

Clausal Complements as OBJ, p. 1

The roots of the analysis

In the earliest work in generative syntax (long before Relational Grammar or LFG) it was assumed that complement clauses were analogous to objects, or, as it was put then, that subordinate clauses were NPs. For example, Chomsky (1955/1975) includes phrase structure rules such as (1)

- (1) NP \rightarrow to VP (p. 235)

and after introducing transformations as a preferred way of embedding one clause inside another, had a pronoun like *it* marking the place of the subordinate clause in the underlying form of the main clause, as in his reference (pp. 394f) to “the transformation *T* that carries [2a] into [2b]:”

- (2) a. *John-knew-it-#-Sentence*
 b. *John-knew-that $\bar{\sim}$ Sentence*

No argument was given for this, but it undoubtedly is a reflection of a very dominant view in traditional grammar.

The classic generative work on complementation, control, and raising is Rosenbaum (1967). For the most part, Rosenbaum takes the position that complement clauses are objects (and thus NPs). He argues, for example, that active/passive pairs such as:

- (3) a. Columbus demonstrated that the world is not flat.
 b. That the world is not flat was demonstrated by Columbus.

can be best accounted for by assuming that the subordinate clause is an NP (an OBJ), because otherwise passivization should not apply. The NP node dominating the S is also invoked in the case of extraposition of subject clauses

- (4) a. That the doctor came at all surprises me.
 b. It surprises me that the doctor came at all.

The *it* is left behind when the clause is extraposed. In the text of the book (which is a reprint of his PhD dissertation) Rosenbaum does recognize the existence of a small number of complement-taking verbs in which the clausal complement does not appear to have any NP properties, what he calls “verb phrase complementation.” But in the preface to the book, written two years later, he states: “Certain conclusions drawn in the work have been called into question by recent findings. First, the number of clear cases of verb phrase complementation has diminished to the point where their general existence becomes questionable.”

Clausal Complements as OBJ, p. 2

Many other “classical” generative studies also take the position that all or most subordinate clauses are NPs, and thus (even if they do not explicitly refer to grammatical functions) that all or most complement clauses are objects (e.g. Postal 1974, Emonds 1976).

The analysis in RG/LFG

In the literature of Relational Grammar, the analysis of clausal complements as OBJ seems to have been adopted without question. Perlmutter and Postal (1983) use this analysis of clausal complements to derive the generalization that when an NP is raised out of a subordinate clause, it takes on the grammatical function that the subordinate clause had, so raising out of SUBJ clauses results in raising-to-subject while raising out of OBJ clauses results in raising-to-object.

- (5) a. [_{SUBJ} That I am leaving] happens. (=Extrapolation ⇒ It happens that I am leaving.)
 b. I happen to be leaving.
- (6) a. Harry expects [_{OBJ} that Joan will return].
 b. Harry expects Joan to return.

(In later RG, raising-to-subject predicates were taken to be unaccusative, so even “subject” clauses were taken to be initial objects.)

As we will see, “classical” LFG took the position that complement clauses are COMP, not OBJ. One exception to this is Andrews (1982), where Icelandic complement clauses are given the OBJ (or OBJ2) treatment. While Andrews does not explicitly argue for this, he does note that subordinate clauses in Icelandic have the same distribution as NP, and therefore should be analyzed as NP. This may be the reason for the analysis.

References

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