

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 5: The Compound Sentence

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The structure

The compound sentence is arithmetic in that its statement is built by the sum of its parts. Its parts are simple sentences or complex sentences. Those parts are compounded by operators that conjoin or disjoin them, or declare the truth of one part to be conditional upon, the result of, or the reason for another part. This process of compounding makes part-sentences of several independent sentences to achieve a new whole sentence. Traditional Grammar usually calls the words that act as compounding operators 'conjunctives'.

Compounding operators

The following are the words commonly used as compounding operators:

Conjunctive operators

He will smile and shrug his shoulders and his wife will glare at him.

Not only did he identify the cause of these deaths but he also criticised the prison's administration.

They came home to find (*or* 'and found') their house burgled.

It is neither useful nor valuable nor an object of beauty.

While [*it is true that*] Mary is successful, [*it is also true that*] Jim is remarkably clever.

His friends knew he had serious financial problems but [*they knew also that*] he had not stolen the money.

Disjunctive operators

Employers were required to insist that workers join a union or face dismissal.

The Prime Minister will call an early election rather than [*he will*] let this incident drop.

They are loving parents yet [*they*] spend very long hours at work.

Although they are neighbours they have never spoken.

Work continued despite/in spite of the heavy rain.

'Reason for' (causal) operators

We had to dismiss him because he was such a nuisance.

He was such a nuisance that we had to dismiss him.

Since the cause is important to him we should try to support it.

In order to ensure his sound education, the boy was sent to boarding school.

Cyclists are required to wear red jackets so motorists will see them easily.

Conditional operators

We shall leave if we are assured that factional fighting will not resume.

I shall go unless you suggest a better plan.

The governor cannot decide until all relevant information is presented to him.

If linguistics is dilettantism, then we spend an enormous amount of time at both.

Unless they give us better instructions we cannot assemble the equipment.

It is difficult for people to understand the reason for a prison sentence when they lack access to information put before a court.

'Result' operators

I think therefore I am.

We invited him so he came.

With the price of oil the highest in nine years, the tyrant's means for providing for his people has increased.

Part-sentence and whole-sentence operators

Our reasoning procedures and declarative or argumentative intentions dictate our choice of compounding operator. Wrong choice reflects a failure in reasoning. The writer must be very mindful of his reasoning when he composes a compound sentence: Compounding operators will do some sort of conjunctive,

disjunctive, causal or conditional operation when set to work in a sentence. The task is to ensure that they do the operation the writer wants them to do, and only that operation.

When the framework of a writer's intention obliges a computation of sentences, and then a further computation of those already-computed sentences, there are several part-sentence operators and one whole-sentence operator in his compound sentence. In the following sentence there are two part-sentence operators, both times *if*, and one whole-sentence operator, *and*:

They get it in the neck if they advocate abortion and they are reviled if they have a test-tube baby.

The first *if* makes the part-sentence *They get it in the neck* conditional upon the part-sentence *they advocate abortion*. The second *if* makes the part-sentence *they are reviled* conditional upon the part-sentence *they have a test-tube baby*. The whole-sentence operator *and* conjoins these two sets of part-sentences. Although all the foregoing part-sentences have the syntactic structure of independent sentences (they each have a subject and predicate) they are 'part sentences' in the sense that an operator computes them before the sum of their separately-computed parts is also computed to become the whole compound sentence.

Writers who lose track of which logical operator is computing which set of sentences in a compound sentence also lose their ability to make sense in a compound sentence.

Bi-partied operators

Compounding operators that are bi-partied (two-part) are natural whole-sentences operators because they devise the framework of the logic that delivers the whole sentence. They are constructions such as: just as... so; not only... but also; while... also; if/even if/when ... then

Like an old fighter who staggers to his feet [so] the people of Lebanon long for an end to the fighting.

While he did not underplay the importance of medication, the doctor [also] underlined the importance of personal contact.

If (or when) a painting sells for £10,000, [then] an auction house will take at least £1,000 from the seller, and another £1,000 from the buyer.

Not only do all the auction houses charge up to 16 per cent commission to sell an artwork but they [also] hit buyers with a fee as high as 15 per cent.

Certain disjunctive operators are also whole-sentence operators. They are: although, despite, even though. These disjunctives simply head the sentence of the statement that wants to disjoin from the statement of another:

Despite the fact that diplomatic relations are already delicate between our nations, their Prime Minister postponed his visit here until June.

Although/even though the chemical will disperse within a year, the river will never be the same again.

Is it a compounding operator?

The next sentence contains the whole-sentence operator ‘if ... then’ (underlined). It is the only compounding operator in that sentence. There are two occurrences of ‘and’ and one of ‘as well as’. These, however, perform no operation either on a part-sentence or the whole of the sentence. Although they can function as compounding operators, they do not have that function in this sentence. Here they merely list *a powerful mind and a champion boxer, their cunning and their courage as well as the quickness of their reactions*. Listing is not a compounding operation; it is only listing. Listing does not affect the process of computation that achieves a whole-sentence statement of part-sentence statements.

If one were to analyse a powerful mind and a champion boxer from the psycho-technical point of view [then] it would turn out that their cunning and their courage as well as the quickness of their reactions in their own specialisation are approximately equal.

Whole-sentence and stripped operators

When part-sentences are being computed by compounding operators into a whole sentence, their independent-sentence forms are sometimes left intact. That happened in all the foregoing sentences. At other times, an independent sentence that compounds with another sentence is stripped. In the next sentence the second sentence is stripped of its subject:

He has the appearance not only of a pessimistic man but also of a fearful one.

That stripped subject is returned to it in square brackets here:

He has the appearance not only of a pessimistic man but also [*He has the appearance*] of a fearful one.

More drastic stripping can have even the operator itself out of sight:

He is fasting to lose weight.

He is fasting [*because he wants*] to lose weight.

The writer must become aware of the implicit presence of these stripped elements in order to know exactly what his compounding operators are computing. Losing track of them is often the cause of bad construction.

Validity in the compound sentence

The reasoning procedure that is the characteristic of compound sentences goes right off the rails when a compounding operator does something the writer did not want it to do, or if it fails to do something the writer did want it to do. The following tests are useful checks against miscarriages of reasoning in the compound sentence:

1. Do the part-sentences to be compounded make sense?

When the part-sentences to be compounded are not valid sentences, the compound ‘sentence’ is as meaningless as the complex ‘sentence’ that lacks a basic sentence. The following compound ‘sentence’ illustrates this:

I don’t like the term ‘ethnic’ but this appears to extend to local-born children of migrants and is therefore more apt.
[defective sentence]

This writer tried to compute defective basic sentences:

I don’t like the term ‘ethnic’. This appears to extend to the local-born children of migrants. This (?) is therefore more apt.

Whatever *This* represents is something that *appears to extend to the local-born children*. So what *appears to extend*: the writer’s dislike, of the term ‘ethnic’? Or does his dislike extend *to the local-born children of immigrants*? Is it one of these two listed possibilities or some other that is described as *more apt*? Even if we were able to find out what extends, there would remain another mystery: What is *more apt* than what? Neither ‘but’ nor ‘and’ nor any other operator can make sense of this kind of nonsense by compounding it.

2. Is the appropriate compounding operator in use?

This writer used the causal operator *so that* when he had no need for it. It succeeded to make him say something rather less than sensible, and quite other than what he wanted to say:

Adults do not recognise our need to have hope for the future *so that* we can change things for the better

for without this our society is committing suicide.
[defective sentence]

He did not mean to say that recognition by adults of someone's *need to have hope for the future* is the source or the cause of that person's being able *to change things for the better*: One can have one's need to hope recognised, and nonetheless remain unable to change anything. But having used the causal operator *so that*, it seems that the writer saw a causal connection where there is none. The meaning he wanted to make had no use for the causal operator *so that*. It needed an adjective phrase (underlined) to describe *future*:

Adults do not recognise our need to hope for a future
in which we can change things for the better.

The other causal operator in the original sentence, *for*, is quite useless because the reader does not know to what *this* refers. The writer thought that his second part-sentence would describe an element of the first one if he slipped a *so that* between them. That was vain hope, for a compounding operator will relate sentences by conjoining or disjoining them, or by declaring them in causal or conditional relationship. It certainly will not perform a descriptive role. Had he sorted out his part-sentences and discovered that he has only two to compound:

adults do not recognise our need to hope for a future

and

our society is committing suicide,

he would have been in a better position to decide which operator will make the sense he wants. Had he decided upon a sense that needs to compound his part-sentences conditionally, he would have chosen the conditional operator 'if ... then':

If adults do not recognise our need to hope for a
future in which we can change things for the better,
then our society is committing suicide.

3. Is the relationship between part-sentences declared logically

If a writer tries to make a compounding operator declare a relationship that cannot hold, he fails to make a statement:

I know it is true *and* I don't believe it.

I know it is true *but* I don't believe it.

[defective sentences]

Neither the conjunctive *and* nor the disjunctive *but* is capable of compounding contradictory points. It is contradictory to claim both that one knows something to be true and that one does not believe it, and vice versa.

In the following sentence the disjunctive operator *but* illogically denies the inherent conjunctive relationship between two statements:

I don't disbelieve it happened *but* I wouldn't assert that it didn't happen.
[defective sentence]

The refusal to assert that something did not happen is consistent with not disbelieving that it did happen. So the conjunctive operator 'and' should have been used, not the disjunctive operator 'but':

I don't disbelieve it *and* I wouldn't assert that it didn't happen.

4. Does the compound sentence reveal the full sequence of reasoning?

A compounding in this sentence causes its writer to say something he did not mean to say. The error occurred because he failed to declare the full sequence of his reasoning:

If I walk away from them they'll think I'm a wimp, but if I stay with them I know they'll get caught.
[defective sentence]

There is a successful compounding of the first two part-sentences: *If I walk away from them [then] they'll think I'm a wimp*. In the second compounding *but if* is appropriately used only if the writer meant to claim that his staying with *them* will be the cause of their being caught. But he did not mean to claim this. Rather, he meant to say that it is inevitable that *they'll get caught*, and that he will be caught with them if he stays. Had he been aware that the first premise of his sequence of reasoning is 'They are bound to be caught', he would have been better placed to word his last part-sentence soundly:

[They are bound to be caught.] If I walk away from them [*then*] they'll think I'm a wimp, but if I stay with them [*then*] I will be caught too.

Failure to declare the full sequence of reasoning occurs again in this sentence:

If you don't count my war against wasps and the painless putting down of the odd spider, I prefer not to bump creatures off the planet.
[defective sentence]

This writer says that he prefers not to *bump creatures off the planet if we do not count his war against wasps and his painless putting down of the odd spider*. Would his preference for 'refraining from bumping off' become a preference for 'bumping off' if we were to count his war? It is a fair guess that he did not mean to make *if you*

don't count my war against wasps the condition upon which he will maintain his preference for not bumping creatures off the planet. Rather, he intended to make *if you don't count ...* the conditional provision that enables the truth of 'I do not bump creatures off the planet'. And he neglected to declare 'I do not' as the part-sentence component of his compound sentence. Once that component is declared his sentence is perfectly sensible:

I prefer not to bump creatures off the planet, *and if you don't count my war against wasps and the painless putting down of the odd spider as 'bumping off', then I do not.*

5. Is the naming clear in the part-sentences to be compounded?

To make compounding operators work logically, one must know exactly what one is compounding. So clear naming is essential in the sentences to be compounded. The following sentence does not name clearly:

It is essential to give students some understanding of the Christian faith but that knowledge, understanding and tolerance needs to be developed regarding all religions and towards all people.
[defective sentence]

The noun phrase *to give students some understanding of the Christian faith* is described by the predicate adjective *essential* and occupies the vacant subject *It*. Thus that noun phrase is the only named concept in this first part-sentence. To what, therefore, does *that* of the second part-sentence refer? It can refer only to the one named concept that precedes it. But the only named concept there cannot be represented by *that* because *that* heads a noun phrase that names something in its own right: *that knowledge, understanding and tolerance*.

So what is the disjunctive *but* disjoining? There is no apparent disjunction between the two noun phrases *to give students some understanding of the Christian faith* and *that knowledge, understanding and tolerance*. They are just the subjects of the two part-sentences to be compounded. Indeed, no sort of logical relationship that might compound them is apparent. The writer, however, thought there is, probably because he did not understand that his noun phrases name the two separate (not the two interchangeable) subjects of his part-sentences.

Agile guesswork yields the possibility that he wanted to say something to this effect: 'Giving students some understanding of the Christian faith is essential but that understanding needs to be of a certain kind.' He might have put it thus:

It is essential to give students some understanding of the Christian faith, *but* that understanding should include knowledge about, and tolerance of, all people and religions.

The naming problem in the following sentence is not as awkward as it was in the previous sentence. But it does perpetrate a joke, and that is not a good thing for a sentence to do when its writer is being serious:

I recommend the use of the Burtell interview in Science classes as she gives a scientific account of nuclear energy and as a role model for female students.

[defective sentence]

The *Burtell interview* is represented by *she* and recommended as *a role model for female students*. Never was an interview more relentlessly personified! Of course, the writer meant to say this:

I recommend the use of the Burtell interview in Science classes, *as* it gives a scientific account of nuclear energy, *and because* Burtell is a role model for female students.

6. Does it merely look like a compounding operator or is it one?

In the foregoing ('Burtell interview') sentence, the first *as* is a compounding operator meaning 'because'. The second *as* is not a compounding operator at all, but part of the adverb-led noun phrase *as a role model for female students* that complements the act *recommend* of the subject *I*. The two occurrences of 'as' probably worked the eye-trick that had the writer thinking they are performing the same role, which in turn diverted him from the need to distinguish between the Burtell interview and Burtell the person.

7. Adverbs as compounding operators

In the following sentence, the writer seems to have thought that *so long as* is necessarily the multi-partied conditional operator 'so long as ... then'. Thus deluded, he inserted a confusing and inappropriate *them* into his sentence:

So long as governments are required to operate the financial affairs of the nation on the premise that sustained economic growth is a holy writ *then* the Budget will always be a revelation of the contradictions of capitalism.

But there is no role for a conditional operator in this sentence. Instead, the adverb (time) *so long as*, which is synonymous with

‘for the time that’ and ‘while’, is acting to conjoin the part-sentences *governments are required to operate the financial affairs of the nation on the premise that sustained economic growth is a holy writ and the Budget will always be a revelation of the contradictions of capitalism*. Deleting *then* corrects the error.

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