Understanding the Nature of Sentence Complexity in English

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to shed light on the notion of sentence complexity in the English language. It introduces a clear definition of the notion of sentence. It also provides a detailed explanation of the relationships between clauses, linking and subordination. Furthermore, it deals with the types of interdependency which are paratactic and hypotactic relationships in addition to the logico-semantic relationships between clauses as expansion and projection.

Keywords: sentence complexity, paratactic relationship, hypotactic relationship, expansion, projection.

ملخص: يقدم هذا البحث نظرة عامة عن الجملة في اللغة الانجليزية و تعقيداتها من خلال تقديم تعريف واضح لمصطلح الجملة مع ذكر أنواعها المختلفة و والتي هي كالتالي، الجملة البسيطة و الجملة المعقدة والجملة المركبة .كما تقدم هذه الدراسة شرحاً مفصلاً للعلاقات بين العبارات والتي هي الربط و التبعية .كما تذكر الدراسة أنواع الاعتماد المتبادل بين العبارات، والمتمثلة في علاقات التجاور والتلامس و نضيف إلى ذلك علاقات المنطق الدلالي بين العبارات، والمتمثلة في علاقات التوسع وعلاقات الإسقاط.

كلمات دالة: تعقيد الجملة ،علاقات التجاور، علاقات التلامس ،التوسيع ، الاسقاط.

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1. Introduction

Syntax is concerned with the structure of sentences. It deals with the order or arrangement of words within a sentence, or how small units within the sentence, words, phrases and clauses are combined together to form larger units. Syntax is concerned with analyzing the sentence and its components and nothing above the sentence. For Turner (1973), the main purpose behind syntactic studies is detecting and analyzing ambiguity. For him, syntactic studies make the students of stylistics familiar with further areas of choice in language. Syntax is the set of rules or principles that govern how words are put together to form phrases and well-formed sequences of words.

2. The Notion of Sentence

Carter and McCarthy (2006) define the sentence as a unit of written grammar which is normally easily identified by an initial capital letter on the first word and a full stop after the last word. A sentence can be a single word or a group of words. It can express a statement, a command, a question, or an exclamation (Onions, 1965). The sentence "I am an engineer." contains neither negation nor a question. Therefore, it is as a declarative sentence or a statement. In the sentence "Speak!", the subject 'you' is hidden. It has the meaning of a command. However, the sentence "How do you do?" ends with a question mark, so it is a question. Whereas, "How it thunders!" ends with an exclamation point because it is an exclamation. Concerning sentence grammatical classification in English, there are four main types of sentences.

2.1 Simple Sentences

A Simple sentence is a sentence that contains only one clause; it includes the elements: subject, verb, object, adverbial … etc (Quirk et al., 1985). It has four main types; first, declaratives; they refer to the normal case of sentences in which the subject generally precedes the verb: *E.g.* "Pauline gave Tom a digital watch for his birthday". Second, interrogatives; they are questions. In English, there are two

types of questions, 'Yes/No' questions in which the operator is placed in front of the subject: *E.g.* "Did Pauline give Tom a digital watch for his birthday?" The second type of questions is 'Wh-questions' in which the 'Wh-word' is placed initially: *E.g.* "What did Pauline give Tom for his birthday?" Third, another type of simple sentences is imperatives in which the subject is omitted. Also, the verb has the base form: *E.g.* "Give me a digital watch for my birthday!". Fourth, the other type is exclamative; this type of sentences generally begins with what or how, and it also usually takes subject-verb order: *E.g.* "What a fine watch he received for his birthday!".

2.2 Compound Sentences

The compound sentence includes two independent clauses (each of them can stand by itself). These two clauses are generally linked by a conjunction or a connector (Eckersly & Eckersly, 1972). Crystal (1996) defines the compound sentence as a sentence with two (or more) main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. In compound sentences, both clauses are equal in rank. In this kind of sentences, the subject or the auxiliary verb or both may be omitted in the second clause if they are the same as those in the first clause.

2.3 Complex Sentences

Complex sentences are another kind; this type of sentence also consists of two clauses joined together, but in this case not both of them are independent clauses. One of them is a main clause whereas the other is a subordinate clause. One clause can stand by itself whereas the second cannot (Palmer, 1972).

3. Types of Relations between Clauses

Clauses can be linked in two different ways. The first one is structural, and it includes two basic kinds of relations between clauses: binding and linking (Lock, 1996). In linking, the two clauses are of equal position either dependent or independent to each other. The two clauses can be linked either by a semicolon, a dash between them or

by a linking conjunction (and, but, or, etc.). Quirk et al (1992, p .720) state that "One of the two main devices for linking clauses together within the same sentence is that of coordination". This type of relations is used when the two clauses contain information of the same importance. In subordination (binding), the two clauses are unequal, i.e., one of the clauses is dependent while the second is independent. In this case, the two clauses can be linked either by binding conjunctions such as 'although', 'if', 'and', 'because' or by 'wh-words' such as 'who' and 'which'. Quirk et al (1992, p.270) define subordination as follows: "subordination is a non-symmetrical relation, holding between two clauses X and Y in such a way that Y is a constituent or part of X".

3.1 Types of Interdependency

With regard to terminology, an independent clause is also called a paratactic clause, and a dependent clause a hypotactic clause. Likewise, a compound sentence is known as a paratactic construction, whereas a complex sentence is considered as a hypotactic construction.

a. Paratixis: Simply defined, parataxis is the relation between two elements of equal status, one initiating and the other continuing.

b. Hypotaxis: Hypotaxis is the relation between a dependent element and its dominant. In Halliday's terms (1985, p.198), hypotaxis is "the binding of elements of unequal status. The dominant element is free, but the dependent element is not".

3.2 The Logico-Semantic Relationships between Clauses

The type of logico-semantic relation between clauses depends on the kind of the message developed in the subordinate clause (exemplification, addition, time relation, space relation, cause, quoting, reporting …etc). Parataxis and hypotaxis are the two basic forms that can be taken by logical relations. This range of logical

relationships can be categorized into two main categories: expansion and projection (Halliday & Mettheissen, 2014):

a. Expansion: Expansion means that the secondary clause expands the primary clause in different ways: elaboration, exposition, exemplification, classification… etc.

b. Projection: Projection may be a representation of the content of a 'mental' clause – what is thought; we call such projections ideas. It may also be a representation of the content of a 'verbal' clause – what is said; we call such projections locutions.

4. The Nature of Complex Sentences

A complex sentence is the type of sentence that consists of only one main clause plus one or more subordinate clauses functioning as elements in the sentence (Garcia, 2002). The relationship between these two clauses is referred to as subordination. Wright and Hope (1996, p.140) state that ''Subordinate clauses are very often used in grammar to describe a hierarchic structure of clauses within the complex sentence which has at least two clauses: a main clause and (one or more) subordinate clauses''.

Also, Quirk et al. (1985) maintain that a complex sentence is generally composed of two or more clauses. A main clause can be considered as a complete and meaningful sentence because it can stand by itself. The second is called 'subordinate clause' and is dependent on the main clause. Strumph and Douglas (1999, p.341) point out that "the main clause expresses the principal idea of the statement," and that "the subordinate clause expresses an enhancing or modifying idea; its role is to support the main clause." There are special connectors used for linking the main clause to the subordinate clause; these are called subordinating conjunctions such as 'as', 'if', 'that', etc.

The clauses that are the constituent elements of the complex sentence are of different types and generally have different functions in the sentence. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) classify clauses into three

types: finite, non-finite and verbless clauses. A finite clause is named after the verb in this clause which is generally a finite verb phrase. This type includes simple sentences. A non-finite clause is also named after its verb which is generally a non-finite. A verbless clause is a clause which contains no verb element. To sum up, complex sentences are generally composed of two clauses: a main clause and a subordinating one.

5. The Concept of Complexity in Stylistics

Complexity in literary works can manifest in two different shapes. The first type of complexity is manifested through non-projection. This type of complexity is usually clear and can be directly detected. Nevertheless, the second type of complexity is more difficult to detect since it is less transparent than the first. This type of complexity is used on purpose or projected. As far as stylistics deals with the variation of style in use, the impact of complexity, whether predictable or not, increases in this regard. Fabb (2002) and Clay (2005) claim that complexity may reveal a lot by implicating sometimes the nature of the characters or hinting at the intended themes at other times. In this respect, many scholars have dealt with complexity in a variety of literary and non-literary texts resulting in the fact that structure complexity relates highly to the semantic intensity of a text. Fabb (2002), accordingly, suggests that literary texts have two types of form: explicit and implicit or generated form. The first type is represented in the explicit meaning of narrative framework; the second is manifested in the meaning generated by the form of the literary work which needs to be identified by the reader. Stylistic complexity, as found mainly in the second type, shows itself in various shapes that are almost in hierarchical relationships.

Bellard (1992, p.18) assures that sentence structure is a very "revealing aspect of style". Knowing about the structure of the sentence helps in describing a particular author's style in recognizing a character's behavior and in determining whether this style is formal or informal. He further suggests that when there is an explicit relation

between the stylistic structure and the plot, this will need less inference than if there is a contrastive relation between them leading to a sudden type of complexity. In a similar vein, Jucker (1992) believes that stylistic complexity might result from sentence length which results in turn from pre and post modifications represented in the form of noun phrases. He suggests that such type of complexity requires a kind of inference behind the purpose of the author. Dámová (2007, p.48) states that the grammatical constructions of English are "as distinctive as those of lexis", and the complexity of sentences which might result out of long sentences, embedded clauses, or the unusual word order flows to the meaning of the text. Wales (2011) and Furlong (2014) also maintain that stylistic complexity is an important factor that gives rise to implicatures about the sophistication in the author's thoughts; and the variation in syntactic structure can suggest and/or reflect the real associations in the literary work. In fact, sentence complexity is frequently a sign of mental complexity.

6. Models for Analyzing Sentence Complexity

Several models were developed by different scholars in order to analyze sentence complexity. The following models are the most important among many of them:

6.1 Leech and Short's Model

Leech and Short (2007) claim that complex sentences are generally a result of   subordination since it is the major device for linking ideas together in a complex sentence. For them (Leech and Short, ibid), this type of sentences is utilized when the author wants to present a complex structure of ideas. Hence, in a complex sentence, the main clause gives the principle information and the subordinate clause adds extra information. In general, clauses are divided into main and subordinate. The subordinate clauses are divided into finite, non-finite and verbless clauses.

In their model of analysis, Leech and Short (2007) suggest a checklist. This checklist includes a list of questions to be answered by a

stylistician. The answers of these questions will form the data that will be examined to find the literary effect of each passage. This checklist is devised in order to help stylisticians collect the data of analysis in a systematic way. The checklist includes information about four kinds of categories:

1. Lexical categories

2. Grammatical categories

3. Figures of speech

4. Context and cohesion

Sentence complexity is included within the grammatical categories. Five questions are raised about such kind of complexity:

1. Do sentences on the whole have a simple or a complex structure?

2. What is the average sentence length (in number of words)?

3. What is the ratio dependent to independent clauses?

4. Does complexity vary strikingly from one sentence to another?

5. Is complexity mainly due to coordination, subordination, or parataxis (juxtaposition of clauses or other equivalent structures)?

Leech and Short (ibid) took a sample paragraph from Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Sharer*. Then, they applied their model of analysis on this paragraph. They first scored sentence length for each of the seven sentences of the paragraph, and then they tried to give an explanation of the possible effects of placing the shortest sentence at the end of the paragraph. After that, they tried to describe sentence complexity. They tried to explain the possible artistic justification behind such a structure: the structure might be used to "imitate the movement from the observer's eye towards the distance" (Leech and Short, 2007, p. 56). They designed a table and involved all the data they gathered using their suggested checklist: within the grammatical data, they

scored the number of the independent clauses, for example (10), and the number of dependent clauses, for example (28), and calculated the ratio of dependent to independent clauses, which is (2.8).

6.2 Halliday and Mattheissen's Model (Systemic Functional Grammar)

Halliday and Mattheissen (2014) developed a model named 'systemic functional grammar' (SFG). This model is extremely systemic. For them, language is the resource of meaning. In SFG, Halliday and Mattheissen (2014) use a different way when dealing with elements in grammar. They have recourse to another term to describe the notion of a sentence; their term is 'a clause complex'. The predicator is the most essential constituent of the clause; in the normal case; the number of clauses in a sentence is the same to the number of predicators, as in the following example, the sentence: "He shouted, laughed, cried, and finally fell down the stairs." has four clauses; the missing subjects for the three subsequent clauses are understood to be 'he' in the first clause.

According to Halliday and Mattheissen's model (SFG), there are three types of sentences:

a- *Simplex sentence:* A sentence that contains only one clause.
b- *Compound sentence:* A sentence with one or more independent clauses following the first clause.
c- *Complex sentence:* A sentence that contains one or more dependent clauses in relation to the main clause.

In Halliday and Mattheissen's terms, an independent clause is referred to as paratactic clause. Also, a compound sentence is called a paratactic construction. However, the complex sentence is called hypotactic construction.

Paratixis refers to the logical interdependency between clauses where the interdependents are of equal status and this is what is referred to as coordination in generative grammar. If two clauses are related

paratactically, the primary one is initiating, and the secondary one is continuing: "I switched on my TV set, and there was a program about Scotland".

Hypotaxis refers to the logical interdependency between clauses where the interdependants are of unequal status. Thus, one of the clauses can be seen as a head being modified by the other(s). If two clauses are related hypotactically, the primary one is dominant, and the secondary one is dependent which is referred to as subordination in traditional grammar.

7. Conclusion

In the English language, there are three types of sentences: simple, compound and complex. Each sentence type has its place and its usage. On the one hand, academic writing relies heavily on compound sentences to build arguments and relate ideas whereas complex sentences are used more in literary works to express complex series of events. On the other hand, simple sentences are generally easy ways to highlight key points. In a nutshell, once the writer is aware of the different types of sentence and their usage, s/he can then choose and correctly punctuate the most helpful type of sentences for the expression of his/her ideas .

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