Subordination as Distinct From Embedding:
Evidence From English and Arabic

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Abstract. Subordination and embedding are two processes of forming non-simple sentences in different languages. But these two processes have been used interchangeably to describe structures which are not really of the same status. As a result, there has been a confusion in terminology. In addition, the two processes have never been distinguished in the literature.

This paper sets to examine how each process is used and what structures it handles. It is felt that a distinction ought to be made between subordination and embedding on structural and functional grounds. Data drawn from English and Arabic seem to support this stance. If this distinction can be established, two objectives will be achieved: (a) the confusion in terminology would be resolved (b) this could be extended to other languages that make use of subordination and embedding in forming non-simple sentences.

00. Both traditional grammar and modern linguistic studies recognise two processes of forming non-simple sentences in English: coordination (which is not the subject of this paper) and subordination. With the advent of transformational grammar a new term has appeared and has come to replace the older one of subordination. Some writers still use the two terms interchangeably. This paper argues that subordination is different from embedding, and consequently, three syntactic processes are employed in forming non-simple sentences, rather than two.

01. In traditional parlance, two major types of sentences are recognised by grammarians and linguists: simple and non-simple sentences. A simple sentence consists of one clause only. A clause is defined as a unit of structure with an identifiable subject and verb and, optionally, an object, adjective, complement, etc. A non-simple sentence, on the other hand, is a sentence that consists of more than one clause.
In traditional grammar, two types of non-simple sentences are recognised: the compound and the complex. A compound sentence is that which results from the coordination of two or more sentences. A complex sentence is one which results from the connection or fusion of two or more sentences by a syntactic process other than coordination. Moreover, a sentence may be compound and complex at the same time. In the following examples, sentences 1 (a) and (b) are compound, 2 (a) and (b) are complex, and 3 is compound-complex. The brackets are used to indicate the sentence of any type.

1. (a) [He doesn’t talk to me] and [I don’t talk to him.]
   (b) [John keeps nagging at me] and [I don’t listen to him.]

2. (a) [One should think carefully] before [he says anything.]
   (b) [I’ll give you the book] [you asked for.]

3. [Lend me your book] and [I’ll give it back to you] whenever [you need it.]

Complex sentences are formed by a process that has come to be known as subordination; a notional term deriving from the fact that one clause is subordinated to another in such sentences.

As mentioned above, with the advent of transformational grammar the term subordination was relinquished and the term embedding came to be used by some linguists. The new term is no less notional than the old one; it refers to the same syntactic structures. Structures handled by subordination or embedding are thus known as subordinate or embedded clauses. Other labels used for the same structures include ‘dependent clauses’ and ‘included sentences’. A mixture of traditional and modern terminology is found in Langacker who points out subordinate clauses being embedded in main clauses. We will come back to this point later on.

Let me mention at this point that the subordinate clause, or a dependent clause in its traditional usage, fulfills a specific function within a larger complex sentence. Thus, it can be the subject, complement, object of a preposition, or modifier of the larger clause, as in the following examples:

4. As soon as it started to rain, all the children began to yell with excitement.
   (Subordinate adverbial clause)

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a. *hina tawaqqafat sayyāratuhu,* 'iṭṭurra al-sā‘īqu 'ilā saḥbihā 'ilā 'aqrabi war-şatin.

“When his car stopped, the driver had to tow it to the nearest workshop.”
(subordinate adverbial caluse)

5. I know that he is honest. (Noun clause: direct object of ‘know’)

a. ya‘taqid ba‘dū-l-‘ulamā‘i 'anna al-zarāfata la taḥtāju 'aktara min 'iṣrīna daqiqatīn li al-nawmi.

“Some scientists believe that a giraffe does not need more than twenty minutes of sleep.” (Noun clause: object of ‘ya‘taqid’ or ‘believe’)

6. A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.  

Oscar Wilde

(Adjective clause modifying ‘man’)

a. ‘a‘ara Fu‘ādun darrājatuhu li al-waladī alladī ya‘lī abu dā‘imān ma‘aḥu. (Adjective clause modifying ‘walad’)

“Fuad lent his bike to the boy whom he always plays with.”

7. (a) As it appeared, John was tackled (b) as he threw the pass (c) that might have saved him.

(a = sentence adverbial  b = adverbial clause  c = adjective clause modifying ‘pass’)


(a = sentence adverbial  b = noun clause, object of ‘aṣṣarra ‘alā  c = adjective clause modifying ṣaxṣ)

Though it was utterly distasteful, Fuad insisted that he would continue to butter up the person who was responsible for the rift between Fuad and his closest friends at work.”

In sentence (4) above, the clause ‘as soon as it started to rain’ serves an adverbial function. Similarly, the Arabic clause ‘hina tawaqqafat sayyāratuhu’ in (4a) serves an adverbial function, too. In sentence (5), the clause ‘that he is honest’ functions as object of the transitive verb ‘known’; similarly, the Arabic noun clause ‘anna al-zarāfata .... al-nawmi’ functions as object of the verb ‘ya‘taqid’. In sentence (6) the relative caluse ‘who knows .... nothing’ serves an adjectival function of modification, i.e. it modifies the antecedent ‘man’. The Arabic clause ‘alladī ya‘lī abu dā‘imān ma‘aḥu’ in (6) also serves an adjectival function. Sentence (7) includes three dependent clauses performing sentential adverbial, adverbial, and adjectival functions, respectively. In (7a), the three clauses perform adverbial, nominal, and adjectival functions, respectively.
02. A closer look at these sentences, however, will show that the dependent clauses within these structures are not of the same status though they are generally viewed as subordinate clauses.

We mentioned earlier (p.2) that the new term 'embedding' replaced the old one 'subordination' in transformational circles. We also mentioned that structures treated under this new process came to be known as embedded clauses. In fact, because of the lack of uniformity in terminology a lost of confusion was evolved; thus in the works of some linguists(4) we find an exclusive use of the term 'embedding'. In the works of some other linguists(5) the term 'subordination' is used exclusively. Still in the works of the third group, especially relatively recent works(6) the two terms are used interchangeably, though in the case of Brown & Miller, the term 'subordination' is used once(7) while the other term 'embedding' is used regularly through the book. Another writer, Jeanne Ambrose-Grillet, in Glossary of T.B.(8) uses the term 'embedding' as synonymous to 'nesting'. He also considers embedding as a simple case of subordination, but he doesn't mention 'subordination' anywhere in his Glossary.

Whatever the case may be, the two terms are used to describe structures like those above and the following ones:

8. a. The claim [that dinosaurs still exist] is untrue.
   b. Mary believes [that dinosaurs still exist].

9. a. [Whenever she calls], she brings her children with her.
   b. [Whether she is happy or sad], she still manages to survive.
   c. A carpenter needs some tools [in order that he can do his job properly].


It is felt that a distinction ought to be made between subordination and embedding. This distinction can be substantiated both structurally and functionally.

Structurally, a subordinate clause in English may be part of the verb phrase (VP) or part of the matrix sentence; this is a controversial issue. Anyway, if it is part of the VP, it would be dominated by the VP node in a tree-diagram. Consider the phrase marker (PM) for (9a):

```
Subordination

S
 /\  
 VP
 /  
 NP
  /\  
   V
    /\  
     NP
      /\  
       V
        /\  
         NP
          /\  
           V
            /\  
             PP
              /\  
                 Adv. Cl
```

The adverbial clause in the above diagram serves an adverbial function of time. If it is part of the matrix clause, it would be dominated by the S node, as in the following phrase marker for (9a):

```
S
 /\  
 VP
 /  
 NP
  /\  
   V
    /\  
     NP
      /\  
       V
        /\  
         NP
          /\  
           V
            /\  
             PP
              /\  
                 Adv. Cl
```

In the above diagram the clause 'whenever she calls' is immediately dominated by the higher S node; it performs an ad-sentential function.

By contrast, an embedded clause is an integral part of the matrix sentence. In formal terms, an embedded clause may be either an NP or a constituent of the NP. This means that the embedded clause is directly dominated by its higher NP node in a tree diagram. Consider the following phrase markers for sentences (8a) and (8b), respectively:

```
S
 /\  
 VP
 /  
 NP
  /\  
   V
    /\  
     NP
      /\  
       V
        /\  
         NP
          /\  
           V
            /\  
             PP
              /\  
                 Adv. Cl
```

In the above diagram the clause 'whenever she calls' is immediately dominated by the higher S node; it performs an ad-sentential function.
In diagram (8a') above, the embedded relative clause 'that dinosaurs still exist' performs an adjectival function; it modifies the antecedent head 'claim' and constitutes an integral part of the subject NP, and the entire construction is a topic NP. By integral is meant that any movement of the element of a major constituent will result in ungrammaticality, as in (8c) and (8c') below:

*8c. The claim is untrue that dinosaurs still exist.
*8c. That dinosaurs still exist the claim is untrue.

In diagram (8b'), the embedded clause serves as the grammatical object of the main clause. This embedded clause is part of, and consequently dominated by, the higher NP node.
Another difference between a subordinate clause and an embedded one can be seen in the order of the clause in relation to the matrix sentence. Since the subordinate clause constitutes part of the matrix sentence and performs an adverbial ad-sentential function, it may show up in sentence-initial, medial, or final position, as in 9(a), (b), and (c) below:

9. a. His mother was advised to stay in bed because she was ill.
    b. Because she was ill, his mother was advised to stay in bed.
    c. His mother, because she was ill, was advised to stay in bed.

The same is true of the Arabic subordinate clauses:

10. a. al-sayyārātu muriḥatun rugma 'annahā qadīmatun.
    "The car is comfortable although it is old."
    b. rugma 'anna al-sayyārāta qadīmatun fa-hiya muriḥatun.
    c. al-sayyārātu, rugma 'annahā qadīmatun, fa-hiya muriḥatun.

By comparison, an embedded clause does not enjoy this freedom of movement; it is an integral part of the NP and cannot move away from it. Such movement will result in ungrammaticality, as in (8c) and (8c') above and in (11a) and (11b) below:

11. I don't know what angered her.
*a. What angered her I don't know.
*b. What I don't know angered her.

The same is true in the case of the embedded clause in Arabic. Consider the ungrammaticality of (12a) and (12b) below:

12. ma‘rifun min al-jamī‘ī ‘anna al-rajula jayyidun.
    "It is known to all that the man is good."
    *a. ma‘rifun ‘anna al-rajula min al-jamī‘ī jayyidun.
    *“It is known that the man to all is good."
    *b. ma‘rifun ‘anna al-rajula jayyidun min al-jamī‘ī.
    *It is known that the man is good to all.”

It should be mentioned, however, that the English translation of (12b) is grammatical, but the meaning is totally different. Thus, in (12b) the adjective ‘good’ is associated with the prepositional phrase ‘to all’; in (12) the adjective is associated with, and describes, ‘man’.

A third difference between a subordinate clause and an embedded one can be seen in the syntactic behavior of each clause. Thus, an embedded clause may always be negated (as in 13) whereas it is quite common to find a subordinate clause which may not be negated, as in the following sentences:
13. Medical researchers have long been seeking a cure for a disease that doesn’t spare the lives of its victims.

14. a. Switch off the lights before you go to bed.
   b. Switch off the lights before you don’t go to bed.

15. a. I tried to speak politely with him although he offended me.
   b. I tried to speak politely with him although he didn’t offend me.

16. a. I will give you the paper as soon as I finish reading it.
   b. I will give you the paper as soon as I don’t finish reading it.

The same applied to Arabic constructions where subordinate clauses may not be negated. Consider these sentences:

17. a. fakkir jayyidan qabla ‘an tuqdima ‘alā ‘ayyi ṣay ‘in.
   “Think carefully before you do anything.”
   b. fakkir jayyidan qabla ‘an lā tuqdima ‘alā ‘ayyi ṣay ‘in.
   “Think carefully before you don’t do anything.”

18. a. ʿālij al-xaṭaʿa ḥayṭumā tajidhu.
   “Deal with any wrong action wherever you find it.”
   b. ʿālij al-xaṭaʿa ḥayṭumā lā tajidhu.
   “Deal with any wrong action wherever you don’t find it.”

19. a. ʾidā ʿaradta ‘an tutāc fa-sal mā yustaṭāc.
   “If you want to be obeyed, then ask for the possible.”
   b. ʾidā ʿaradta ‘an lā tutāc fa-sal mā yustaṭāc.
   “If you don’t want to be obeyed, then ask for the possible.”

Thus, the negation of subordinate clauses in the above English and Arabic constructions results not only in ungrammaticality but also in semantic or logical oddity.

A fourth difference, emanating from the preceding point, can be seen with regard to the scope of negation. The negation of the embedded clause usually spans the entire construction which includes that clause; at the same time, the negation of the matrix sentence entails the negation of the embedded clause. Thus, the two readings of sentence (20) below are equivalent in meaning, or at least in their truth-value:

20. a. I don’t believe that she is prejudiced.
   b. I believe that she is not prejudiced.

Arabic exhibits the same phenomenon in this area. Consider the two readings of sentence (21) below:

21. a. la ʾaḍunnū ḥannahu kaḍibūn
   “I don’t think that he is a liar.”
b) 'aqlunnu 'annahu gayru kaqibin.
   "I think that he is not a liar."
   (Note that in 21b), we normally use "şadiq" instead of gayr kaqib.)

   However, the negation of a subordinate clause would yield a totally different
   meaning. Observe the semantic difference between (a) and (b) of sentence (22),
   though they are logically equivalent:

   22. a. I don't believe her because she is prejudiced.
   b. I believe her because she is not prejudiced.

   In (22b), the main clause is emphasized; thus, 'believing' takes place, as it were.
   In (22a), the subordinate clause is emphasized; thus, she is already prejudiced. The
   same applied to (a) and (b) of the Arabic sentence (23):

   23. a. lā 'uhibbuhu li'anna hu maqrūrun.
       "I don't like him because he is self-conceited."
   b. 'uhibbuhu li'anna hu laysa maqrūran (i.e. mutawādi').
       "I like him because he is not self-conceited, i.e. humble."

   A further difference between subordination and embedding can be seen in the
   area of coordination. Thus, while it is possible to coordinate two embedded clauses
   or two subordinate ones, it is not possible to conjoin an embedded clause and a sub-
   ordinate one at the same time. The reason is fairly obvious: coordination conjoins
   two syntactically equivalent units or structures. Consider the grammaticality of (24
   a + b) and the ungrammaticality of (25 a + b) below:

   24. a. I don't know what she said or why she said it.
   b. You can call on us if you like and whenever you like.
   25. *a. As soon as he read the paper and that he wanted, he got up and left in
            a hurry.
   *b. If you want to have a nice job and that you will, you should work hard
       towards it.

   The same thing can be said of the Arabic sentences (26) and (27) below: the
   former is gramatical while the later is not:

   26. a. lā 'ařifu 'ayna yaskunu 'aw māqā ya'malu.
       "I don't know where he lives or what he does."
   b. ma'ä a'anni muhi'jun wa lā 'amliku dirhaman, fa-lan 'āţluba min qālika
       al-baxili.
       "Although I am in need and I am penniless, I will not ask that miser."
27. *a. 'in sa'alta ma'rufan wa 'anta turidu dālika, fas'al bi-'adabin.
   *"If you ask for a favor and that you want, ask politely."

   *b. 'uškur Allāha ba'da 'an ta'kula wa māḏa ta'kul.
   *"Thank the Lord after you eat and what you eat."

Finally, subordination differs from embedding in the number of formal devices employed; in English and in Arabic, the number of subordinators is quite large and heterogeneous.\(^{(10)}\) By contrast, the number of embedders is relatively small, including a somewhat closed set of relative pronouns and complementizers such as that and to cited in sentence (28) below. Arabic embedders are more-or-less equivalents of that in English, as in (29) below:

28. a. I think (that) the recession is bottoming out.
   b. He submitted a summary of the story (that) he read.
   c. To make such a dreadful accusation infuriates me.

29. a. 'aḍunnu 'anna al-mas'alatna wādihatun.
   *"I think that the case is obvious."

   b. 'an taḍriba man huwa 'ašgaru minka sinnan 'aybun 'alayka.
   *"To hit someone (who is) younger than you is quite shameful."

   c. marartu bi-waladin ḍuriba.
   *"I passed by a boy who was beaten."

It is evident that these complementizers and relative pronouns can be deleted in English embedded clauses, without violating the grammaticality of the sentence. This is indicated by the parentheses in (28) above. In Arabic, it is possible to delete such elements, but the resulting structure would be totally different from the original with the complementizer. Thus, (29a) is traditionally parsed as a sentence consisting of subject-verb as one unit "'aḍunnu" (literally: I think) and a nominal clause functioning as the direct object of the verb 'yaḍunnu" (literally: he thinks). This embedded clause, which begins with the complementizer 'anna 'that', consists of the topic 'al-mas'alat' and the comment 'wādiḥat'. Deletion of 'anna' would yield a SIMPLE sentence with a ditransitive verb 'yaḍunnu', thus inflecting the two elements 'al-mas'alat' and 'wādiḥat' in the accusative, marked with the /-a/ or /-an/ for the definite and indefinite, respectively. However, it is quite possible to delete the complementizer if the first NP is indefinite, as it is the case in (29c) above.

On the other hand, omission of the subordinators results in ungrammaticality in both English and Arabic, as in (30b), (31b), (32b), and (33b) below:

\(^{(10)}\) Quirk, pp. 313-15.
30. a. I'll go wherever you go.
   *b. I'll go you go.
31. a. Don't talk unless you are asked to.
   *b. Don't talk you are talked to.
32. a. 'in tadrus tanjah.
   * "If you study, you will pass."
   *b. tadrus tanjah.
   "Study, you will pass.
33. a. là ’astaṭίṭu al-‘amala li‘anni mut‘abun.
   "I can't work because I am tired."
   *b. là ’astaṭίṭu al-‘amala ‘anā mut‘abun.
   "I can’t work I am tired."

03. Summary and Conclusion. In the preceding pages, an attempt was made to distinguish between subordination and embedding as two distinct processes, rather than one, of forming non-simple sentences in English and Arabic. Together with coordination, three processes ought to be recognized. The data drawn from both systems seem to provide ample synthetic evidence of treating the two processes as different from each other. This is simply because clauses which are constituents of NPs—and they are constituents of constituents of sentences—behave in a manner which is different from that of clauses which are constituents of sentences. These seem to be different categories. If our conclusion is correct in the case of English and Arabic, there is sufficient ground to bolster such a distinction and extend it to other languages that make use of these syntactic processes. Probably, other syntactic constructions which include such subordinate and embedded clauses may be reconsidered. It is also hoped that this piece of research has offered something towards solving the riddle of confused terminology.
الإلفاظ والدمج في العربية والإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث: يُعد الإلفاظ والدمج من الطرق المستخدمة في تكوين الجمل غير البسيطة في اللغات الإنسانية، وتختلف كل لغة عن الأخرى في طريقة استخدام هاتين العمليتين اللغويتين. ورغم كثرة استخدام هاتين الطرقتين، السبب عدم التمييز بينهما من حيث البنية أو العمل النحو، فكثيراً ما يُستخدم الإلفاظ بمعنى الدمج أو الدمج بمعنى الإلفاظ، ما أسفر عن تشويش في استخدام اللفظتين وعن الخلط في التراكيب النحوية.

وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إنعاق النظر في وظيفة كل طريقة وأنواع التراكيب التي تُخضع لكل منها، مستعينة بنماذج لغوية من التراكيب العربية والإنجليزية نجاة الوصول إلى الغاية المرجوة، إلا وهي اختلاف الإلفاظ عن الدمج من حيث البنيات، وكذلك المعنى. كما تهدف إلى حل مسألة الخلط اللغوي الناجم عن استخدام الكلمتين، وتحمل إلى ذلك أن هاتين الطرقتين يمكن تعميمها على لغات أخرى تستخدمها في تكوين الجمل المعقدة أو المركبة.