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## Rhetorical and Grammatical Dependency in Adverb Clauses

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Within the last few months, two textbooks have arrived in my mail, a book for freshman classes in its fourth edition and one for basic writing classes in its sixth edition. Outside of the fact that they are far too grammar- and error-oriented to be, in my view, of any real use, they are alike in promoting grammatical fictions that have been current for decades. Here, I want to focus on one example, the assumption that our students need to write fewer simple sentences and more compound and complex ones and the correlative assumption that subordinate clauses actually subordinate in meaning or in rhetorical effect the ideas in them.

The vigorous life enjoyed by these notions prompts me to call attention to two of the best books ever written about grammar and composition, books whose effects seem to have been virtually nonexistent: Kellogg W. Hunt's famous study, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (NCTE Research Report No. 3, 1965) and George L. Dillon's Constructing Texts: Elements of a Theory of Composition and Style (Indiana University Press, 1981).

Those familiar with Hunt's study will recall that he examined the grammatical features of the writing of students at grades 4, 8, and 12 and, for

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## The 1995 Conference

--**Tom Yonkin**

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Dear Ed,

Thank you for organizing and hosting the recent ATEG conference at Penn College. It was my first such conference and I found it informative and interesting in a number of respects. The Professional Development Center afforded a most pleasant and comfortable environment for the conference. I especially appreciated the logistical support from the College -- the refreshments and the delightful lunch at Le Jeune Chef on Friday.

The following are some observations and comments about the conference from the perspective of a secondary teacher:

1. ATEG members are decidedly neither officers nor members of NCTE's fan club. Hooray!
2. The majority of the audience and all of the presenters teach at the college level and are concerned only with problems at that level.

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comparison, articles (not fiction) in Harper's and The Atlantic. Among the schoolchildren, Hunt found that the 4th graders produced 37% more compound sentences than the 12th graders and the 12th graders 23% more dependent clauses than the 4th graders. So far, this would indicate that while increased compounding at the sentence level is not desirable, the increased use of dependent clauses is. However, the "superior adult" writers, as Hunt termed them, wrote only 5% more compound sentences than the 12th graders and only 6% more dependent clauses. In short, the high school seniors were using coordination and subordination at almost the same rate as professional writers of superior ability.

Yet there was, of course, a major difference in quality between the two groups and between the lengths of their sentences. In fact, the T-units of the adults were 40% longer than those of the 12th graders. (A t-unit is an independent clause along with any dependent clauses attached to it.) What accounts for the greater length of the superior adult T-units? "It is not," Hunt wrote, "largely the trifling 6 percent gain in number of subordinate clauses. Development in that respect seems to have stopped at a limit which the average twelfth grader has already approached. The 40 percent gain in T-unit length is due largely instead to the whopping 35 percent gain in clause length. . . . The superior adult packs into his clauses a larger number of words, and, one supposes, a larger number of non-clausal structures" (57).

In short, on the one hand, the compounding of independent clauses is a characteristic of immature, not mature, writing and, on the other, pushing for more dependent clauses is largely a waste of time. In fact, Hunt found that greater clause length, which was caused largely by greater density of noun modification, was the characteristic of the most mature writing -- not an increased number of

clauses. To illustrate this in the writing of college freshmen, here are parts of two essays, one characterized by a very high frequency of coordination and subordination, the other by a very low frequency but by much greater noun modification:

Throughout history, the local hang-out has always been important to the teenage crowd. After school and especially on weekends, droves of youths have traditionally descended on the local drugstore equipped with soda fountain, the corner hamburger joint, the drive-in, the pizza parlor, and more recently, the galleria and the video game arcade. These focal points, then as now, served not only as meeting places, but also as centers for exchanging information, news, and gossip, and have stood as a symbol of the neighborhood gang's ultimate domain over their turf. In my neighborhood, 16th Street between Valencia and Guerrero, The Compound, housed in a renovated firehouse, serves as the nucleus of the local San Francisco punk and new wave scenes and, particularly on a Saturday, attracts a wide variety of interesting and unusual types, individuals one can spend an offbeat afternoon observing and conversing with.

Everyone here on earth has a special talent that they do better than anyone else. For some it may be big important things, but for most it is something small and unimportant to all, but not for the person who does it. Every little thing we do makes us feel special. For me I feel special when I take care of children. It can be hell at times, but the pleasures it has overcomes all the hellish problems.

The first student has written four sentences, three of them simple, and has used only one dependent clause, an adjective clause in an appositive in the last sentence. The second student has written five sentences, all of them complex or compound-complex. The first student has done something our textbooks do not teach. The second student has done what they do teach. (Incidentally, note that of my previous four sentences, the two longer ones are simple and the two shorter ones complex.) With the exception, then, of basic writers and a small minority of regular freshmen, the teaching of coordination and subordination represents a waste of time and, in fact, a misplacing of priorities.

Despite showing that 12th graders use dependent clauses at about the same rate as do superior writers, Hunt provides some interesting data in the details of the kinds of clauses they use. To introduce their adverb clauses, they rely overwhelmingly on three words, if, when, and because. While both the 4th and 12th graders use because at about the same rate, the 4th graders use many more when clauses and the 12th graders many more if clauses (82). But dependent clauses of contrast and concession are virtually absent from the writing of both groups. Although and even though appeared 2 times in the writing of the 4th graders (when appeared 101 times and if 30 times) and 5 times in that of the 12th graders (where when appeared 53 times and if 73 times). The contrastive whereas appeared only twice among the 12th graders and not at all in the earlier grades, and while appeared 13 times in the writing of the 4th graders and 5 times in that of the 12th graders, an indication that it was probably being used to indicate time rather than concession or contrast.

Unfortunately, Hunt does not give us figures on the use of such clauses by the adults, but we may speculate that just as the kinds of subordinate conjunctions used by 4th and 12th graders seems to indicate a maturing thinking process, so the greater intellectual maturity of adults publishing in Harper's and The Atlantic would probably prompt a higher incidence of concessive and contrastive clauses. These are tools used by the writer concerned to weigh competing arguments and to foreground and background different elements of exposition and argument, as in these sentences from a recent New York Times Magazine article:

History can be told from different vantage points. In Henry Kissinger's recent book, "Diplomacy," though there are sharply drawn thumbnail sketches of the human actors, the main players are the nation-states born of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

While only the rare Denny's manager resorted to the extreme of locking out blacks, other variations of the "blackout" practice were commonplace . . .

Which brings me to my second point, that the virtually standard textbook practice of telling students that subordinate clauses are somehow less important or carry less weight or bear less intensity or whatever than independent clauses is, on the whole, incorrect. Again, Hunt exposed the essential fallacy of this notion with a number of obvious examples, concluding, "It is not on grounds of 'meaning' or 'importance,' then, that subordinate clauses can be isolated, but on grounds of formal structure alone" (74). Without belaboring the point, it is obvious that noun clauses ("She said that the President had been shot"), restrictive adjective clauses ("The person who shot the President was acting alone"), and most adverb clauses ("I was upset because the President had been shot") do not in fact subordinate anything to anything, except in a strictly grammatical sense.

In chapter six of Constructing Texts, a book that covers many central issues in the teaching of grammar and composition, Dillon notes that the reader is more likely to feel the effect of rhetorical subordination in adverb clauses when the clauses are in the initial rather than the terminal position in sentences, and that rhetorical subordination is more likely to be felt in introductory clauses expressing concession (though) and condition (if) than others. (More about this in a moment.) Dillon's discussion of subordination and embedding is much too complex to summarize here, but he establishes that the texture of subordination and dependency is much richer than the simplistic and incorrect assertions common to our textbooks.

As far as teaching is concerned, it is clear from Hunt's study that at least one area of grammatical and rhetorical subordination is probably worth teaching -- namely, the relationship of concession. In its simplest and most accessible form, concession is established through clauses beginning with though, although, even though, while, and to a somewhat lesser extent, whereas. The extremely small incidence of these words in the writing of Hunt's 12th graders along with their obvious importance -- as thinking as well as writing devices -- in comparisons

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and arguments strongly suggests that much is to be gained in freshman classes from promoting their use.

One of the effects of concessive clauses -- and one of the few instances in which adverb clauses really do establish relative importance between dependent and superordinate clauses -- can be illustrated through a device like the following.

A friend of yours has spent \$10 on a ticket for a concert, but when he gets there, he finds he has lost his ticket. Now he faces a dilemma. He can either spend \$20 for the concert or he can forget the whole thing. Finally, he comes to a decision. He says, "Although I really wanted to attend this concert, I hate to spend \$20 on it." What has he decided to do?

Students, even in remedial classes, invariably answer the question correctly, and thus the use and effect of concession have been established.

At the same time, it is difficult if not impossible to discuss concessive clauses without also discussing contrast (or opposition) since we use a small group of conjunctions to do both jobs. The most important words here are the following:

but, whereas, while, although (though is an informal equivalent and even though an emphatic equivalent of although)

Related and equally important, although not equally frequent in usage, are these conjuncts and conjunctions:

however, besides, on the other hand; yet, it is true that, while it is true that

The difference between contrast and concession in English grammar and usage seems to be a small but real one, and some fairly fine distinctions are involved (see Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartik, A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language [Longman, 1985], pp. 1098-99). None of this, however, need be taught to native speakers of English, who have imbibed it along with the rest of their knowledge of the language.

At SF State, we have found it very productive to teach contrast and concession in both our basic writing and regular freshman English courses. Beyond that, as Hunt's research strongly suggests, we feel it is a waste of time and even counterproductive to teach coordination and subordination, along with the myths about the rhetorical effects of most dependent clauses.

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3. Most of the presenters concentrated on identifying grammatical problems and/or solving esoteric matters. I suppose such scholarship is necessary to push the envelope of grammatical knowledge, but it bears little relevancy to the reality of the middle and secondary classroom.

4. Very few presentations offered practical solutions for middle and secondary teachers. There were notable exceptions: your workshop, Glenn Swetman's Nine Question Method, and Tony Hunter's non-traditional approach. There is 'stuff' here I can use.

5. If ATEG is truly interested not only in widening its audience and membership to include

middle and secondary teachers but also in making a dent in the grammar problem, its members must reach out to them with practical and workable systems that show students a knowledge of grammar is significant and has a definite connection with their writing. The conference indicated to me that there is sufficient brain power within ATEG to do that.

6. Developing four or five of those systems will ultimately have positive effects on the college level instructors. They will receive a better quality student and will thus be able to do much more advanced work with those students.

I hope you find something of value in these thoughts. If they generate some discussion, I think it would benefit ATEG and its membership.