

Characteristics of Nominal Clauses in Spoken and Written English

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Abstract: The present research paper investigates the incidence of nominal clauses in spoken and written English. The focus is placed on the frequency of occurrence and the range of subordinators that introduce this type of subordinate clause. The study applies comparative analysis to define differences in the use of nominal clauses within a small-size corpus comprising of texts that represent spoken and written English. Quantitative research method is used to determine the frequency of occurrence of nominal clauses and particular subordinators in the selected registers. The purpose of the study is to find out potential differences in the employment of nominal clauses in different media of language production. Based on quantitative analysis of nominal clauses in the different texts of spoken and written discourse, the paper presents frequency counts and interprets them as indicative of the character of the discourse. The findings are compared with the findings of previous studies performed on large-scale corpora.

Keywords: nominal clauses, conversation, fiction, complexity, spoken language, written language.

1 Introduction

There is a variety of factors (context, purpose, recipients of the language product, etc.) that influence the way language users compose their language product. As a result of these influencing factors, the character of the language product may change in terms of lexis, syntax, overall organization, etc. Another factor that might affect language performance and its product is the medium of production. The present paper demonstrates the syntactic characteristics of registers belonging to different media of production (spoken and written) focusing on the use of a particular type of subordinate clauses, namely nominal clauses. The paper presents the characteristics of nominal clauses in terms of frequency of their occurrence as well as the range of subordinators that introduce this particular type of subclauses. The aim is to determine whether the registers representing spoken and written English (conversation and fiction) exhibit a different level of structural complexity in nominal positions in a sentence. Potential differences in the incidence of nominal clauses (complex structures) might demonstrate that the medium of production may influence the complexity of the language product in nominal positions in a sentence.

The analysis of nominal clauses is carried out on a small-size corpus (a collection of randomly selected authentic language material comprising two text types: *conversation-interviews* and *fiction*, both representing contemporary British and American English). The obtained data are then compared with those from large-scale corpora presented in previous quantitative studies and large reference grammar works of contemporary English, such as *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* written by Biber et al. (1999). The paper proceeds from defining the key terms and describing the characteristics of the corpus to the presentation of the results.

2 Characteristics of the corpus

As it is mentioned above, the occurrence of nominal clauses is examined in different registers of English, namely *conversation* (interviews-IW) and *fiction* (FC). Both registers have similar level of formality and might be considered less formal registers. The two registers are selected to represent spoken and written language because of their similar formality level. Possible differences in the use of nominal clauses might thus reflect the impact of the medium of production rather than the impact of different level of formality. The choice of registers promises more objective results of the study.

Biber et al. (1999, p. 4) describe conversation and fiction as different varieties of English and state that “each of these varieties is termed a register, and each extended sample of language from a register constitutes a text.” Thus, the term “text” is used to refer to language samples even in the case of spoken language in the present study. The study obtains its results from the analysis of empirical data. It is based on the analysis of “a collection of authentic spoken and written texts, organized by register, which is called a corpus” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 4). Basing the analysis on samples of the actual use of language should ensure valuable results that objectively determine how language users incorporate nominal clauses into their language production.

The selected texts contain language performances of a variety of people of different gender, age, race, social background, nationality, occupation, etc. Each text included in the corpus is of different length, but all the texts in each register combined are of approximately the same length (30,000 words). The whole corpus thus consists of approximately 60,000 words, equally divided between the register representing the spoken language (conversation) and the written language (fiction). For the summary of the characteristics of the corpus including the selected registers, the number of texts within each register as well as the number of words, see table 1 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of the corpus.

Register	Number of texts	Number of words
Conversation	12	30 660
Fiction	3	30 665
Total	15	61 325

Conversation is analysed through written transcripts of conversation-interviews taken from available websites such as www.time.com of *the Time magazine*, *Oprah Winfrey interviews* (www.oprah.com), *Larry King interviews* (www.cnn.com) and from several others (www.foxnews.com, www.asapsports.com, etc.).

As for the written language, it is represented by samples taken from contemporary fiction. This sub-corpus consists of several chapters taken from three books of various genres written by native English-speaking writers. The books used for the analysis include Mary Stewart's mystery novel *Rose Cottage* (1997), Stephen King's suspense novel *Under the Dome* (2009) and Diane Chamberlain's romance *Reflection* (1997). The books selected for the analysis were written by both British and American writers of both genders. The choice of various gender and nationality writers should ensure more objective results and eliminate the potential influence of gender or variety idiosyncrasies.

3 Nominal clauses and their distribution in the corpus

Nominal clauses can fulfil a range of different functions in the sentence. "Nominal clauses have functions that approximate to those of noun phrases: subject, object, complement, appositive, and prepositional complement. Every nominal clause may function in some or all of these functions. See example: I noticed *that he spoke English with an Australian accent*" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1047–1049). In this example, the nominal *that*-clause functions as direct object. Regarding subordinators, nominal clauses are most commonly introduced by *that* or a *wh*-word (Rafajlovičová, 2012). Nominal clauses are thus specific for their position in the sentence, the range of functions they can fulfil as well as the subordinators that introduce them.

Investigating the use of nominal clauses in spoken and written language might lead to thought-provoking findings. It might reveal whether language users opt for simple structures (phrases) or complex structures (subordinate clauses) in nominal positions in speech and writing. The data that the analysis provided are processed in a variety of ways to describe the use of nominal clauses from different points of view. Besides the frequency of their occurrence in the two registers, the frequency of use of different subordinators introducing the nominal clauses is provided, too. These data are first processed and commented upon on the corpus level of the study and then in terms of distribution in each register to provide a contrasting view of the registers.

Table 2: The distribution of *that*- and *wh*- nominal clauses in the corpus.

Type of nominal clause	Number of instances	% of nom. clauses
that + zero that	598	60.59%
wh-clauses	389	39.41%
Total	987	100%

Nominal clauses are first divided into the following two structural types based on the subordinator that introduces them: *that*-clauses + zero *that*-clauses and *wh*-clauses. Table 2

below displays the incidence of the two structural types of nominal clauses within the whole corpus.

The figures in table 2 show that there are overall 987 finite nominal clauses in the investigated corpus. Of the 987 nominal clauses, there are 598 instances of *that*- and zero *that*-clauses, which accounts for 60.59% of all finite nominal clauses. On the other hand, *wh*-clauses occur in the analyzed texts 389 times and form 39.41% of all finite nominal clauses. If we compare the two types, *that*- + zero *that*-clauses prevail as opposed to *wh*-clauses with 209 more instances.

[3.1] All I can tell you is *what they said in the village at the time*. [N-FC]

[3.2] ... but in all honesty, I don't know *how U2 will stay relevant*. [N-IW]

[3.3] Rachel pointed toward the case and noticed *that her hand was trembling*. [N-FC]

[3.4] I think *we're starved for a life of the senses*. [N-IW]

Wh-clauses are nominal clauses introduced by a wide range of *wh*-words (*what* [3.1], *whether*, *where*, *how* [3.2]...). Although the first group consists of clauses introduced by only two subordinators (*that* [3.3] and zero *that* [3.4]), there are more instances within this group. In spite of a wider range of clauses falling into the group of *wh*-clauses, nominal *that*-clause and its variation zero *that*-clause prevail and represent the most common types of finite nominal clause in the corpus.

3.1 Characteristics of nominal clauses in INTERVIEWS

Interview as a text type is assumed to contain language closest to that of natural conversation. Therefore, the analyzed interviews were chosen to represent conversation and the spoken language. The quantitative analysis of nominal clauses was performed on written transcripts of the interviews. The nominal clauses identified in the interviews were each marked along with the subordinator that introduced them. The results show that the investigated type of finite subordinate clause uses a variety of subordinators. Table 3 below shows the total number of nominal clauses in the interviews, the number of clauses introduced by each subordinator as well as the proportional representation of these figures within the subcorpus.

Overall, there are 1390 subordinate clauses in the analysed interviews. Out of 1390 subclauses in this text type, 596 clauses were identified as nominal clauses. It means that over 40% of all subclauses in the interviews are formed by nominal clauses. The figures thus show that in the register of spoken language, nominal positions in sentences are frequently filled with nominal clauses. By frequent employment of nominal clauses instead of simple noun phrases, the register of spoken language exhibits a high degree of complexity. The spoken medium of language production thus seems to result in the language users opting for complex structures in nominal positions (subject, object, complement).

Table 3: The distribution of subordinators introducing finite nominal clauses in the interviews.

Subordinator	Number	%
zero that	193	32.4
that	160	26.9
what	145	24.3
how	33	5.5
why	16	2.7
who	14	2.4
where	12	2.0
when	10	1.7
if	8	1.3
which	2	0.3
whether	2	0.3
whatever	1	0.2
Total	596	100

As table 3 shows, in terms of subordinators there is a tendency to use either *that* (160 instances) or zero *that* (193 instances) to introduce nominal clauses in the interviews. Altogether, 59.3% of all finite nominal clauses in the interviews are introduced by these two subordinators. This figure might be surprising if we consider the whole range of *wh*-subordinators that can be used to introduce nominal clauses. Apparently, *that*-clause [3.1.1] and its variation zero *that*-clause [3.1.2] are the first option for speakers when it comes to the use of nominal clauses. Based on the obtained figures, it seems reasonable to consider *that*- and zero *that*-clauses as characteristic types of nominal clause in less formal spoken language.

[3.1.1] So now I hope *that the band make it this year*. [N-IW]

[3.1.2] I think *it's beautiful to have a belief in something* and... [N-IW]

It might also be useful to compare the frequency of occurrence of *that*-clauses and zero *that*-clauses. Table 3 above shows that zero *that*-clauses prevail with 193 instances, which is 32.4% of all identified nominal clauses in the register. It means that almost every third finite nominal clause in the interviews is zero *that*-clause. Zero *that*-clause is basically a *that*-clause, in which the subordinator *that* is omitted. The analysis of subordinators thus shows that the language users in the interviews tend to omit the subordinator if possible. It might be interpreted as a kind of simplification in an attempt to make the speech more flow-like and easier to process.

[3.1.3] I start thinking about *what it means to be not just a man, but a black man in America*. [N-IW]

[3.1.4] When I asked *if you'd been nervous about directing this movie*, you said... [N-IW]

Concerning *wh*-clauses, there is a strong preference to introduce nominal clauses with the subordinator *what* [3.1.3]. There are 145 instances of nominal clauses introduced by *what* in the interviews. As table 3 above shows, the next relatively frequent *wh*- subordinator is *how* with 33 instances. The rest of the nominal clauses in the interviews are introduced by 7 more *wh*- subordinators, e.g. *why*, *who*, *where*, *whether*, etc. There are also 8 instances of nominal clauses introduced by *if* [3.1.4].

3.2 Characteristics of nominal clauses in FICTION

The analysis of interviews is followed by the same procedure in fiction. Fiction is the text type that represents the written language in the corpus. For the purpose of the analysis, several chapters of three different books were taken as a language sample. As mentioned above, the selection of books with various characteristics should ensure that the results are not influenced by idiosyncrasies of a particular type of books. The collected data reveal the total number of nominal clauses in the fiction texts, the range of subordinators that introduce them and the number of instances of each subordinator expressed in percentage. The results of the quantitative analysis of nominal clauses in the fiction texts are summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4: The distribution of subordinators introducing finite nominal clauses in fiction.

Subordinator	Number	%
zero that	167	42.7
that	78	20.0
what	64	16.4
how	35	9.0
if	20	5.0
where	8	2.1
who	6	1.5
why	6	1.5
whether	3	0.8
which	2	0.5
whatever	2	0.5
Total	391	100

The figures in table 4 show that the fiction texts contain 391 finite nominal clauses. If we compare the total number of nominal clauses in both registers, we find out that the analyzed conversation-interviews contain considerably more nominal clauses (596 – see table 3). There are 205 more instances of nominal clauses in the interviews than in fiction. Due to this significant difference, nominal clauses might be considered more characteristic for the conversation-interviews and, furthermore, for less formal spoken language which the interviews represent.

As both registers are of similar formality level, what differentiates them is the medium of language production. The comparison of the results shows that language users resort to the use of complex structures in nominal positions more frequently in the register of spoken language. On the other hand, in the written medium of production, they more often opt for simple structures (noun phrases) instead of complex structures (nominal clauses) in nominal positions in a sentence, as evidenced by fewer instances of nominal clauses per the same number words. The total numbers of nominal clauses in the registers thus show that the medium of production may have an influence on the use of complex structures in nominal positions.

Table 4 above also presents the distribution of subordinators introducing nominal clauses in fiction. If we compare the most frequent subordinators in fiction with those in the interviews, we can see that they correlate. In both registers, *that*-clauses and zero *that*-clauses prevail as opposed to *wh*-clauses. In fiction, *that*- [3.2.1] and zero *that*-clauses [3.2.2] form 62.7% of all finite nominal clauses found in the register. The next two most common subordinators (*what* [3.2.3], *how* [3.2.4]) also match in both registers. These results suggest that in most cases the medium of production does not influence the choice of subordinator in nominal clauses. However, there is one intriguing difference between the two registers regarding subordinators. The use of *if* to introduce nominal clauses is more common in fiction. The subordinator *if* [3.2.5] stands as the fifth most common subordinator in fiction with 20 instances as opposed to 12 instances in the interviews.

[3.2.1] A giggle, then a swift kiss, which let me know *that there were tears on her cheeks*. [N-FC]

[3.2.2] When they said *it was Scotland*, I was afraid *there might be something wrong*. [N-FC]

[3.2.3] ... trying not to think too much about *what Gran had told me of the village gossip*. [N-FC]

[3.2.4] ... and you know *how it goes to my stomach...* [N-FC]

[3.2.5] I gathered it was some sort of gastric flu, but I did wonder *if she was all right*. [N-FC]

The figures presented above show the characteristics of nominal clauses across registers in a small-scale corpus. These findings were compared with the findings of a large-scale corpus-based research performed by Biber et al. (1999). The comparison reveals that both studies present corresponding findings. This applies in terms of both distribution of nominal clauses across registers and the frequency of use of particular subordinators.

According to Biber et al. (1999, p. 658), “complement clauses are also sometimes called *nominal clauses* because they typically occupy a noun phrase slot as subject, object, or predicative.” Although each study uses a different term, the aforementioned statement proves that they refer to the same type of subordinate clause. Concerning the frequency of occurrence of finite nominal clauses, the results of the present study performed on a small-scale corpus correspond with those of Biber et al. (1999, p. 754): “finite complement clauses, i.e. *that*-clauses and *wh*-clauses, are most common in conversation, followed by fiction.” The two studies correspond even in terms of most common subordinators introducing nominal clauses. According to Biber et al. (1999, p. 754), “*that*-clauses and *to*-clauses are more than twice as common as *wh*-clauses and *ing*-clauses.” Although non-finite clauses are not the focus of the present study, the frequency of use of particular subordinators in finite nominal clauses corresponds. In both studies, *that*-clauses occur more frequently than *wh*-clauses.

4 Conclusion

The present paper compares a register of spoken English (conversation) and a register of written English (fiction) focusing on the employment of nominal clauses. Nominal clauses are characterized with regard to two aspects – the frequency of occurrence in each register and the range of subordinators that introduce them. The figures of the two registers are compared to determine whether language users incorporate nominal clauses differently in speech and writing.

The comparison of the total number of nominal clauses in each register reveals that conversation-interviews contain 205 more instances of nominal clauses than fiction. The results show that language users more frequently use complex structures in nominal positions in the register of spoken language. The aim of the study, which is to determine whether the registers representing spoken and written English exhibit a different level of structural complexity in nominal positions in a sentence, has been achieved through the analysis of the incidence of nominal clauses in the registers. Both registers contain language of similar formality level. What distinguishes them is the different medium of language production. The total numbers of nominal clauses in the registers thus show that the medium of production may have an impact on the use of complex structures in nominal positions. The more frequent incidence of nominal clauses in the register of spoken language suggests that the spoken medium of production might increase the use of complex structures in nominal positions in a sentence. It might be explained by the character of conversation and spoken medium of production. In speech, language users have very limited time to choose the right word that precisely expresses and corresponds with their thoughts. This might result in the tendency to opt for more elaborate way of expression via nominal clauses to preserve the flow of communication. In addition, conversation often revolves around reporting what someone has thought, said, done, or heard. This sort of information is usually expressed by means of nominal clauses in the position of object. See examples:

[4.1] And you thought *that was, in fact, the big time*. [N-IW]

[4.2] I don't think *anybody has played that stadium more...* [N-IW]

[4.3] What they told me was *that I had strong support in the African American community*. [N-IW]

[4.4] I heard *you got a little carried away*. [N-IW]

[4.5] You said *that a writing teacher once told you...* [N-IW]

The analysis of subordinators in nominal clauses revealed that on the corpus level, *that-* + zero *that*-clauses with 209 more instances have a strong dominance over the use of *wh*-clauses. Despite the fact that there is a wider range of *wh*-words that can be used to introduce nominal clauses, *that* and its variation zero *that* prevail and represent the most commonly used subordinators in finite nominal clauses in the corpus. The choice of subordinators within each sub-corpus is identical in the majority of clauses. In both registers, *that* and zero *that* are the most frequently used subordinators. The next two most common subordinators also correlate in both registers (*what, how*). The majority of nominal clauses are introduced by the same subordinators in both registers. The analysis of subordinators thus shows that in most cases the medium of production does not influence the choice of subordinator in nominal clauses.

The findings of the present study were compared with the findings of a large-scale corpus-based research performed by Biber et al. (1999). The comparison reveals that both studies lead to corresponding findings in terms of distribution of nominal clauses across registers as well as the frequency of use of particular subordinators.

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