An Analysis of English Relative Pronouns - Focused on 'That'

Ji-Hye Lee[1] and Mun-Koo Kang[2]

[1,2]*Department of English Education, Kongju National University,*
56 Gongjudaehak-ro, Gongju-si, Chungcheongnam-do, 314-701, Republic of Korea
[1]*yjh2488@nate.com,* [2]*kangmunkoo@hanmail.net*

Abstract

To speak English naturally and accurately, we need to have grammar acquisition to some degree. While there are many grammar categories in a language, among them, relative pronoun is considered one of the most important parts in grammar. Relative pronoun is usually represented by 'wh-phrase' and 'that' according to its antecedent and its case. The idea that whether pronoun 'that' can come under relative pronoun or it should be regarded as a conjunction performing complement has been controversial so far. In this analysis, it is suggested that pronoun 'that' is included in a part of complementary subordinate conjunction rather than relative pronoun because it has several features as distinct from relative pronoun. This study has proven why pronoun 'that' can be considered a complementary conjunction.

Keyword: Relative pronoun, Complementizer, Pronoun 'that', Language, Grammar acquisition.

1. Introduction

The most important purpose for learning language is acquiring foreign language as naturally and accurately as acquiring mother tongue. It emphasizes not only on communicating naturally but on accurately speaking a target language. However, It is quite difficult to speak foreign language fluently. There are four skills for learning language, but it is difficult that the four skills are developed harmoniously. The cause of these difficulties is various but one of them is due to lacking grammar acquisition. Some researchers argued that grammatical competence can contribute to language communication. Canal and Swain found that grammatical points are important factors for fluent communication. Ellis figured out that there are obvious distinctions in communicating between those who are taught grammar and those who aren't. Likewise, it is helpful for learners to acquire the target language correctly and fluently. Among many grammatical elements, relative pronoun is considered important because many English learners have experienced difficulties related to it, and relative pronoun has many usages. Therefore, these things make learners acquire the target language hard. If accurate definition and usage of relative pronoun isn't established, the target language learners may be confused about it and finally they have learned incorrect usage. If they don't know the specific characteristics that relative pronouns have, the learners just use a coordinate conjunction such as 'and, but' for linking two sentences. Of course, its practice isn't exactly wrong. But unfortunately, we may lose the chance that we can make use of the various expression and economy of the language.

In this analysis, we can figure out the general characteristics of relative pronoun, among them, whether especially pronoun 'that' can be regarded as the part of the relative pronoun or of the subordinate conjunction, there are researcher's various points of view about pronoun 'that'. According these point of view, we have a discussion about the usage and status of pronoun 'that'.

2. The features of relative pronoun

2.1. Historical review of relative pronoun

Language is no exception to the change that everything has gone through. English has changed with the times. Its changes are represented as Old English, Middle English and Modern English. According to the changes, the relative pronoun is also changed a lot. We cannot find any proof that there is relative pronoun in the Old English. But '*pe*' existed in Old English and it could be connected with '*se*' which meant 'that'. Pyles mentioned it as follow

A relative participle '*pe*' usually regarded as a survival of an Old English indeclinable relative-of-all work occurs in early Middle English side by side with 'that' Pyles (1970, 174)

Jespersen argued the change of 'who' usage that now we use.

In Old English, relative clauses were introduced by demonstrative pronounces (m, se, f, seo, n, pæt) or by the relative participle '*pe*' or by both jointly. '*pe*' disappeared in Middle English period and 'that, which' represented.

2.2. Universal characteristics of relative pronoun

Relative pronoun can connect two sentences and in this process, it can serve as a pronoun that substitutes for prior noun which is same noun between two sentences. In English relative pronoun, it is represented through 'who, whom, whose and which'. Relative pronoun provides much more specific information, locating 'wh-phrase' in the front of the sentence of relative clause. Relative pronoun 'who' and 'whom' respectively express the subjective case and the objective case and have an antecedent such as a person or persons. Another relative pronoun 'which' expresses both subjective case and objective case, having things or animals antecedent not a person. Relative clause functions adjective clause that modifies the antecedent. The noun phrase represented as the antecedent cannot appear in the following relative clause. So there is a gap in the relative clause.

(1) She told me that my father [who Δhad died many years before] was standing by my side.

(2) The only colleague [whom I knew Δ] was the social and physical geographer Doctor Dudley Stamp.

In the case of (1), we can tell at a glance that 'who' substitutes the subject in the following sentence, whereas in the case of (2), 'whom' substitutes the direct objective of the verb in the following sentence. 'Δ' represented in the above sentence means the gap that is included in the relative clause. According to the some scholars, it is said that the reason why it is made in the clause is that the noun phrase which originally exists in the relative clause may be moved to the front position and we can regard this movement as antecedent's movement.

2.3. The restrictive and non-restrictive use of relative clause

Generally speaking, there are two types of the relative clause usage, restrictive and non-restrictive. The main distinction between two is that whether it restricts the antecedent or not. Curme insisted on these two separations as below.

Restrictive clauses are quite linked to the antecedent in thought so that they follow immediately without a pause, and hence are not usually set off by a comma. (1973, 176).

Also Yule mentioned the restrictive clause as below.

So far, we have been looking at restrictive relative clauses. These are also called 'defining' relative clause because they define or restrict the antecedent noun. They help to identify or classify the person or something being talked about.

Let's examine some sentences below.

(3) Successive surges of violence, [which Δswept through jails on a single night in 1986], have focused attention on living conditions.

(4) The cycle [which you ordered Δ] is now complete and ready for collection.

According to the relative clause (3), (4), they modify the antecedent by using relative pronoun 'which'. However, they have respectively different information that each relative clause gives us. (3) is non-restrictive relative clause, which has a coma. (4) is restrictive relative clause, which doesn't have a coma. The difference between two sentences is subtle, but its importance is very great and enormous. In (3), non-restrictive relative clause merely provides additional information about the antecedent 'violence' while restrictive relative clause (4) is a process that we can confirm the information about the antecedent 'the cycle'. We can identify the information that you ordered and confirm the fact you ordered is the very noun phrase 'the cycle' in the sentence. Relative pronoun 'that' which functions as subordinate conjunction is generally used for only restrictive relative clause, whereas relative pronoun 'who, which' can be used for restrictive and non-restrictive clause. However, in the case of (4), relative clause 'that' can often lead the following sentence, so we can't always say so (Bas 2011)

3. The discussion of relative pronoun 'that'

Through the analysis so far, we can recognize that there are various arguments about 'that' as a relative pronoun among grammatical critics. Whether we regard 'that' as a relative pronoun or as a conjunction acting a relative pronoun is still actively discussed. First of all, some researchers argued that it is natural to regard 'that' as a point of view of the traditional grammar. Zandvoort(1972), who followed Jespersen's point of view when it comes to naming it, argued that we can call 'that' relative participle, treating 'wh-phrase' as the same way. On the other hand, Jespersen argued that in school grammar system, 'that' is not a pronoun but rather a conjunction. In 1920s, he thoroughly insisted on his thought in his research aside from him, other scholars supported his thought, regarding 'that' as a conjunction. After that transformational grammarians were interested in the status of 'that' and then they concluded that 'that' can be regarded as a 'complementizer', that is, it is a marker representing a complementary clause in the sentence. This point of view goes along the lines of the functional grammar. Like this, there are many opinions on the status or the position of 'that' In this chapter, we can examine the basis of these researcher's opinions. Through these grounds, we can recognize whether the relative pronoun 'that' can be regarded as a complementizer or not.

3.1. The status and position of the pronoun 'that'

As I mentioned above. various point of view about 'that' may be classified under the two large groups. The first view is the relative pronoun performing faithfully a conjunction and at the same time acting a pronoun like other relative pronouns. The second one is that it is regarded as a subordinate conjunction acting a complement. In these two arguments, which one is correct or incorrect depends on the scholar's value-laden, but in this analysis, it is assumed that pronoun 'that' is a subordinate conjunction because it has much more tendency as a complementizer rather than a relative clause.

The basis pronoun 'that' is a relative clause is as follows.

1. Relative clause can lead a subordinate clause.

2. Relative clause can form a noun phrase within a subordinate clause, and then cam make another noun phrase, that is, an antecedent in the main clause.

3. Relative clause can carry out syntactic function, substituting for a noun phrase for instance, subject, object and possessive within a subordinate clause.
Let's look at the below sentences.

(5) The book [that Δis on the desk] is mine.

'that' in the above sentence connects the noun phrase 'the book' and at the same time, relative clause 'that is on the desk' is the part of the main clause's subject. In the relative clause, 'that' is a subject instead of 'the book'. If 'that' can perform this role, we can admit it as relative pronoun. But there is another case.

(6) I think that my brother is innocent.
In (6), 'that' cannot be a relative pronoun because it can't meet the qualification number3 mentioned earlier. 'that' in (6) doesn't do the syntactic function substituting for subject or object. If relative pronoun can meet the three qualifications below, 'who, whom, whose, which and what' can be regarded as a relative pronoun. First 'wh-phrase' can be also used as interrogative. Second 'wh-phrase' has the same conditions each other when viewed from morphemic principle. Last 'wh-phrase' cannot make relative clause with 'to-infinitive'. When pronoun 'that' is applied to these three conditions, it is not met at all.

(7) I don't knoe what to do.

(8) *I don't know that to do.
In (7), we can realize that 'wh-phrase' can make relative clause with 'to-infinitive'. However, in (8), instead of 'wh-phrase' if 'that' is used, it causes a problem. There is another reason for not regarding 'that' as relative pronoun.

If pronoun 'that' has the same features like other pronouns, we expect its case inflection. However, 'that' doesn't have any case inflection, that's why pronoun 'that' cannot be admitted as a relative pronoun. And there is another reason. 'wh-phrase' relative pronouns have ending of word '-ever', representing so called a compound relative. But 'that' cannot have a compound relative such as 'thatever'. We can learn the reason that we cannot expect pronoun 'that' as relative pronoun, comparing the use of 'that' with that of 'wh-phrase'.

If so, what are the grounds of regarding 'that' as a conjunction?

3.2. Pronoun 'that' as a conjunction

Although there is a premise that the pronoun 'that' cannot be included in relative pronoun, there still exists an ambiguity that pronoun 'that' is regarded as a conjunction acting complement of a subordinate clause. In other words, whether pronoun 'that' can perform a relative clause and a conjunction as well, or it can be completely regarded as not a relative clause but a conjunction is still ambiguous.

According to Jespersen, he defined that '*pe*' using instead of relative pronoun in ancient time was called relative participle, and modern pronoun 'that' was called a conjunction.

That is to be regarded as the same word that we have in I know that you mentioned the man's namely as a connecting particle. (conjunction) (Jespersen, 1927)

While the status of pronoun 'that' is a thing not quite understandable, let's see why it is more reasonable to regard 'that' as a conjunction than to regard it as a relative pronoun.

First, while a demonstrative pronoun is pronounced in a tense vowel, a conjunction 'that' can be pronounced in a weak vowel. Second, 'that' as relative pronoun and as a conjunction can be omitted and if these two situations are regarded as the same case, it is possible to generalize these conditions.

(11) a. I know that the boy is your brother.

    b. I know Δthe boy is your brother.

(12) a. I met the boy that you loved.

    b. I met the boy Δyou loved.

In (11) (12), of course, they cannot be regarded as the same omitting conditions. Leaving out 'that' acting he object as a conjunction much more frequently takes place when it is accompanied by low frequency verb than high frequency verb (such as know) Third, it is assumed that modern relative pronoun 'that' is derived from a conjunction. We can find out the reason that Klima said below.

The use of THAT as a marker of subordination has historical justification. In middle English, all subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns and interrogative pronouns (but only in indirect questions, that is, in subordination) were followed optionally by THAT.

Fourth, relative pronoun 'that' cannot generate a movement of the preposition.

(13) a. This is the man to whom I have given a book.

    b. *This is the man to that I have given a book.

    c. This is the man that I have given a book to.

4. Conclusion

Grammar helps the foreign language learners to acquire the target language accurately and to speak the aim language fluently. Among the grammar elements, especially relative pronoun has its various functions. So learners have difficulty acquiring English. Commonly we have known that relative pronoun 'that' is used for connecting two sentences and at the same time, substitutes for common noun between two sentences. However, in this research, it is started by the point of view that pronoun 'that' should be regarded as a conjunction acting a complementizer. The grounds of suggestions for considering a conjunction rather than relative pronoun are as in the following. First, in contrast with 'wh-phrase' with the role of interrogative, 'that' cannot serve as interrogative. Second, it cannot make relative clause with

'to-infinitive'. Third, 'that' cannot have case inflection. Fourth unlike 'wh-phase', 'that' cannot make a compound relative, adding '-ever' at the word of ending.

However, this analysis suggests some reasons why we can regard pronoun 'that' as a conjunction. First of all, 'that' as an object relative and as a conjunction all can be omitted. And if these two circumstances are same case, it is possible to generalize it. Second, unlike a conjunction, relative pronoun 'that' doesn't let the preposition move. So far, there have been many arguments about pronoun 'that'. But above all whether 'that' can be regarded as a relative clause or a conjunction depends on its context. Learner acquiring the target language also can judge a pronoun 'that' depending on their value system according to its context.

Through this analysis and research, It can be helpful for learners to acquire the target language more accurately and fluently.

References

[1] A. Bas, "Oxford modern english grammar," Oxford University Press, New York, **(2011)**

[2] M. Canale and M. Swain, "The theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing," Applied Linguistic, vol.1, pp.1-47

[3] O. George, Curme. English Grammar, Barnes and noble, New York

[4] R. Ellis, "Second language acquisition and the structural syllabus, " TESOL Quarterly, vol.27, pp.91-113

[5] O. Jespersen, "A modern English grammar," George Allen and Unwin, London

[6] C. Lehmann, "Der relativsats," Tubingen, Gunter Narr

[7] T. Pyles, "An introduction to language," Harcourt Brace and World

[8] G. Yule, "Explaining English Grammar," Oxford University Press, New York

[9] R.W. Zandvoort, "A handbook of English Grammar," Longman, London

Author

*Corresponding author: Mun-Koo Kang, Ph.D.

Department of English Education, Kongju National University,
56 Gongjudaehak-Ro, Gongju-Si, Chungcheongnam-Do, 314-701 South Korea
E-mail: kangmunkoo@hanamil.net