Was *that* necessary?

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Some pronouns and a conjunction: omission or addition?

THE ORIGIN of this article, and of the first of its two topics, was the inclusion of relative pronouns that seemed to me unnecessary and burdensome. I had been reading, out of duty rather than for pleasure, some texts written by professional classicists and grammarians and began to be aware that these writers, from Britain and the USA, nearly always included relative pronouns when they were not grammatically obligatory and where sometimes not having them would, in my view, have been to the benefit of the sentence.

The words in question were in most cases *that*, *which* and *whom*. I noticed too that these authors often used *which* in sentences where style guides I know of for British English would recommend *that*. So whereas, for me, a sentence might go 'I'm using the pen you gave me for Christmas', I suspect that, even in informal prose, these authors would have added, after *pen*, not so much an acceptable *that* as a dubious *which*. The distinction is summed up, for example, by the style guide of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, which says bluntly: 'That defines, which informs.' Things can be more complicated, and there are sentences in which the relative *that* correctly has an informing sense rather than a defining one, but as a rule of thumb *The Guardian*'s advice on this point is sound.

I am wondering therefore whether, in some parts of the academic world, there is nowadays a preference for the polite-sounding *which* over the more workaday *that* when it comes to relative pronouns. It is the impression I certainly get from some of those academic writers who take long, abstract-filled, roundabout routes towards their full-stops.

Getting rid of your relatives

I had to give the books back and forgot to note down any of the examples. To show, however, that the same thing happens in more general circles, here are some clippings from British newspapers, the first two from *The Guardian* (31 Aug 05) and the others from *The Observer* (18 Sep 05):

1 Iraq may have a constitution which it can be proud of.
2 They might have people whom they call their ancestors.
3 ... to do something which he clearly felt was immoral.
4 ... some of the more colourful events with which he has been involved this year.
5 ... the job to which he always felt he was entitled.

In the first three, the relative pronoun (*which/whom*) need not be there, and the last two are short enough for the preposition to come later and not be too far from the noun it relates to; so No 4 could have been '... some of the more colourful events he has been involved with this year.' And, of course, with No 1 and No 3, the house style of those two newspapers would have preferred *that* to *which*. Strictly speaking, 3 as it stands should imply the immorality of any action at all! It is just saved from being forced to have that meaning by the absence of a comma before it. The distinction, therefore, between the defin-

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DOI: 10.1017/S0266078406002082
English Today 86, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2006). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2006 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078406002082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing *that* and the informing *which* is like the difference commas make with *who*, *whom* and *whose*, as in 'The girls who are ill won't be playing hockey' (defines which girls) and 'The girls, who are ill, won't be playing hockey' (provides the reason).

Not being obliged in some circumstances to have the objective or conjunctive relative seems to me an advantage. It cannot be done, as far as I am aware, in the Romance languages, for example. To take my earlier sentence, you could not say in French **J'utilise le stylo tu m'as donné à Noël*: the use of *que* ('that') would be obligatory after *stylo* ('I am using the pen that you gave me at Christmas'). Why, then, do writers in English (including me) often write it when they need not? You would have thought that economy of effort favoured its exclusion. In fact, of course, it sometimes takes less mental effort to write something you need not write than not to write it. Whether there has been some trend, I am not sure, but I seem to have been more aware in recent years of a style in everyday publications, such as newspapers, in which the inclusion of the optional relative looks as if it was the first choice, unlikely to have been reconsidered. I am not advocating the abandonment of the relative wherever possible – it acts as a foil to its absence and is sometimes desirable – but, looking at it as a reader, I should welcome a greater proportion of relative-less sentences: provided the sense is not compromised, they often seem to me more elegant and mature.

I think I might be pushing my luck, though, if I recommended going further and following Shakespeare, who sometimes did not even use a subjective relative, as in 'Youth's a stuff will not endure.' I think I once may have said 'There's a shop down the road sells matches', but a newspaper headline like 'Oil is a fuel will not last indefinitely, says PM', though I should be delighted by such syntax, seems unlikely in the near future.

The invisible conjunction

There are four kinds of *that*: the relative pronoun, the demonstrative adjective, the disjunctive pronoun and the conjunction. The second topic of this article is also to do with the presence or absence of *that*, this time the conjunction. Not long ago, I wrote: 'There are those who think Chomsky's ideas about language have been harmful to intellectual life.' Long-time readers of *ET* should not be surprised at my expressing such an idea, but the issue here is not the sentiment but the syntax, that I did not include *that* and write 'There are those who think that Chomsky's ideas about language have been harmful to intellectual life.'

After certain verbs, such as *say*, *think* and *show*, the connective *that* is sometimes not grammatically obligatory. Once again, English differs from French, for example, where you could not write **Il y a des gens qui pensent les idées de Chomsky sont néfastes à la vie intellectuelle.* A *que* ('that') would be required after the verb *pensent* ('think'). If the introductory verb in English can be transitive, there may sometimes be a momentary misunderstanding, but once the following verb appears, all usually becomes clear. So, one of the examples I give below starts 'They don't know their fathers...'; if you stop there, *their fathers* seems to be the object of *know*, but the sentence continues '... were donors', and now, without blinking, you take 'their fathers' as the subject of the noun-phrase dependent on 'know'.

The examples below are again from *The Guardian* (25 Nov 05) and *The Observer* (26 Nov 05) and are taken from a variety of authors in the editorial and comment columns. I have chosen only examples where the presence or absence of *that* would have been equally feasible on grammatical grounds. This is not a statistical exercise, and so I have not given all the possible examples from those sections to count them up and see which syntactical choice wins. There were some where word-order made the inclusion of *that* the better choice. An example of this was the sentence *They believe, incredibly, that the earth is only a few thousand years old*. Without the *incredibly*, either version, with or without *that*, would be equally possible, but here even the inclusion of only one word between the introductory verb and the dependent clause has tipped the scales in favour of including *that*. Sometimes, too, the addition of another dependent clause – after *and* or *but* – may require *that*, even if there is not one to start with.

I have split the examples into two groups. How you describe them depends on your point of view. For the first group, you could say that *that* has not been omitted or that it has been added; for the second, that *that* has been omitted or that it has not been added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078406002082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Group 1

a ... suggests that the truce could collapse.
b That's not to say that we're all hipster SDCs.
c ... reminding us that we are being watched by CCTV.
d ... as suggesting that each of us needs...
e Lest people think that the invasion of Iraq was undertaken to establish democracy...
f ... people tend to think that the politics of pensions is dull.

Group 2

a ... the chancellor's letter shows he is having doubts...
b Supporters insist the case is politically motivated.
c The moves suggest friendly solidarity has not been completely destroyed.
d Mr Blair believes his party's future prosperity depends on him.
e Only one out of four Americans believes life on earth has evolved...
f He declared its task was to create a base for a peace agreement.
g ... they don't know their fathers were donors.
h Pendennis hopes upmarket boozadrome, the Departure Lounge, is within...

The default position

Is there a default position for these constructions? That is to say, should we take one version as the basic form and talk of adding or omitting the relative pronoun and the conjunction, as the case may be? It could be misleading, I think, to appeal to the history of the language. Take, for comparison, the rule about the two forms of the indefinite article, *a* and *an*: on historical grounds, it would be more accurate to say that the default form was *an* and that you omitted the *n* before a consonant. It would be strange, though, I think, to formulate the rule in that way nowadays, and I would say it was not how we feel it. I have also heard some British speakers in the under-30 age range sometimes keeping *a* before a vowel; to me it sounds weird, but to them *a* is clearly the default form.

We could simply say that the two possibilities had equal status but, if we are looking for a criterion for the default, it might be that of naturalness. Individual decisions are likely to be made on aesthetic grounds or, sadly, from an absence of aesthetic consideration. Maybe, then, I have loaded the examples I am about to give in favour of my own preference, but they seemed to me stylistically neutral. So, comparing two pairs of sentences I have made up that differ only by the presence or absence of *that*, I should say that 'Some of the things I know about her would surprise you' and then 'I thought she was a soprano' were more natural than 'Some of the things that I know about her would surprise you', and then 'I thought that she was a soprano.'

There is not much in it, though. If I were to propose a default for the general case, therefore, I would go for the options without the relative and the conjunction, and say that the fuller constructions were variants that may, in some circumstances, be preferable or required. May I suggest then that, for the sorts of sentences I have referred to here, we say that *that* may be added rather than that it may be omitted? ■

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