally in relation to the main Sentence. It does not follow, however, that all Adverbial Clauses are equally mobile, or even mobile at all. Thus, many of the Adv. examples given above may not be moved to initial or medial position: for example;

He left it where he was supposed to.

*where he was supposed to he left it.

*He where he was supposed to left it.

He hid the money where nobody would find it.

*Where nobody would find it he hid the money.

*He where nobody would find it hid the money.

However, in some cases at least, a different position may imply a different structural relationship with the main Sentence. Consider, for example, the following two Sentences;

When he feels like it he will come.

He will come when he feels like it.

In the first Proposition we have a Sentence modifier which specifies the circumstantial context within which the event identified by the main Sentence will take place, whereas in the second what we appear to have is an Adverbial Clause at Adv.; modifying the Verb "come". This apparent change of structure however, seems to be confined to time Clauses, and perhaps place Clauses. With other types of Adverbial Clause change of position results in change of emphasis, but no change in structure: for example;

If you go, he'll be angry.

He'll be angry if you go.

Though you struggle, you will not escape.

You will not escape, though you struggle.

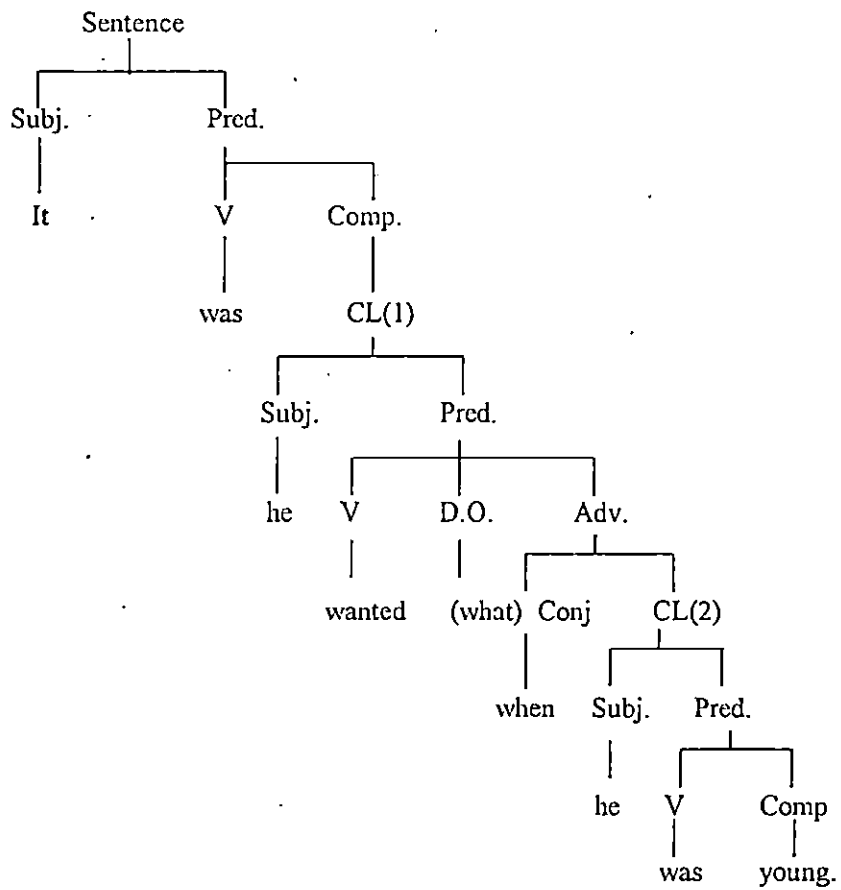
and so on.

It should be said that there is much that is obscure about the operation of Adverbial Clauses, and no doubt much could be added to what has been said here. Grammar books, generally, are somewhat sketchy on the subject, and tend to concentrate upon a, sometimes exhaustive, classification and sub-classification of Clauses in terms of semantic labels, such as "time when", "duration", "manner", and so on, mainly by reference to the subordinating devices. The result, usually, is a catalogue of trees, but no forest. This is an area of English grammar, in fact, that would repay thorough investigation.

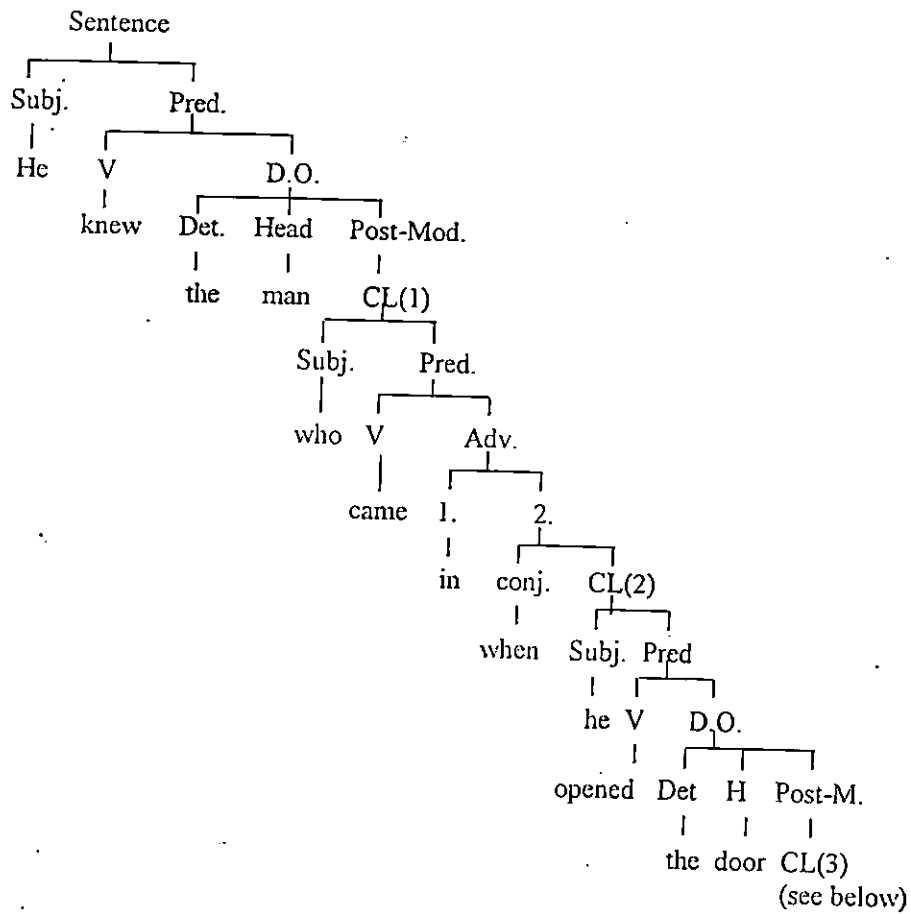
Thus far we have discussed subordination in terms of a single level; that is to say in terms of Clauses and Phrases operating directly in the structure of Sentences. However, subordination is recursive, so that subordinate structures may themselves contain subordinate structures. There is no identifiable limit to this recursive process, in fact, though, clearly, if it is carried to extremes it will result in structures which, while they do not breach any grammatical rules, are nevertheless impossible to interpret.

The kind of structure that can result from the recursive process can be demonstrated by "Tree Diagrams", that show how succeeding levels of structure are made up of other structures, down to the point at which individual words are inserted. A few illustrative examples will make the operation of recursive subordination clear.

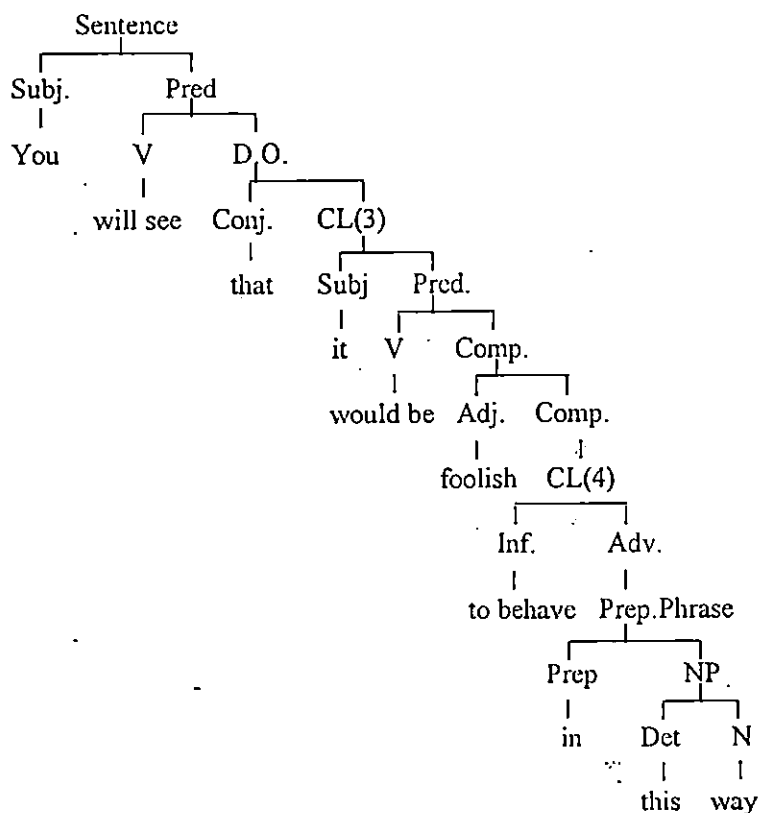
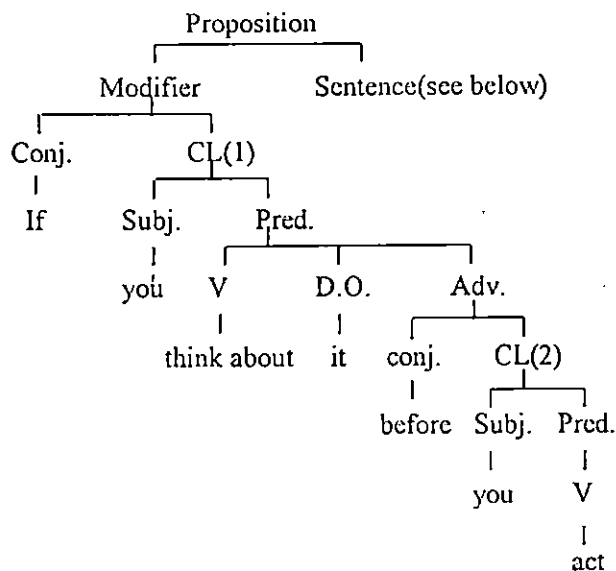
1. It was what he wanted when he was young.



2. He knew the man who came in when he opened the door to the kitchen.



3. If you think about it before you act, you will see that it would be foolish to behave in this way.



All human languages are complex, and English is no exception. Remarkably, native speakers of any given language master the complexity in a relatively short time, and usually with little, if any, overt instruction. The second language learner, however, must have the complexity described and explained, if he/she is ever to come to terms with it. It has been the aim of this paper to provide such description and explanation with regard to one particular area of complexity in English, Subordinate Clauses, in the hope that teachers of English as a second language may find in it a useful source of material. The reader will judge for himself/herself whether this aim has been achieved.
