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An Analysis of the Rules Describing the Use of Subordination

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE RULES DESCRIBING THE USE OF SUBORDINATION

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CONTENTS

Let us never forget that language is alive and vital and changing. It is not dead and safely enbalmed in rules in a textbook (54:436).

The English language is much more flexible than the grammarians, and continually bursts out of their petty rules, as a growing tree will burst even an iron band fastened too closely about it (15:196).

. . . skepticism toward handbook rules does not mean undue libertarianism. . . . it requires investigation rather than mere acceptance of authority to determine whether a given form is right or wrong (25:285).

CHAPTER I

A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The science of linguistics has awakened new interest in the study of the English language. Although it has not, thus far, resulted in sweeping changes in classroom teaching methods, it has forced English teachers to examine traditional ideas and to look with a critical eye at the prescriptive rules which have long been a basis for our teaching.

For several years I have been dissatisfied with the way our college handbooks handle the discussion of subordination. Nearly all of them say that the use of subordination is the mark of a mature writer and that it is the most effective method of improving style and achieving variety and emphasis in writing. Although they stress the importance of this area of English study, few of them devote more than three or four pages to a discussion of it, and that discussion rarely shows how subordination really works in our language. Often the entire subject is reduced to one rule which tells the student to put the most important idea of the sentence in the main clause and all subordinate ideas in subordinate clauses. The student is given the impression that subordination is always used in this way, whereas so far as I have been able to determine, it is not used in this way at all.

Because of the almost universal inclusion of this rule in our handbooks, teachers too tend to accept it without question. When I mentioned to another teacher that I felt our handbook was wrong in its handling of subordination, he said, "Not only that, but it is almost impossible to teach." I asked him then why he continued to struggle with it each quarter, and his answer was something like Edmund Hillary's when he was asked why he felt it was necessary to climb a mountain: "Because it is there."

Subordination is not Mt. Everest, but neither is it a molehill which can be covered in one easy step, and this is what our textbooks try to do. Unfortunately, there is no single easy way to teach the use of subordination, and this paper cannot offer any positive remedy for the inadequacies of our college handbooks. It will, however, discuss the varieties of opinions about the subject, explore several possible approaches, and offer some suggestions for a changed method of teaching subordination to our students.

CHAPTER II

A SURVEY OF THE HANDBOOKS

A survey of handbooks and workbooks currently in use in our colleges reveals a discrepency in the definition of subordination. Most of them give the standard definition that subordination involves the use of a clause, a group of words containing a subject and a verb. However, a very few, such as Gorrell and Laird's Modern English Handbook, use the term to cover not only clauses but also participial, gerund, and infinitive phrases; prepositional phrases; and single words, particularly adjectives. If we follow this kind of definition, the statement that the main clause contains the most important idea would be justifiable, but it also broadens the field of subordination to such an extent that it becomes almost unmanageable. Under this definition, the phrase "a green hat' uses subordination because it means "the hat that is green." Handbooks which discuss subordination in this way are viewing the study of English not from a structural viewpoint but from a lexical one. Some grammarians would classify a sentence such as "Though sick, she went to school" as complex because, though simple in structure, it is complex in thought and intention. Paul Roberts discusses this idea when he says

> Those grammarians who speak of verbal clauses would logically describe 'I knew Barnwell to be ill' as a

> complex sentence, construing Barnwell to be ill as an infinitive clause. But according to the terminology used in this book, 'I knew Barnwell to be ill' is a simple sentence, the verb knew taking an infinitive phrase as its object (48:307-8).

To avoid making a complicated subject even more complicated, I use the term subordination to mean the use of clauses which have a stated subject and verb. However, even when a handbook follows this same definition, there are difficulties. One widely used handbook says that "subordinate is the opposite of coordinate" and then destroys its own definition by saying, "Ideas are subordinate when they are of less importance than other ideas in the same sentence" (39:105). Even if we were to accept the statement that subordinate ideas are "less important," we can hardly say that they are the "opposite" of coordinate.

Most handbooks, rather than attempt a concrete definition of subordination, concentrate on demonstrating its use. One book covers the entire subject with the vague statement, "The most important units of subject matter should be expressed in the most emphatic units of writing" (33:32). Another is more exact: "The idea contained in the dependent clause is of less importance to the writer's purpose than the idea in the independent clause" (8:193). The most prescriptive books state the rules as though there could be no question about the use of subordination. "Determine the most important idea of the sentence and express it in the main clause. Put lesser ideas in subordinate clauses, phrases, or words. Use

co-ordination only for ideas of equal importance" (43:853).

Although each handbook varies the handling of subordination, there are three rules which are generally discussed:

1. Use coordination only for ideas of equal importance.
2. Use subordination for variety and emphasis.
3. Use subordination only for ideas of lesser importance.

The easy way to teach the use of subordination would be to accept these rules. It is unfortunate that they do not adequately describe the way our language works.

Probably the most accurate rule is that which tells us to use coordination only for ideas of equal importance, but even this needs some modification. Students who already write with accuracy and some fluency are the ones who could most benefit from an explanation of when to bend the rules. If we stress that coordination is to be used only for ideas of equal importance, we may prevent the student from developing an understanding of such stylistic devices as irony, as in the following: "In 1963, the world was on the brink of disaster, the United States was in danger of civil war, the President was assassinated, and I taught sleepy sophomores to scan a line of poetry." It is precisely because the rule usually is true that varying it deliberately can lead to greater style and originality in writing.

The second rule, that subordination should be used to achieve variety and emphasis, could help students to improve their writing. The difficulty here is that the handbooks base their discussions on sentences quoted out of context. Any judgment about whether a sentence shows variety and emphasis should be based, at least in part, on how that sentence compares with those that surround it. In many cases, it is questionable whether the examples shown by the handbooks are really improved. One handbook, illustrating how to achieve variety and emphasis by avoiding the "chain sentence," gives this example:

> Unemphatic: We would generally go to the movies on Friday afternoon, and afterward we would have Cokes at the drugstore, and then if we had time enough we would dance awhile before dinner.
>
> Emphatic: Friday afternoons we generally go to the movies, drink a Coke afterward, and, if there is time, dance awhile before dinner (58:184-185).

The handbook goes on to explain that proper subordination is achieved principally through the use of a compound verb. It is doubtful that the second sentence is really much improved over the first. Certainly the first has better rhythm and balance. Any improvement comes not through using subordination--there are no more subordinate clauses in the second than in the first--but through changing the tense of the verbs, eliminating excess words, and avoiding repetition.

Another handbook shows this example of "improved" sentence structure:

> Awkward: Do not be in too much of a hurry to join an organization. Study its membership before you join.

Revised: Before you join an organization, investigate its membership (34:59).

Whatever standard we might use to judge these sentences, the first version is not"awkward." It is more interesting and gives a clearer, more emphatic command than the second.

A third example should be enough to show that textbook writers sometimes have difficulty with illustrating the rule. The Scribner Handbook of English labels this sentence as commonplace: "They find now that their early training becomes valuable to them." It then gives this strange-sounding sentence as an example of how to emphasize the time element: "Now it is that their early training becomes valuable to them" (41:86).

It is true that skillful use of subordination can help to achieve variety and emphasis, but if our students are to learn this skill, it will have to be demonstrated with examples that are better than those above. By condemning some sentences as "unemphatic" or "awkward," the textbook writers give the idea that these sentences would be wrong wherever they are used. A better method of illustrating improvement would be to quote the sentence in context, explain why it is inappropriate or ineffective in that particular passage, and show a number of ways that it might be written to achieve different kinds of emphasis.

In surveying the handbooks I found that the third rule, that subordinate clauses must contain ideas of lesser

importance, is the most difficult one to examine, partly because it seems to be true in some cases. This rule, which is most strongly emphasized by some textbooks, is really the least accurate of all. Chapter V will be devoted to a close examination of the rule; for now I will show only a few examples chosen at random from the textbooks.

1. Since Fred knows almost nothing about farming, I do not expect him to enjoy much success.
2. When it rains, it pours.
3. It was so warm that I took my sweater off.
4. Ned stood so that I could have his seat.

Perhaps the independent clause in each of the above sentences does contain the main idea, but there is no other possible arrangement, since to put that idea into the subordinate clause results only in nonsense: "Since I do not expect Fred to enjoy much success, he knows almost nothing about farming."

Still another type of sentence is illustrated by the following examples:

1. Mrs. Hamel sang the song as it was written.
2. If you can get there early, you can get a good seat.
3. Since I was angry, I slammed the book on the desk.

Again the main idea is in the independent clause. In these sentences it is possible to put that idea into the subordinate clause, but then the sentence has an entirely different meaning from that originally intended. If the first sentence

were written, "As Mrs. Hamel sang the song, it was written," the antecedent of "it" would no longer be "song" but some other word mentioned before.

What the survey of textbooks shows is that there are discrepancies between the rules and the illustrations of those rules, and between the language itself and the grammar which purports to describe it. Two of the handbooks I examined have somewhat overcome these problems. The Macmillan Handbook of English is the only one which suggests that because our language is still developing, a syntactical change has occurred in complex sentences.

> A thought expressed in a simple sentence is thereby given primary rank or importance. Ideas expressed in the co-ordinate units of a compound sentence are given equal billing, as it were. Now it is quite possible for communication to exist on that one level; the Anglo-Saxons came pretty close to writing and speaking in that manner. Modern English, however, developed a system whereby many differences in the relationship of one idea to another could be expressed by grammatical structure. It developed and perfected the dependent clause and the complex sentence.
>
> But it should be added that this development and refinement has continued to the point where, for the sake of variety and emphasis, main ideas are occasionally expressed in dependent clauses, as in this very sentence you are reading now (34:48).

From this point on, the handbook returns to the conventional idea that minor facts and ideas are placed in dependent construction.

Gorrell and Laird's Modern English Handbook offers an extensive treatment of subordination. There is some confusion in introducing the subject, as when the book

instructs the writer to choose the idea he wants to stress and subordinate the others to it. The example used is

> When we are offered a penny for our thoughts we always find that we have recently had so many things in mind that we can easily make a selection which will not compromise us too nakedly.--James Harvey Robinson, Mind in the Making.

The explanation of this sentence is that

> an independent clause makes an independent assertion, does not depend on any other part of the sentence. The independent clause in Robinson's sentence is we find plus the elaborate complement that comprises the remainder of the sentence (21:248).

The problem here is that the "elaborate complement" itself contains three subordinate clauses, and the explanation is a rather ineffective attempt to justify the rule.

From this point on, however, the handbook emphasizes that the relationship expressed by subordinate clauses is the important thing, and the examples consistently show the subordinate clauses carrying most of the meaning of the sentence, as in

> Not until long after my vacation was over, and I had returned to my studies at Oxford, did I realize that the quiet, little gray man whom I would occasionally overhear as he trudged the hedgerowed lanes muttering Greek poetry was England's leading novelist, Thomas Hardy (21:254).

The rest of this twenty-six page section stresses relationship, showing the nuances of meaning which skillful use of subordination can give.

When such uncertainties and contradictions about subordination exist among current textbooks and even within a

single textbook, we need to consider the basic studies of the English language done by grammarians and linguists who have devoted their lives to an attempt to answer such questions. While an exploration of these studies cannot give us an exact, simple answer, it can show why the confusion exists. The next chapter will be devoted to this.

CHAPTER III

THE GRAMMARIANS

Anyone who studies grammar finds himself admiring the work of Otto Jespersen, if not for exactness and clarity, at least for sheer bulk. His most thorough discussion of English is A Modern English Grammar, seven volumes spanning more than thirty years. He bases his analysis of the language on historical principles, and for examples to illustrate each point he chooses from nine hundred years of English literature.

Although A Modern English Grammar is an invaluable reference work, there are several difficulties involved in its use. Because Jespersen continued his examination of the language during the years between the publication of each volume, he modified his ideas in many ways, and changes in terminology and emphasis are evident. The complexity of his work is also a handicap to the person who searches for a simple answer. In discussing subordination, for example, he covers every word that is, or has been, used as a conjunction and gives examples of its use throughout literary history. The third difficulty is that Jespersen's best comments are often buried within these thousands of examples. A Modern English Grammar is rather like an NED for grammarians.

Jespersen says that there is chaos in the grammar books on the subject of clauses, and he tries to establish some kind of order by breaking them into three classifications: primary (clauses used as subjects, objects of verbs, and objects of prepositions), secondary (roughly equivalent to adjective clauses), and tertiary (adverb clauses). He warns that we must be careful of wrongly interpreting his idea of "rank," for that term "in speaking of the relations of words and ideas is only, and can only be, figurative and should not, therefore, be taken too literally" (31:355). He continually stresses relationship of meaning between clauses, but he says that that relationship is not bound to any strict order.

> It is sometimes immaterial whether the time-relation is given in the main statement of a clause. . . . "He was breakfasting when I entered: I entered while he was breakfasting" (32:355).

He questions the idea of relative importance of clauses by showing such sentences as "He has a house of his own, whereas his brother lives in a flat."

Jespersen illustrates in many ways that the grammar books are in error in their teaching of subordination, but his own method of using historical illustrations to show what it is still leaves us with no description of how it works.

Like Jespersen, George Curme analyzes grammar historically and draws his examples from literature. His

analysis fails to clarify the subject because he has set no exact basis for his judgment. This is shown in his introduction to Syntax.

> . . . the author defends . . . the recommendations of conservative grammarians wherever they contend against the tendencies of the masses to disregard fine distinctions in the literary language already hallowed by long usage. On the other hand, the author often takes a stand against these conservative grammarians wherever they cling to the old simply because it is old and thus fail to recognize that English grammar is the stirring story of the English people's long and constant struggle to create a fuller and more accurate expression of their inner life (14:x).

His interpretations, then, are based on his rather romantic personal judgment, not on any pre-set standard. Besides using historical precedents, Curme analyzes words, phrases, and clauses by their form and function, and, in addition, although he does not mention this, he relies heavily on meaning.

His reliance on meaning leads him into a complicated discussion of abridged and elliptical clauses. The following sentences with the subordinate clauses underlined are used as examples:

1. It is stupid of you to say it.
2. It is necessary for me to go.
3. Tired and discouraged, she went to bed.
4. The sophists were hated by some because powerful, by others because shallow (13:157).

Interpreting by using meaning also leads to confusion in

distinguishing between subject and predicate clauses. The following are Curme's examples of subject clauses:

1. It is best that he should go.
2. My only terror was lest my father should follow me.
3. It has often been asked who did it.
4. It was thoughtful of you to do it. (13:159-161).

He is led into such entanglements as explaining that in "This is the pen I write with" we really mean "This is the pen I write with (it)" (13:164).

Curme's definitions are uncertain. He defines the complex sentence as one with a principal clause and one or more subordinate clauses. "This is true, however, in only a general sense. In an exact sense there is often no principal clause at all" (14:174). Also he explains that the principal clause may be buried in a subordinate clause, as "What the South wants above all things is just what General Grant says let us have, and that is peace" (14:186).

Curme's treatment of subordination is thorough, but his definitions are too vague and the classifications too broad to be of help in developing clear-cut rules.

Although Henry Sweet began his work in grammar earlier than the two grammarians discussed above, he is in many ways more modern than either of them. In his insistence that we must study grammar as it is today, he breaks with the historical grammarians. The viewpoint of today's linguists

is expressed by Sweet:

> . . . it must be borne in mind that the rules of grammar have no value except as statements of facts: whatever is in general use in a language is for that very reason grammatically correct (52:5).

Sweet recognizes the divergence of the grammatical and logical divisions of the language.

> But in actual language--which is always an imperfect instrument of thought--the grammatical and logical categories do not always exactly correspond to one another (52:11).

In his discussion of subordination he says

> The distinction between independent and dependent does not always exactly agree with that between coordinate and subordinate, because the former is a purely grammatical distinction, the latter a logical one (52:160).

The difficulty in following Sweet's grammar is that he stresses the logical point of view.

> Before analysing a sentence or other passage grammatically, it should generally be analysed from a logical point of view, especially if it involves any divergence between logical and grammatical categories. Thus in analysing such a complex as 'it is you that I mean,' we should understand clearly that it expresses a simple thought, the principal clause 'it is you' being only an empty sentence (52:210).

Because some grammarians might not agree that "it is you" is only an "empty sentence," Sweet's grammar fails to give us an exact basis for judgment.

Of all the grammarians, Etsko Kruisinga most effectively bases his analysis of English on grammatical rather than logical categories, and in many ways he simplifies the treatment of subordination. He classifies sentences as

either simple or compound, a compound sentence including what we usually call complex. He uses the terms main clause and sub-clause but says that these are only syntactical terms, and no other meaning should be inferred from them. He discusses sentences as they are, without the confusion of "reduced clauses" or "ellipsis," avoiding the latter by saying, "Sub-clauses may be connected by conjunctions or relative pronouns or be unconnected" (36:362). He somewhat clarifies the defining of main clauses by saying that they may lack a subject or predicate or may have a different structure such as an imperative clause--"Hurry up if you don't want to lose your train"--or exclamatory--"How funny that he should refuse after all" (36:363).

Kruisinga touches upon the main point of this paper when he says

> The distinction of main and sub-clauses is a purely grammatical one, without any bearing on the meaning of the whole sentence, and it is also possible for the elements of the compound sentence to be equally balanced (36:363).

He points out that sometimes there is not even a grammatical division of the compound sentence as in this example by W. Somerset Maughm: "It's you're the fool. You're making me cry" (36:399).

Kruisinga writes clearly and deals with the English language as he finds it, without attempting to explain it by historical principles or by logical meaning. His viewpoint is close to that of the linguists, but he suggests

that we can never reach an exact analysis of English.

> This lack of mathematical 'clearness' is inextricably bound up with language as a means of human communication: language is the more effective as such because it is inconsistent (35:479).

From the discussions of the grammarians it should be obvious why there is confusion in our textbooks. There is a wide variation in the descriptive terms used; there is often disagreement about where the divisions should be made, as between simple and complex sentences; and there is no way to use meaning as a basis for exact analysis. One textbook writer was so caught up in this confusion that he advised our students that "the writer's meaning <u>is</u> his language, and his language <u>is</u> his meaning" (2:357). But Hayakawa says, "The meanings of words are not in words; they are in us." Grammarians and teachers who try to base an exact, scientific analysis on meaning fail to realize that meanings are subjective and may be interpreted in various ways. Grammarians, then, have failed to provide a sound foundation for teaching English. Nevertheless, old ways die hard; it is very difficult to free our minds from ideas that have been accepted as true for so long; it is very difficult to examine meaningful language as though it had no meaning. However, we must realize that a rule cannot be imposed on the language. Instead, a rule is a description of how the language works, and to reach agreement on a rule, we must first have agreement on a basis that is more objective than meaning is.

CHAPTER IV

THE LINGUISTS

It is on the kind of analysis that should be used that modern linguists differ from the older grammarians. Charles Fries says

> It is this kind of grammatical analysis, this starting with the total meaning, and the using of this meaning as the basis for analysis--an analysis that makes no advance beyond the ascribing of certain technical terms to parts of the meaning already known--it is this kind of grammatical analysis that modern linguistic science discards as belonging to a pre-scientific era (20:55).

Fries, then, depends upon structural analysis rather than on a lexical analysis. There are two main reasons that linguists prefer the structural approach. First, in English it is the word-order arrangement that signals much of the meaning of the sentence, and, second, many of the important function words, such as which, what, and that, carry no lexical meaning at all.

Even though the linguists are attempting to develop a scientific method of analyzing language, there is still little agreement as to what that approach should be. Sometimes there are even several approaches used by one linguist. W. Nelson Francis, for example, defines a sentence on the basis of intonation patterns (17:372), an "included clause" (our subordinate clause) on the basis of its structure (17:390),

and infinitive and elliptical clauses partly on their intended meaning (17:398-9). Archibald Hill analyzes English on the basis of its structure, using stress, junctures, and pitch as signals of this structure. Paul Roberts classifies subordinate clauses by their function and then sub-divides adverb clauses by their meanings (48:317-332). Other linguists analyze sentences as phonemic, not syntactic, units.

Is it possible to describe language without resorting to meaning? Again there is a difference of opinion among linguists. Francis says

> The doctrine that lexical meaning must not be used in linguistic analysis has been a necessary and fruitful corrective against the indiscriminate resort to meaning in the traditional grammars. But it should be remembered that the total exclusion of meaning produces an artificial linguistic situation . . . not characteristic of the normal communicative use of language (16:102).

However, Hill feels that both the structure of language and its meaning can be described scientifically.

> Undoubtedly important though paralinguistics may be, the field which is most important to all of us is that of meaning. . . . It is to be hoped that no reader has gained the impression that meaning is either unimportant or unreal to the linguistic analyst. The attempt has been to lay some of the foundation on which a study of English meanings might be built. Linguists, furthermore, are now hopeful that there can be a genuinely scientific semantics. . . (26:409).

The linguists, with their variety of approaches to language, have done no better than the grammarians in explaining clause patterns, but they are unanimous in their

condemnation of the way our textbooks teach subordination. Fries illustrates the difficulty in attempting to draw the line between coordinating and subordinating conjunctions if the definition is based on the relative importance of the ideas connected by these conjunctions:

a. The house is large and the location will suit it.
b. The house is large and consequently the location will suit it.
c. The house is large thus the location will suit it.
d. The house is large but the location will suit it.
e. The house is large still the location will suit it.
f. The house is large yet the location will suit it.
g. The house is large therefore the location will suit it.
h. The house is large however the location will suit it.
i. The house is large so the location will suit it.
j. The house is large so that the location will suit it.
k. As the house is large the location will suit it.
l. Because the house is large the location will suit it.
m. Since the house is large the location will suit it.
n. Although the house is large the location will suit it.
o. If the house is large the location will suit it.
p. Provided the house is large the location will suit it.
q. Unless the house is large the location will not suit it.
r. In case the house is large the location will suit it.
s. In as much as the house is large the location will suit it (18:210-211).

Sentences a to j are conventionally defined as having coordinate conjunctions and k to s as having subordinate. It is, however, very difficult to draw a line at the precise point at which "the house is large" ceases to be as important as "the location will suit it." It is possible to base the definition on structure because in sentences k to s the conjunction always precedes the first clause, and, although the conjunction may come between clauses, it can do so only

if the entire first clause is moved: "The location will suit the house because the house is large." Fries, however, concludes that even this distinction is not necessary.

> The difficulty of finding a reasonable set of criteria by which to separate coordinate from subordinate clauses . . . argues that, in English, this distinction is really of practically no importance. Each of these function words signals a particular set of relationships between the clauses which it joins and the precise nature of the relationship is vitally important. Whether we further classify that relationship as a 'coordinate' one or a 'subordinate' one makes no difference whatever (18:211).

There are, of course, disagreements about Fries' analysis. One critic says

> Fries' function words include not only such markers of subordinate clauses in which they are contained as when, although, which, and that, and such preclausal prepositions as because and since, but also the coordinate and and but and such simple conjunctives--neither subordinating nor explicitly coordinating--as therefore and nevertheless. He makes no attempt at a classification of subordinate clauses, and his classification of main clauses can hardly be called a classification based on form (38:13).

John Hughes agrees in general with Fries that "a question that arises here is whether it is necessary or worthwhile in English to distinguish between 'subordinating' and 'co-ordinating' conjunctions" (28:185). However, he suggests that there are grounds for making another kind of distinction.

> Two sentence patterns are often connected by a word like'therefore' or 'however,' whose position in the clause it introduces is flexible: it may stand at the beginning or end, or in the middle; whereas 'and,' 'but,' or 'for' may stand only between clauses. Also words of the 'therefore' type may connect only complete sentence patterns. They seem always to come at a distinct juncture, never to substitute for a juncture (28:185.

It is obvious that there is as yet no basis for agreement on defining and classifying subordinate clauses, but this lack of agreement hardly justifies our continuing to use a rule that is demonstrably wrong. The linguists do agree that there is no basis for the rule about putting subordinate ideas into subordinate clauses, but none of them have done more than give the most obvious illustrations of cases where it does not work. One textbook writer, after giving the usual rule, says

> Actually, in many sentences the idea in a subordinated construction is more important than that in the main clause of the sentence. For example, the italicized subordinate clause is the important idea in the following sentence: "He is a politician who tries to be all things to all voters." This linguistic phenomenon, however, is too subtle and complex to warrent a place in our elementary discussion of sentence structure (57:138).

I contend that saying that the subject is "too subtle and complex" is merely a way of avoiding the fact that he does not really understand it himself. Having the most important idea in a subordinate clause is hardly a "linguistic phenomenon." The next two chapters are an analysis of complex sentences and an attempt to explain the errors on which the rule is based.

CHAPTER V

AN ANALYSIS OF THE RULE

A critical look at sentences containing subordinate clauses will help to show that the rule that subordinate clauses must contain subordinate ideas does not describe our language correctly. In sentences containing a noun clause as the subject, direct object, or subjective complement there can be no separation of the idea in the subordinate clause from that of the main clause. In the sentence "That he would never conform to the rules of society was apparent," the weight of the sentence is carried by the subordinate clause. In many cases, if we were to treat all subordinate clauses as though they contained subordinate ideas, we would have no important idea left, as in "What I mean by this sinister reference is that there is a limit to a child's and an adult's endurance in the face of demands to consider himself, his body, and his wishes as evil and dirty, and to his belief in the infallibility of those who pass such judgment." Here the <u>entire</u> idea of the sentence is contained in subordinate clauses, <u>is</u> being the only word not in such a clause.

Adjective clauses, too, often carry much of the meaning of a sentence: "I want a girl who is just like the girl that married dear old Dad." Even when the main idea

is in the main clause, it is usually because the sentence could not possibly be stated in any other way: "Is this the box which the shoes came in?' or "I like the small town where I grew up." The idea in adjective clauses is subordinate only in the sense that any adjective is subordinate to the noun it modifies.

While both noun and adjective clauses are used in the same way that their single-word counterparts are used, the same is not always true of adverb clauses. Only in a general sense does an adverb clause correspond to a single-word adverb by modifying a verb, adjective, or adverb. Instead the importance of the adverb clause lies in the ability of its conjunction to communicate relationships (23:28). In most sentences that relationship can be stated in only one way. Any rearrangement of the ideas contained in the subordinate and main clauses results either in a completely changed meaning or in nonsense. In other sentences it makes no difference which idea is contained in the main clause, as in "I live in the city, whereas he lives in the country" or "While Joe mowed the lawn, Bill trimmed the hedge."

Even this brief look at complex sentences shows that all noun and adjective clauses and most adverb clauses can be eliminated from any possible coverage by this rule. There is only one area yet to be considered. In a few textbook examples the rule does seem to work, as in this sentence:

"When I was ten years old, my father died." The textbook explains that in this case the important idea is "my father died." It then says that if the time is more important, the sentence should read "I was ten years old when my father died." However, there is another factor other than importance of ideas that controls these sentences. Jespersen's explanation, which has apparently been overlooked by all other grammarians and linguists, is this:

> In the former the death is told as a new fact, supposed to be unknown to the hearer; it is natural in a connected story of one's life and answers the question: What happened next?, or What happened when you were 10 years old? In the second expression the hearer is supposed to know that the speaker had lost his father, and the sentence is an answer to the question: When did your father die? or How old were you when your father died? (32:355).

This explanation, applied to other sentences in which relative importance might seem to be a factor, held true; in every case, the main clause introduced new information.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

What has caused the authors of our textbooks to tell us that we must put the main idea in the main clause and subordinate ideas in subordinate clauses? Linguist James Sledd says

> The best that can be said for this widespread belief is that it is too simple to be true, and a more severe criticism is that the doctrine rests on a series of bad puns in which the same labels are carelessly applied to words, thoughts, and things (49:276).

Even the early grammarians mentioned before stressed that in using the terms "subordination," "primary, secondary, and tertiary classes," and "rank," they were speaking of <u>grammatical</u> divisions, not <u>logical</u> ones. However, our textbook writers have been fooled into taking these terms literally and forcing them into a rule to which we are supposed to make our language conform. Another possibility is that the rule is a kind of reversal of the one that tells us to use coordination only for ideas of equal importance. If that rule were construed to mean that <u>only</u> coordination should be used with such ideas, then subordination could be used only with ideas of unequal importance. A third possibility is that the rule is a mixture of two other beliefs. Sweet says (although this too is open to question) that in

the "normal order" of a complex sentence, the dependent clause comes first (53:27). Combining this with the idea that the most emphatic part of a sentence is the last part, grammarians could have "reasoned" their way to our present rule.

Although many of the rules given by our textbooks are inadequate, they cannot be discarded until there is something better to substitute for them. Until grammarians and linguists can agree on some fairly consistent method of analyzing language, we will have to do as well as we can with the explanations in our textbooks, modifying them as it seems necessary. The rules about using coordination for ideas of equal importance and subordination for achieving variety and emphasis can be used if the instructor shows many examples to give students experience in judging written work. Giving a sentence in context is the only effective method of allowing the students to see whether it is varied, emphatic, and appropriate in the way it expresses relationships. However, a rule that does not correctly describe the language is at best worthless and a waste of time for both student and teacher. Since the rule stressing the relative importance of ideas is certainly wrong, it should be dropped.

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