

A Preliminary Corpus-Based Study on Genre-Specific Features in Restrictive Relative Clauses

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Abstract

Current grammar pedagogy requires English teachers to know and teach accurate use conditions and native-speakers' preferences. English teachers are also expected to be familiar with such suprasentential or discourse-level features as genres or topics in order to instruct grammar in context. The present article reports on a preliminary corpus-based analysis on native-speakers' preferences of relative pronoun deletion/retention in restrictive relative clauses. Two different genres, letters exchanged between magazine editors and readers published in *The Humanist* and scientific articles in *Scientific American*, were selected and investigated as linguistic corpora. The present study revealed that native-speakers' preferences of relative pronoun deletion/retention are affected by these genres.

1. Introduction

One of the major issues in grammar pedagogy has been the instructional balance between prescriptive and descriptive grammars in classroom implementations (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999). Traditional grammar pedagogy, which has often been described as rule-based and single-sentence oriented, tends to overemphasize prescriptive rules and underestimate such functional aspects of language as discourse or context features (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999; Nelson 1993). Thus, several pedagogical implications were advocated in the past. For instance, Ellis (1993, 1995), Fotos (1993, 1994), Rutherford (1987), Sharwood Smith (1988), and Yip (1994) claimed that grammatical consciousness-raising or input analysis exercises should be

incorporated into classroom instructions. In addition, Celce-Murcia (1991a, 1991b) and DeCarrico (2000) suggested that grammar teachers teach grammar in a discourse context. Descriptive, functional aspects of grammar in instructional materials and activities became primary characteristics in current grammar pedagogy. Accordingly, today's English teachers are required to be familiar with and to be able to teach not only accurate sentential form and meaning but also accurate use of a sentence at suprasentential, discourse level (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999; Conrad 2000; DeCarrico 2000). Furthermore, English teachers are also expected to be able to explain "why speakers of English choose to use one form rather than another when both forms have more or less the same grammatical or lexical meaning" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999:5).

A relative clause in English, "a type of complex postnominal adjectival modifier used in both written and spoken English" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999:571), is said to have two main functions: to modify a noun and to give detailed information about the person or thing the noun refers to (e.g. Thomson & Martinet 1986). Generally, relative clauses in English follow the nouns they modify and are introduced by such a relative pronoun as 'who,' 'which,' or 'that.' However, when a relative pronoun is not placed in the subject position, the relative pronoun can be deleted in restrictive relative clauses. Thus, as we can see in Example A below, all of these sentences are grammatical without relative pronouns.

- Example A:
- a. He is the guy I met yesterday.
 - b. He is the guy I gave a book to.
 - c. He is the guy I took a picture of.

Hurford (1994) mentions that since we can use a relative pronoun 'that' before a relative clause in each sentence above, "the relative pronoun can be omitted altogether anywhere where 'that' can be used, except when the 'shared' position inside the relative clause is the subject position" (219). Accordingly, it is possible to delete the relative pronoun that replaces an object of a verb or a preposition altogether except the case that "the preposition has not been fronted along with the relativized object" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999:581). Therefore, it is practically possible to delete the relative pronoun in sentence (d) only (see Example B). Sentence (g) is ungrammatical because, as DeCarrico (2000) points out, there is the 'structural gap' that has to be filled up by moving 'whom' to the beginning of the clause. In order to make the sentence (g) grammatical, we should either place 'about' right after 'talked' or insert 'whom' after the preposition 'about' so that the preposition is placed right next to the relative pronoun.

- Example B:
- d. The guy whom (or that) he talked about is Tom.
 - e. The guy about whom he talked is Tom.
 - f. The guy he talked about is Tom.
 - g. *The guy about he talked is Tom.

Although a few structural restrictions can be found in the relative pronoun deletion, whether we should delete or retain relative pronouns in restrictive relative clauses has been left unclarified. In fact, most of the grammar reference books and textbooks touch on the relative pronoun deletion although they merely claim that deletion is more preferable in speaking than writing, and that one of the main reasons why deletion is preferred in speaking is that speaking, in general, is less formal in style than writing (see Azar 1992, 1999; Hurford 1994; Thomson & Martinet 1986). In addition to the discourse modality (speaking vs. writing) and formality of respective discourse, however, there may be some other factors involved in the relative pronoun deletion and retention in writing. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), one possible factor is a usage tendency or preference affected by discourse genres or topics, and the other is the animacy or humanness of the referent. The present article reports on a preliminary corpus analysis on native-speakers' preference of relative pronoun deletion/retention in relation to discourse-genre specific features. Based on research findings, some implications for English teachers are discussed.

2. Research Background

Olofsson (1981) examined the Brown University corpus to clarify lexical co-occurrence in relative clauses. An interesting finding of the study is the preference to use 'that' for the relativized subject found in the relative clauses including body parts as head nouns. The study also reported that when 'every' was used to modify the head noun, the relativized object was always deleted as in 'Every student I met two days ago studied English very hard.' Besides these findings, three syntactic environments in which a certain relative pronoun is preferred over another are also presented: (a) 'that' is preferred when there is relativized nonhuman [- human] subject; (b) relative pronoun is preferably deleted when there is relativized nonhuman [- human] object; and (c) 'which' is preferred when there is relativized prepositional object. Even though these environments seem to be valid, Olofsson did not take into consideration discourse genres or topics that might change one or more of the above environments.

The structural environment (a) was not considered relevant to the present study because the relative pronoun deletion is not possible for the relativized subject as we have previously discussed. As for (c), it is, of course, impossible to find the relative pronoun deletion when the preposition has been fronted along with the relative pronoun. However, the use of 'that' or the relative pronoun deletion is an option when the preposition has not been fronted along with the relative pronoun. As for (b), since discourse genres or topics were not fully investigated in the Olofsson's study, it is probable that the retention of the relative pronoun over deletion may be preferred in different discourse genres or topics. On the basis of these speculations, an attempt was made to examine the relative pronoun deletion and retention in restrictive relative clauses using such different linguistic corpora as letters exchanged between magazine editors and readers published in *The Humanist* and scientific articles in *Scientific American*. Examined texts from *The Humanist* and *Scientific American* were randomly selected from issues published in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Approximately, a total of 20,000 words were investigated.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Letters in *The Humanist*

A corpus analysis on the letters exchanged between editors and readers of *The Humanist* revealed that the deletion of the relative pronoun is preferred when the relative pronoun has a [- human] antecedent. Thus, the structural environment (b) in the Olofsson's study was confirmed. Excerpts from the letters in *The Humanist* are as follows. As we can see in these excerpts, the relative pronoun deletion is applied in a restrictive relative clause that has a [- human] relativized object.

"Paul Jackson's "Jury Nullification" in the January/February 1999 issue is the worst idea I have ever seen in the Humanist."

(DeTar 1999:2)

"... and his enthusiastic endorsement of U.S. militarism abroad makes it difficult to exaggerate his bellicosity (an enthusiasm he shares with the current administration, alas)."

(Edwards 1999:2)

"But even closer to the bone: the comic passage Swomley cited in error has since been echoed by Bush's cavalier mockery, in the opening issue of Talk magazine, of Karla Faye Tucker and her execution."

(Edwards 1999:2)

"Tucker Carlson reported Bush sneering at Tucker's plea for clemency (even making up things she never said) to show how macho tough he is when it comes to state murder."

(Edwards 1999:2)

There is only one exceptional sentence, however, which retains 'that' even though its relative clause has a relativized [- human] object. What follows is an excerpt that shows this exception.

"Far too much of thinking about the next century is concerned with predictions of the benefits that we will get from new technologies."

(Burton 1999:2)

Although the relative pronoun 'that' is not deleted in the excerpt above, the fact that any other relative pronouns for the relativized [-human] object are deleted illustrates that the relative pronoun deletion is more preferable than retention in the specific discourse genre 'letters' in *The Humanist*.

Furthermore, the Olofsson's structural environment (c) was also confirmed in the corpus analysis on *The Humanist*. Namely, every preposition is fronted along with the relative pronoun that functions as an object of the preposition, and thus the relative pronoun (i.e. *which*) is retained as in the following excerpt.

"Swomley quoted a small portion of a Texas Observer article by Lucius Lomax in which Governor George W. Bush is described as signing death warrants for Texas prison inmates scheduled for execution and asking his aide such questions as, "They're not white, are they?"

(Edwards 1999:2)

3.2. Scientific Articles in *Scientific American*

A corpus study on the scientific articles in the *Scientific American* did not fully confirm the Olofsson's structural environment (b). Some example cases are as follows:

"In due course, Alice has a third photon - call it photon X - that she wants to teleport to Bob."

(Zeilinger 2000:53)

"A typical transformation that Bob must apply to his photon is to alter its polarization by 90 degrees..."

(Zeilinger 2000:54)

"The problems that it poses for our our everyday intuition about the world led Einstein to criticize quantum mechanics very strongly."

(Howard 2000:57)

"... by the U.S. Department of Energy to hold the short stretches of DNA sequence that scientists were just beginning to obtain from a range of organisms."

(Howard 2000:58)

"They have also quickly seized on the degree of automation that bioinformatics has brought to biology."

(Howard 2000:63)

"The tiny snippets of genetic material and the proteins that gene therapy will leave behind in the athletes' muscle cells may be impossible to identify as foreign."

(Andersen, Schjerling, & Saltin 2000:53)

In all the above excerpts, even though the relativized object is [- human], the relative pronoun 'that' is not deleted. Namely, this fact may imply that the retention of the relative pronoun is more preferred over deletion in the specific genre 'scientific article' of *Scientific American*. Although the number is fewer than that of the retained relative pronouns, several deleted relative pronouns were also found. Nevertheless, most of the cases were found in interview transcripts cited in the articles. Thus, the relative pronoun deletion might have been done because of the modality (speaking). The following excerpts show two examples of the deleted relative pronouns found in such interview transcripts.

"How do we know that an object - say, the car we find in our garage in the morning - is the same one we saw a while ago?"

(Howard 2000:57)

"You're trying to figure out the behavior of that circuit when you do not know the outside genes it impacted."

(Howard 2000:63)

Moreover, the deleted relative pronouns were also found in several sentences that are typically long and complex and have already contained one or more relative pronouns. The following excerpts show a few examples of this finding.

"Now that all the 100,000 or so genes that make up the human genome have been deciphered, a new industry is emerging to capitalize on when and where those genes are active and on identifying and determining the properties of the proteins the genes encode."

(Ezzell 2000:64)

"If DNA is the set of master blueprints a cell uses to construct proteins, then mRNA is like the copy of part of the blueprint that a contractor takes to the building site every day."

(Ezzell 2000:64)

Additionally, the Olofsson's structural environment (c) was well confirmed in the corpus analysis on *Scientific American*. That is, all prepositions but one exception are fronted along with the relative pronoun that functions as an object of the preposition, and thus the relative pronoun 'which' is retained. The exception can be found in the following excerpt where the relative pronoun is deleted due to the fact that the preposition has not been fronted.

"Various other genes are turned on or off at different times - or not at all - according to the tissue they are in and their role in the body."

(Ezzell 2000:64)

4. Conclusion and Implications for English Teachers

In the present study, an attempt was made to examine the relative pronoun deletion and retention in restrictive relative clauses using the corpora of the two different genres: published letters exchanged between magazine editors and readers of *The Humanist* and scientific articles in *Scientific American*. Despite the preliminary nature of the study, the present corpus analysis verified some discourse genre-specific effects on the deletion and retention of the relative pronoun. In what follows, major findings are summarized in comparison with Olofsson' (1981) research.

- (1) Since there were some discrepancies in terms of the relative pronoun deletion/retention in two different discourse genres, discourse genres may, indeed, play a crucial role in determining native speakers' preference. This finding indicates that the Olofsson's structural environment (b) is not always valid.
- (2) Since the tendency to front the preposition along with the relative pronoun in published writing was observed in the present study, the Olofsson's structural environment (c) may be valid.
- (3) The relative pronoun deletion and retention are determined by not only the discourse modality (speaking vs. writing) but also a usage tendency or preference affected by genres or topics.

The present study also depicts the fact that the description on the relative pronoun deletion that almost all grammar reference books and textbooks give to readers (e.g. the major reason why deletion is preferred over retention in speaking is that speaking, in general, is less formal in style than writing) is not appropriate. There are other factors affecting the relative pronoun deletion in addition to the discourse modality; such factors as structural/grammatical restrictions and discourse genres or topics should be taken into account. Accordingly, students in grammar class or writing class should be exposed to various types of spoken and written linguistic patterns in authentic materials (see Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1994) to become familiar with various use conditions which prefer the relative deletion/retention; ESL/EFL teachers should take into account not only the discourse modality but also genres or topics to teach the relative pronoun deletion (or retention) effectively. Moreover, even though it turned out to be less important than genres or topics in the present study, the animacy or humanness of the referent should also be taken into consideration.

Current grammar pedagogy requires English teachers to know and teach accurate use conditions and native-speaker preferences. Considering the fact that language is functional and systemic in nature (Christie 1999), this is a natural requirement for language teachers. However, there may be some difficulty in the real teaching situation: explanations about accurate use conditions or context-specific native-speakers' preference of one form over another might be challenging to non-native teachers of English: especially, when they teach in EFL (English as a Foreign language) contexts (e.g. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, etc.), there may be no immediate, sufficient access to native speakers of English. According to Conrad (2000), corpus-based research is a key solution for English teachers to cope with the difficulty. Without any access to native-speakers, for instance, non-native teachers of English can analyze functional aspects of English lexicogrammar and use some findings for pedagogical practices. In this regard, non-native teachers of English should consider corpus-based research a research option for action research, which is generally conducted to pose and solve problems found in the status quo of teaching, to generate some change, and to reflect on their teaching practice (e.g. Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001; Gebhard & Oprandy 1999). Needless to say, native English teachers can, of course, benefit from corpus-based research because much broader samples of typical uses of grammar structures and lexicon will be available for instructional purposes (Conrad 2000).

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