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PRESCRIPTIVE NONSENSE: THE NONRESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSE

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For the past few years, especially after the recent spate of commissions decrying the state of American education, we have witnessed the return to basics. Like a sci-fi sequel this "return" is peopled by familiar characters not the least of which are the prescriptive grammarians. "See," they must be gloating, "we told you so." And so they did. Having shrugged at double negatives, prepositions at the end of sentences, and misused adverbs, we teachers must have contributed to the current decline. In response, publishers have revised handbooks, authors have included more exercises, and teachers have returned to the womb of prescriptive grammar.

Of course, many never left the fold. They veiled their distrust of descriptive linguists smiling through the anarchistic manifestos of structuralists, transformationalists, and dialectologists alike. They knew the pendulums' swing. But lest we forget, those manifestos, which proclaimed that most prescriptive rules were arbitrary, capricious, and historically wrong, sought to change the attitudes of the teacher, not to loose anarchy upon the world. They asked us to be reasonable, not tasteless; informed, not unprincipled.

Instead of rehashing the old debates let me propose a new challenge. Along with other grammatical distinctions, we have accepted the claim that there are two types of relative clauses: restrictive and nonrestrictive. This two-fold division has dominated English textbooks and classrooms despite the lack of evidence to support its existence. Teachers relying on this distinction have developed prescriptions governing the use of commas with relative clauses: thou shalt use commas to set off a nonrestrictive relative clause. This prescription is supported by a distinction ostensibly made in everyday speech by pausing before and after the clause. There may be good reasons why we should invent different types of relative clauses, but, if native speakers do not make such distinctions, we cannot use practice as justification for our prescriptions, and we must change our attitudes toward both the rule and our students who have difficulty with it.

Linguists who have also accepted the claim that speakers can delete nonrestrictive relative clauses and use pauses to distinguish nonrestrictives from their restrictive counterparts have tried to explain the origins of this distinction.[1] In contrast, I set out to determine whether speakers *actually* make a distinction in meaning between restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses and whether pause or intonation patterns distinguish a nonrestrictive modifier from a restrictive one. I discovered that pause or intonation have very little to do with the restrictiveness of a modifier and that speakers of English assume that all relative clauses are restrictive. We may have invented a rhetorical distinction which does not exist in everyday speech.

One of the most familiar arguments for the existence of a nonrestrictive relative clause is that we can delete such a clause without affecting the meaning of the noun phrase. However, the claim that the relative clause in sentence 1 is deletable and, therefore, different from the relative clause in sentence 2 is moot.

1. The man, whom you met, is my brother.
2. The man whom you met is my brother.

In the first sentence the relative clause is set off by commas, which are supposed to represent pauses in speech, and is not as necessary in defining "the man" as the same clause in sentence 2. It is then argued that the clause is deletable and unnecessary. However, if I argued that the effect of the Empire State Building would be different with four fewer stories, there would be no way to determine what the building would be like if it were somehow different. In the same way, when we produce a noun phrase with a relative clause, we have uttered it with the clause and not without it. To argue that we could have ignored it is to avoid dealing with its use.

Another familiar argument for the existence of a nonrestrictive clause is that speakers pause before and after a nonrestrictive modifier. Lehman, for example, distinguishes the clause by using pauses and distinctive intonation patterns.[2]

3. ^{2}The man whom you met is my ^{3}brother^{1}
4. ^{2}The ^{3}man^{2}▶^{2}whom you ^{3}met^{1}▶is my ^{3}brother^{1}

In sentences 3 and 4 the numbers indicate rising and falling pitch (1 is low), and the arrows indicate pauses. This pattern is supposed to represent a distinction which occurs naturally in the English language, in our everyday speech.

To test whether speakers of English make any distinction between relative clauses which are or are not set off by pauses, I began with sentences from McCrimmon's handbook of English usage:[3]

> 5. The president who said that was Lincoln.
> 6. Soldiers, who are selected by physical fitness tests, should show a lower sickness rate than that of the total population.

Even though McCrimmon claims that sentence 5 has a restrictive relative clause because of the absence of pauses, subjects did not interpret the clause as applying to anyone else but Lincoln when I read it aloud and set it off with long pauses. The meaning was not determined by the pauses. Moreover, in its written form without commas, subjects would hesitate a moment, unsure of the meaning, until they would realize that the word *that* functioned as a pronoun and not as a subordinate conjunction. The insertion of commas would clarify the meaning of *that* and have no effect on the meaning of the modifier, to most speakers of English.

Conversely, when subjects heard sentence 6, with long pauses to correspond to the commas, they understood the relative clause as referring to a particular class of soldiers and not to all soldiers. Despite the "required" pause no one thought that all soldiers had a lower sickness rate. In other words, they regarded both restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses, in sentences 5 and 6 respectively, as restrictive modifiers ignoring the pause or intonation pattern.

To test this conclusion more systematically, I read a set of sentences to seventy-two students, half of whom were college freshmen, half more advanced English majors. The forty-eight sentences combined various subjects and predicates with a fixed relative clause — "which are fed barley" — to see if English speakers ever interpreted that clause as being nonessential or nonrestrictive. The sentences were then juggled so that a sentence such as "Any horse which is fed barley will run" was not immediately followed by its so-called alternative: "Any horse, which is fed barley, will run." The subjects were "horses," "any horse," "those horses," "a horse," "the ten large horses," "some horses," "the horse," and "all horses." The predicates were "will run," "will run slowly," and "will run a two minute mile." My intention was not to measure how each student had learned, but whether pause or intonation determined meaning. I used two types of questionnaires as a control and administered the test in four separate meetings. I read each of the forty-eight sentences twice and asked the students to mark their questionnaires in the appropriate manner. I paused and varied my intonation pattern with each nonrestrictive modifier according to Lehmann's suggestions.

No one filled out a questionnaire correctly, and no one turned in a questionnaire in which all the clauses were interpreted as nonrestrictives. However, 58% of the students turned in questionnaires in which *all* the clauses were interpreted as restrictive modifiers. Furthermore, in the same vein, only 9% of the restrictive clauses were labeled nonrestrictive, *but* 87% of the nonrestrictives were labeled restrictive. Tables 1 and 2 explain these lopsided choices by indicating that the type of subject noun phrase which precedes a relative clause or the type of predicate which follows a relative clause have very little to do with the restrictiveness of the relative modifier. Neither do pause or intonation. In each table the nonrestrictive clause (that version set off by pauses or commas — that unnecessary version) was consistently mistaken for a restrictive modifier 81-94% of the time. In contrast, the restrictive modifier was mislabeled in only 5-14% of the time. Thus, speakers assume that a relative clause is a restrictive modifier. The number of items which were marked nonrestrictive was so small that it would be difficult to maintain that these few responses were significant. The conclusion must be that for native speakers of English a relative clause is a restrictive clause.

Some of my colleagues have wondered if the relative clause could in some instances be ambiguous and, like other well-documented cases of ambiguity, not be visible to the listener until specified by the speaker, e.g., "Flying planes can be dangerous." But there is a difference between such ambiguous sentences and relative clauses. First, most speakers when confronted by an alternative reading accept (or "see") the alternative interpretation. Not so in the case of relative clauses. When I told students that a sentence such as "Horses, which are fed barley, will run" makes a statement about the ability of *all* horses, they rejected that possibility. They would not accept a traditional alternative construction such as "Horses will run and they are fed barley" as synonymous. Second, the alternative meanings of an ambiguous sentence would be independently proposed by a large segment of the population. Not so in the case of relative clauses. Very few speakers of English propose a nonrestrictive interpretation for any relative clause.

We are faced then with a situation in which teachers of English insist that the relative clause in sentence 7 is a nonrestrictive modifier, while 97% of the native speakers I interviewed insist that it is not.

> 7. Those horses, which are fed barley, will run slowly.

Since the identification of nonrestrictive relative clauses is limited to a very select group of teachers and researchers, I propose that all relative clauses occur in speech as restrictive clauses. The existence of a nonrestrictive interpretation depends upon a rhetorical/writing rule which inserts commas (pauses) to make subtle discriminations. Teachers should recognize the fact that a nonrestrictive relative clause is an invention which does not exist in the English language. Therefore, appeals to pause, intonation, or intuition are meaningless, and teachers should approach the subject as they approach other artificial rhetorical skills or prescriptive grammatical rules — with patience and respect for the students' language skills.

TABLE 1

Relationship Between Different Predicates and the Relative Clauses Which Precede Them

	Occurrences in 72 questionnaires	Incorrect occurrences	% of occurrences which are incorrect
Restrictive+ "will run slowly"	576	32	6
Nonrestrictive+ "will run slowly"	576	530	92
Restrictive+ "will run a mile"	576	58	10
Nonrestrictive+ "will run a mile"	576	494	86

Restrictive+ "will run"	576	72	13
Nonrestrictive+ "will run"	576	480	83

TABLE 2

Relationship Between Different Subject Noun Phrases and the Relative Clauses Which Follow Them

	Occurrences in 72 questionnaires	Incorrect occurrences	% of occurrences which are incorrect
"horse"+ restrictive	216	10	5
"horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	190	88
"any horse"+ restrictive	216	24	11
"any horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	196	91
"those horses"+ restrictive	216	22	10
"those horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	204	94
"a horse"+ restrictive	216	12	6
"a horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	188	87
"the ten large horses"+ restrictive	216	30	14
"the ten large horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	178	82
"some horses"+ restrictive	216	24	11
"some horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	174	81
"the horse"+ restrictive	216	20	9
"the horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	192	89
"all horses"+ restrictive	216	20	9
"all horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	192	89

Notes

[1]See John Ross, "Constraints on Variables in Syntax," Diss. MIT, mimeographed by Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1967; Robert Stockwell, et al., *The Major Syntactic Structures of English* (New York: Holt-Rinehart-Winston, 1973); G. Carlson, "Amount Relatives," *Language* 53 (1977); Ray Jackendoff, *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); Carlota Smith, "Determiners and Relative Clauses in a Generative Grammar of English," in *Modern Studies in English*, eds. David Reibel and Sanford Shane (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969).

[2]Winfred Lehman, *Descriptive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 169.

[3]James McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 423.

HOPELESS, BUT NOT SERIOUS: COMPARING RESULTS FROM WRITING CLASSES WITH THOSE OF OTHER DISCIPLINES

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Reading through our professional journals is like an excursion into self-induced schizophrenia: articles promising hopeful new methods for teaching, let us say, voice or audience, are interspersed with studies hammering home that our very best efforts have only a marginal effect on our students' skills. The professional journals are rather like cigarette ads that beguile us by design and then warn us by law. Yes, our journals assert, one does see improvement in skills, but the increase is usually no greater than that of students not taking writing courses.[1] Yes, we nod in agreement, students need to be taught to write with a specific audience in mind; yet, a study in a recent issue of *College English* concludes in fact that having a specific audience produces worse papers.[2] The Iowa study, performed in 1969, confirmed our worst fears about teaching English: that while students may improve in time, it has more to do with aging and the college environment than with writing instruction. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, we are guilty of tampering with the first blush of ignorance, and what's worse, we seem to be doing it to no good end. A complementary study, of more recent vintage[3] demonstrates that no teaching method or personal teaching style produces consistently favorable results. Given these conclusions, can anyone help but wonder if writing teachers are not wasting their efforts, the students' time, and the taxpayers' money?

Reading these studies, I can scarcely repress memories of countless student conferences in which I have remarked—gently to be sure— "look here, this word needs an apostrophe or a comma," and seen the students' shoulders sag and their eyes roll upward like St. Sebastian when the arrows penetrated his flesh. Despite all my attempts to be kindly, how difficult it is to resist mentioning to them that we had a lesson on this only last week. (Did they not remember? Yes, they did.) Once again I had beguiled myself into thinking that I had exorcised some grammatical demon forever. But here it was, hideously leering at me again. And I find myself wondering again, why couldn't I be teaching math or physics or accounting? Why is writing so different from other courses students take? How gratifying to be a chemistry teacher, able to hold up a final exam booklet and announce "this much I taught the student—more than he knew when he entered." But, in writing, as we are too painfully aware, the final exam booklets and post-tests do not buttress our claim of having taught anyone to write better.

Our efforts to validate writing improvements reminds me of a study in psychotherapy done a number of years ago. Hans Eysenck attempted to measure which of the competing methods produced the greatest rate of client progress.[4] The result: the less therapy, the greater the rate of improvement. Spontaneous remission accounted for more successes than any other approach. In this respect at least, the psychotherapist can claim kinship with the writing instructor.

Psychotherapy aside, one wonders: is the acquisition of writing skills really so different from other learning activities? From my own experience, there is at least one other endeavor where