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Written sentences and spoken clause-complexes

9.1 A note on concepts and terminology

A course book on the grammar of English is an attempt to demonstrate how language works – to reduce to some kind of order the complex ways in which we use the English language to ‘make meanings’ in speech and writing. Every statement about the structure of English is open to judgement, and there are often alternative ways of describing and naming. This is because, as was said in Chapter 1, language is abstract, and in trying to understand the system, or ‘network of choices’, which makes up language, everything said about it is a hypothesis, or guess based upon principles. If the principles seem sound, then the hypothesis will be acceptable and likely to be true.

This is why this book has from time to time discussed alternative ways of describing the same feature of the language, and mentioned more than one word for naming something. It is not right to say, ‘This is the truth about the structure of the clause’, or ‘This is the correct term for this feature’, but only, ‘This way of describing a clause seems justified according to observation’, and ‘This term is commonly used for this feature (but you may find others)’. There is still a lot that is not known about the detail of English grammar, even by the experts, and there is continuous academic argument amongst linguists and grammarians about the best way of describing it.

If you consult other reference grammars, you will find that they differ from each other in terminology and explanatory description. The same concept may have two or more names. For example, what is called noun phrase in this book is also called nominal group, subordinating conjunctions are also binders, coordinating
conjunctions are listers, and certain adverbs are linkers. The second terms in these pairs are short and clear, but because they have not caught on in most reference grammars, the traditional and more widely used terms have been used in this book.

Similarly, the same word, used in two descriptive grammars, may be found to have two different meanings, and writers have to define their own particular use of a technical term. What is important is the concept underlying the term, not the term itself.

9.2 Sentence or complex clause?

The rank-scale introduced in Chapter 1 stated that a sentence consists of one or more clauses, a clause of one or more phrases, and a phrase of one or more words. But Chapters 7 and 8 have shown that this description only works for some sentences, because clauses can be found inside NPs and PrepPs, and also in the place of a phrase as subject, complement or adverbial in clause structure. So we begin to explain this by setting up the concept of the embedding of one constituent in another (the embedded constituent being subordinate to the other), with the rank scale applying to kernel clauses, and others being derived from them.

Unfortunately, if we try to stick to traditional, established terms for grammatical concepts, we find ourselves being inconsistent.

For example, the phrase the netting is a NP. If it is post-modified with a PrepP to become the netting of the pheasant trap, it is complex, but still a NP – a complex NP.

The PrepP in the long grass can be post-modified with another PrepP behind the trap, to in the long grass behind the trap. It is complex, but remains a PrepP – a complex PrepP.

Similarly, the NP the group of abandoned buildings can be post-modified with a restrictive RelCl as qualifier,

\[
\text{d} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{q} \\
\text{p} \quad \text{m} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{q}
\]

(the group (of abandoned buildings [that lay outside the perimeter of Lunghua Camp]))

and still be called a NP. It would be possible to invent different terms which mean,