Complements and Dummies

BY JOHN LAWLER

Discussing grammar can require special vocabulary, and parsing the working parts of even simple sentences requires conceptual explanations and definitions. I've been invited to alternate such discussions with the Test Yourself department. For those who are interested in how grammar works toward meaning, I'll be investigating and analyzing problematic constructions. I'll try to keep the terminology to a minimum and to define what I use. I'll also answer your questions (as far as I'm able), which you may send to me in care of the *Eye* editor.

And so we begin.

English grammar is about constructions, not words: *Construction* is a general term that refers to any characteristic clause or phrase type, its structure, and the machinery to construct it. Take, for example, the *extraposition* construction in

(1) It's possible <u>that he stole the car</u>.

In (1), *that he stole the car* looks as though it might be the object of *(is) possible*, except that *possible* is an intransitive predicate adjective and can't have an object. In fact, *that he stole the car* is the subject of *(is) possible*, but it has been shifted to the end of the sentence, leaving behind in subject position a peculiar type of pronoun known as a *dummy it*. It's called a dummy because it doesn't refer to anything (except possibly the final *that*-clause). Example (2) shows the awkward sentence that was avoided with the help of extraposition:

(2) <u>That he stole the car</u> is possible.

That's what extraposition does—provides a way to move "heavy" material such as *that he stole the car* to the end of the sentence, where it's easy to parse, instead of leaving it at the beginning, before the verb, where it complicates parsing. For this reason, extraposition is often called a "movement rule."

Extraposition applies to many kinds of constructions, but the one I want to talk about here is the *complement clause*. A complement is a clause used as a noun (a "noun clause") that is the subject or the object of some predicate. English has four types of complement clauses. Two are *non-finite* (with no tense inflections, just a fixed form of the verb, no subject agreement, and frequently no subject):

Infinitive clauses: (3) He tried <u>to steal the car</u>.

Gerund clauses: (4) <u>Stealing the car</u> gave him a thrill.

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strategic and anti-terrorism concepts anyhow—and doesn't really want to know, as it were, how sausage is made. The Doubters believe that a lot more information could and should be shared without having to wrest it through the Freedom of Information Act. These journalists have an overarching suspicion of secrecy and constantly question the validity of classification, veering toward "Give us the max!" regardless of the consequences.

The fact that government agencies with similar security missions are loath to share secrets with one another—not to mention with Congress or the public—bodes ill for the media. Turf wars infect all agencies, even the 22 that have been merged into the Department of Homeland Security; the ideal of an "informed electorate" is, more than ever before, a chimera. The types and quality of access we get may, ultimately, depend on how forceful reporters are in posing questions to the government and to sources, and in fighting the trend to require disclosure of confidential sources.

Sissela Bok's insights in her 1982 book *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* seem prescient today. Bok sets the artful dodging of government and other information dispensers in a moral context. If one message rings most clearly through her analysis, it is this: However regrettable, it is true that all societies find lying not just convenient but invaluable. But, the effects of purposeful duplicity by governments and their armed forces are innately harmful to democracies. "Secrets can corrode from within," Bok warns. ◆

David C. Walsh is a Washington, DC–based writer and photographer experienced at digging for the true story despite hearing "Sorry, we can't talk about that."

And two are *finite* types (where the verbs must be in either present or past tense, and the subject must be present and must agree with the verb):

that-clauses   (5) It's unfortunate **that** he stole the car.

wh-clauses   (6a) I wonder **what** he is bringing.
                  (6b) *I wonder **what** is he bringing.

That-clauses are just regular indicative sentences with *that* in front; *wh*-clauses are just ordinary questions; in fact, *wh*-clause complements are often called *embedded questions*. By the way, * in front of an example like (6b) indicates that it is judged ungrammatical; in this case that's because an embedded question complement does not invert its subject and verb the way a normal question does.

That he stole the car is the subject of *(is) unfortunate* in (5) because it's the answer to the question *What is unfortunate? What he is bringing* is the object of *wonder* in (6) for similar reasons. However, *that he stole the car* also has its own structure as a *that*-clause in two simple parts:

a. *that* is a word (called a "complementizer') that marks this clause as a complement.

b. *he stole the car* is just a plain, ordinary sentence.

And so does *what he is bringing*, as a *wh*-clause:

a. *what* is a *wh*-word referring to the object of *bringing*, moved to the front of the sentence.

b. *he is bringing* is a sentence with a missing object.

Both of these constructions mark the beginning of the clause so that it can be parsed properly as soon as it is encountered; this is typical of a "right-branching" language like English.

Finite complements are very common as object clauses:

(7) He didn't admit that he stole the car.
     What didn't he admit____?

(8) They told me where I could find her.
     What did they tell me ____?

But they appear rather less often as simple subjects than as direct objects; they make clumsy subjects as in (9), so they're usually extraposed, as in (10).

(9) That he missed your point is obvious.

(10) It's obvious that he missed your point.

Now into the fray of individual grammar calls: A woman in a commercial remarks,

(11) I love when that happens.

This reminds me of the punchline

(12) I hate when that happens.

made famous by Billy Crystal and Christopher Guest on *Saturday Night Live.* Both of these constructions sound odd to me. I would ordinarily say them a different way, with a dummy *it* before the *wh*-clause:

(13) I love **it** when that happens.

(14) I hate **it** when that happens.

I see (13) and (14) as cases of extraposition because of the dummy *it*; but they are not ordinary cases of extraposition because the clause is clearly not the subject of *love* or *hate* but rather–if anything–the object. In fact, though it is much less common than extraposition of subjects, extraposition of direct objects does occur with a few verbs, but mostly with *that*-clauses:

(15) I take **it** that you haven't heard yet/*what you haven't heard yet.

(16) She can't stand **it** that he's always late/*why he's always late.

In my 63-year-old idiolect of English, these verbs *must* extrapose finite object complements, so (11) and (12) are ungrammatical for me. But the pattern in general is more complex. Google reports (for instance) 44,100 hits for "I love that you" versus only 848 for "I love *it* that you," a very low rate of 2 percent extraposed *that*-clause objects. However, for extraposed *wh*-clauses, one gets the opposite result. There are (for instance) 78,500 Google hits for extraposed "I love *it* when you" but only 18,200 for unextraposed "I love when you," which comes to 77 percent extraposed.

Apparently, in most people's grammar, *love* and *hate* have developed the ability to take grammatical object *that*-complements (though my grammar still doesn't allow that); but they still appear unable to take object *wh*-clauses without extraposing them, though this construction appears to be waning a little, too.

This kind of situation is pretty normal when you look closely at any syntactic construction: Grammar is filled with exceptions and special cases, which vary in surprising ways from person to person, group to group, and year to year. It's what you ought to expect when looking at a living thing, and your language is as much a living part of you as your thumb is. ◆

John Lawler is a linguist at the University of Michigan. He has published an English Grammar FAQ at www.umich.edu/~jlawler/aue.