8

Exploring the grammar of the clause

GRAMMAR BITES in this chapter

A Subordination, coordination, and ellipsis

- How to condense and elaborate meaning in grammar
- Subordination and dependent clauses: making grammar 'deeper'
- Coordination: making grammar 'broader'
- Ellipsis and condensation of structure: making grammar 'quicker and simpler'

B Subject–verb concord

- Concord: matching subjects and verbs in clauses
- Special cases of concord, such as collective nouns
- Notional concord v. grammatical concord
- The principle of proximity

C Negation

- Clause negation and local negation
- Negative contractions and verb contractions
- Choosing between *not*-negation and *no*-negation
- The scope of negation
- Assertive and non-assertive forms

D Independent clauses

- Declarative clauses: statements
- Interrogative clauses: questions
- Imperative clauses: directives
- Exclamative clauses and non-clausal material

E Dependent clauses

- Finite v. non-finite dependent clauses
- Finite clauses: complement, adverbial, relative, and other types
- Non-finite clauses: infinitive, *-ing*, *-ed*, and other types
- Dependent clauses without a main clause

8.1 Introduction

The **clause** is in many ways the key unit of grammar. Chapter 3 (3.4–5) surveyed simple clauses, seen as units structured around a verb phrase. In the simplest case, the chief elements of the clause—subject, verb phrase, object, predicative, and adverbial—are made up of phrases, which have been explored in some detail in Chapters 3–7.

However, we now turn to subordination: the type of syntactic structure where one clause is embedded as part of another. For example, clause elements like object or adverbial can be realized as other dependent clauses. We also need to describe how clauses can be combined by coordination, and the way simplified or condensed structures can be formed through ellipsis. The way in which clauses can be combined to make more complex structures is fundamental to grammar. The present chapter introduces the key concepts and terms. We explore the grammar of these structures in more detail in Chapters 9–13.

8.1.1 Clauses v. non-clausal material

Clauses are used very differently in different varieties of English. As a starting point, let's examine the distribution of clauses in discourse, using two text samples (the verb phrases are given in bold, and clauses are enclosed in *[]*):

Text sample 1: CONVERSATION IN A BARBER'S SHOP (*B* = barber, *C* = customer)

B: *[I **will put**,] [I **won't smile**.] – [**Tell** me [what **would** you **like** now?]]*
C: *Erm – [**shortened up** please Pete] – erm – [**shaved** a little at the back and sides]–[and then just sort of **brushed back** on the top a bit.]*
B: *Right, and [when you **say** [**shaved** a little bit]]*
C: *Yeah yo– – [you sort of just – **got** your thing] and zazoom!*
B: *Yeah [but – **is** it that short really?]*
C: *Yeah to–, yeah and I*
B: <unclear> *[you **want** a number four?]*
C: *Yeah [I **think** so]*
...
<later in the same conversation>
B: *So yeah, [I **was** well pleased] [cos you **remember** [the time before I **said** [I **wasn't** perfect.]]]*
C: <unclear>
B: *[That's right] yeah – yeah – [[I **mean**] I'**m being** honest.]*
C: *Yeah – mm.*
...
B: *[I **was**] – [I **thought** [it **looked** good]] – [and I **thought**,] [I **was** quite confident [that it **would stay** in very well,] [you **know**?]] –*
C: *Mm.* (CONV)

Text sample 2: A COMPLETE NEWS STORY FROM THE *INDEPENDENT* NEWSPAPER

*[People [who **eat** a clove or more of garlic a day] **are** less likely [to **suffer** a heart attack, high blood pressure or thrombosis,] [doctors **said** yesterday,] [**writes** Liz Hunt.]] [New clinical trials **show** [that [**including** garlic in the diet] **can** significantly **reduce** cholesterol in the blood], according to Dr Jorg*

Grunwald, a research biologist from Berlin.] [High cholesterol levels ***are associated*** *with atherosclerosis, or 'furring' of the arteries with fatty deposits, [which* ***can lead*** *to a heart attack.]] [Garlic* ***could*** *also [****reduce*** *high blood pressure] and [****prevent*** *blood cells sticking together,] risk factors for a heart attack, [Dr Grunwald, head of the medical and scientific department of Lichtwer Pharma, a German company that manufactures garlic pills,* ***said.****]] [The active ingredient in garlic* ***is thought*** *[to* ***be*** *the compound alliin.]]* (NEWS)

The differences between these two samples are striking:

The conversation text	In the newspaper text
includes non-clausal material (e.g. *right, yeah*)	all words and phrases belong to clauses
includes many single-clause units	there are no single-clause units
includes little clause embedding	the clauses contain many words

GRAMMAR BITE

A Subordination, coordination, and ellipsis

8.2 Devices of elaboration and condensation

This Grammar Bite introduces **coordination**, **subordination,** and **ellipsis**, three aspects of grammar which are closely interrelated, and which enable us to elaborate, combine, and reduce the structure of clauses. With coordination, two clauses are connected, with each having equal status, as in:

It's modern ***but*** *it's clean.* (CONV)

With subordination, on the other hand, one clause is embedded as part of another clause, as in:

Although *it's modern, it's clean.*

Finally, ellipsis is a device of simplification: it allows us to subtract words from the complete clause structure, wherever their meaning can be 'taken for granted' (^ marks the ellipsis):

It's clean ***although*** *^ modern.*

It's modern ***but*** *^ clean.*

8.3 Subordination and dependent clauses

We can see more exactly how subordination of clauses differs from coordination of clauses by looking at Figures 8.1 and 8.2. In the case of subordination, one clause (a dependent clause) is embedded as part of another clause (its main clause). In Figure 8.2, the dependent clause functions as an adverbial in the main clause. As shown by the repeated use of brackets in Text sample 2 (8.1.1), there can be further degrees of embedding: one dependent clause can be subordinate to another dependent clause. The following example, simplified and extracted from Text sample 2, further illustrates this:

> *[New clinical trials show [that [including garlic in the diet] can reduce cholesterol.]* (NEWS†)

Figure 8.1 Coordinated clauses

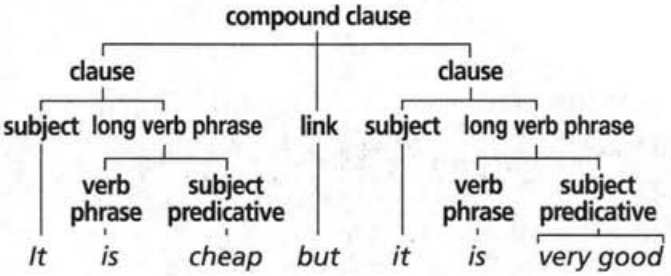


Figure 8.2 Main clause with embedded adverbial clause

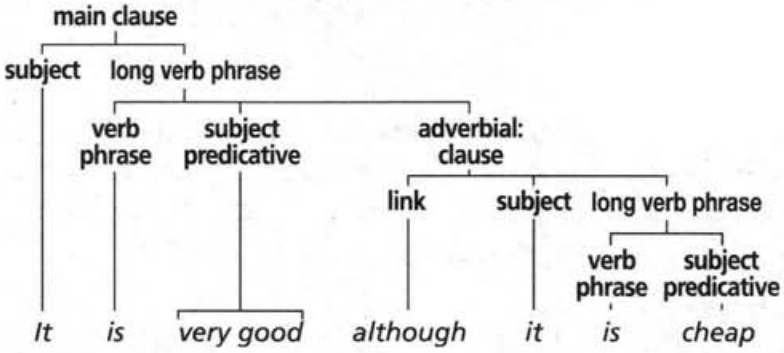
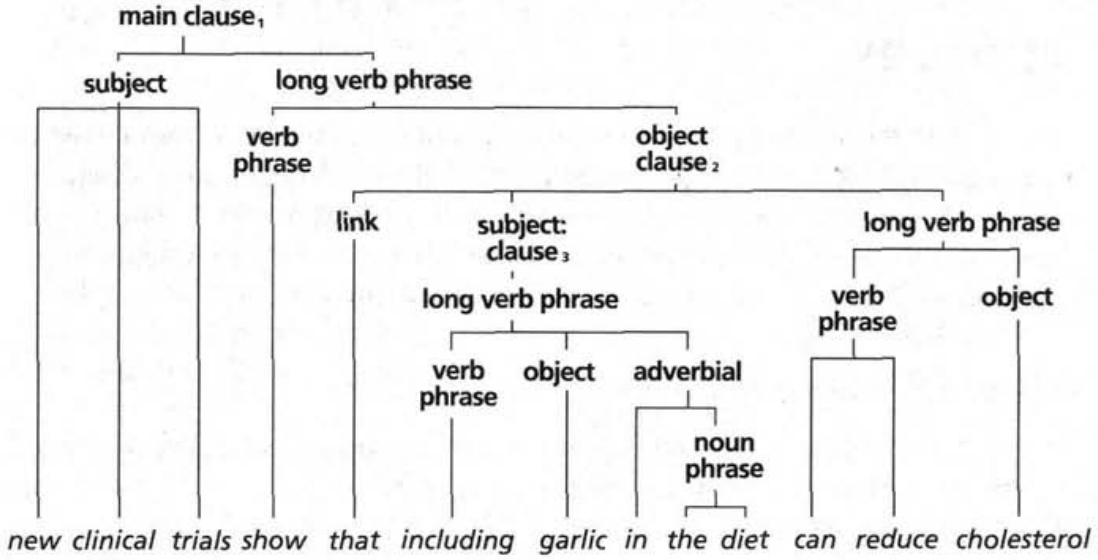


Figure 8.3 shows this complex clause as a tree diagram. In this diagram, three clauses are marked as $clause_1$, $clause_2$, and $clause_3$: $clause_2$ functions as the object of *show*, and so it is subordinate to $clause_1$; $clause_3$ functions as the subject of *can reduce*, and so it is subordinate to $clause_2$.

When we classify clauses, we draw a major distinction between **independent clauses** (those which can stand alone without being subordinate to another clause) and **dependent clauses** (those which have to be part of a larger clause). Hence $clause_1$ in Figure 8.3 is an independent clause, while $clause_2$ and $clause_3$ are dependent clauses.

Figure 8.3 **Main clause with two degrees of embedding**



8.3.1 Subordinators as clause links

Subordinators differ in important ways from other clause links. Subordinators are like **coordinators**, but are different from **linking adverbials**, because they occur in a fixed position at the front of their clause. But, unlike coordinators, the clause introduced by a subordinator is always a dependent clause, and it does not necessarily follow the clause to which it is linked:

*He was screaming **because** he had to go home.* (CONV)

Examples **1** and **1a** illustrate how it is often possible to move a dependent clause to a different position; but **2** and **2a** show this is not possible for coordinate clauses:

1 *I'm still just as afraid of her, **although** she's no longer my teacher.* (FICT)
1a ***Although** she's no longer my teacher, I'm still just as afraid of her.*
<equivalent to **1**>

2 *She's no longer my teacher, **but** I'm still just as afraid of her.*
2a ****But** I'm still just as afraid of her, she's no longer my teacher.*
<not equivalent to **2**>

***Wh*-words** are like subordinators in normally being fixed at the beginning of a dependent clause. However, unlike subordinators, *wh*-words usually fill a major syntactic role (e.g. subject, object or adverbial) in the dependent clause (see 2.5.1).

8.3.2 Signals of subordination

Subordination can be signalled by:

- an overt link, in the form of a subordinator or *wh*-word
- a non-finite verb phrase, that is, by a verb phrase introduced by an infinitive, *-ing* participle or *-ed* participle.

Finite clauses are marked for tense or modality. Finite dependent clauses usually have an overt link, starting with a subordinator or a *wh*-word:

*You can drink your orange [**if** you like].* (CONV)

Non-finite clauses have no tense and they cannot include a modal verb. Non-finite dependent clauses usually have no overt link, but the non-finite verb form itself signals that the clause is subordinate:

*[**Leaving** the road], they went into the deep darkness of the trees.* (FICT†)

Most non-finite clauses have no subject, and so the verb phrase typically begins the clause. Hence, in most cases, the listener has no problem in recognizing when the speaker is beginning a dependent clause. (For more on finite and non-finite dependent clauses, see Grammar Bite E in this chapter.)

8.3.3 Clause patterns revisited

To see in more detail how dependent clauses are embedded in main clauses, we return to the clause patterns and elements previewed in 3.4–5. At that point we introduced basic clause structures with the elements S (subject), O (object), P (predicative), and A (adverbial) realized by phrases. But now we describe how S, O, P and A can themselves be clauses. Table 8.1 identifies by # the major ways in which finite and non-finite clauses can be elements of a main clause.

Table 8.1 Typical realizations of the clause elements S, O, P, A

clause element	noun phrase	verb phrase	adj. phrase	adv. phrase	prep. phrase	finite clause	inf. clause	*ing*- clause	*ed*- clause
subject (S)	•					#	#	#	
verb phrase (V)		•							
subject predicative (SP)	•		•		•	#	#	#	
direct object (DO)	•					#	#	#	#
indirect object (IO)	•					#			
prep. object	•					#		#	
object predicative (OP)	•		•			#	#	#	
adverbial (A)	•			•	•	#	#	#	#

Key: adj. = adjective; adv. = adverb; prep. = prepositional; inf. = infinitive.

These dependent clause patterns are illustrated below:

- subject:
  - finite clause: ***That it would be unpopular with students or colleges** was obvious.* (NEWS)
  - infinitive clause: ***To meet the lady** was easy enough.* (FICT†)
  - *ing*-clause: ***Including garlic in the diet** can significantly reduce cholesterol.* (NEWS†)
- subject predicative:
  - finite clause: *That's **what I'll do tomorrow.*** (CONV)
  - infinitive clause: *Their function is **to detect the cries of predatory bats.*** (ACAD)
- direct object:

finite clause: *She hoped **that Joe wouldn't come in drunk**.* (FICT†)
ing-clause: *Stephanie disliked **living in this unfinished mess**.* (FICT†)
infinitive clause: *'I wouldn't like **to leave him**,' Olivia said.* (FICT)

- prepositional object:
  finite clause: *Well you pay for **what you want**.* (CONV)
  ing-clause: *Please forgive me for **doubting you**.* (FICT)
- object predicative:
  infinitive clause: *No one can expect us **to sign our own death sentence**.* (NEWS†)
  ing-clause: *She watched her son George **scything the grass**.* (FICT)
  ed-clause: *I should have got my boots **mended**.* (FICT†)
- adverbial:
  finite clause: *I'm tense; excuse me **if I talk too much**.* (FICT)
  infinitive clause: *I borrowed a portable phone **to ring Waterloo**.* (NEWS)
  ing-clause: *She gazed down at the floor, **biting her lip**.* (FICT†)
  ed-clause: *I went on waiting, **tinged with doubt**.* (FICT)

8.4 Coordination

Unlike subordination, coordination can link words, phrases, or clauses:

*'No black worth [his] **or** [her] salt would touch such a [black] **and** [white] merry-go-round.* (NEWS†) <coordination linking words>

*'[A fool] **and** [his money] are soon parted,' he says.* (FICT) <coordination linking phrases>

*[He had even called her parents] **and** [they didn't know where she was], **nor** [did her friends when he called them].* (FICT) <coordination linking clauses>

In addition, the coordinators *and*, *or*, *but*, and *nor* can function as utterance- or turn-initial links in speech (see 8.4.2 below). In this case, coordinators are very close in function to linking adverbials like *however*.

A: ***And** you won't have that problem.*
B: ***But** that's a, that's a, that's a different thing.* (CONV) <turn-initial coordination>

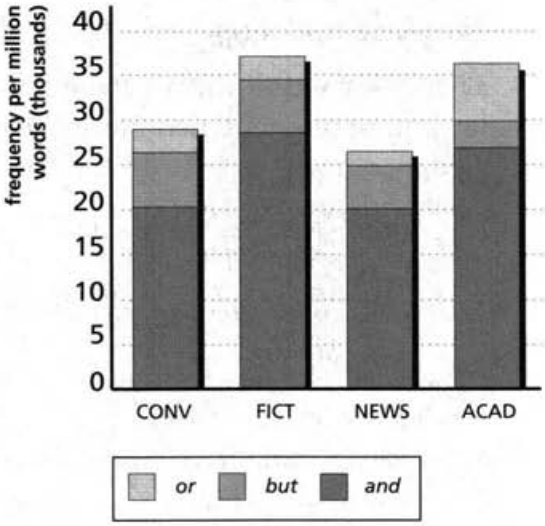
In what follows, we survey some aspects of the use of coordinators, drawing a broad distinction between phrase-level coordination (including coordination of words) and clause-level coordination.

8.4.1 Use of coordination

There are three major coordinators in English: *and*, *or*, and *but*. As Figure 8.4 shows, these coordinators are not equally common: *and* is much more common than *or* or *but*. Further, although it is often supposed that *and* is especially common in conversation, Figure 8.4 shows that *and* is actually most common in academic and fiction writing.

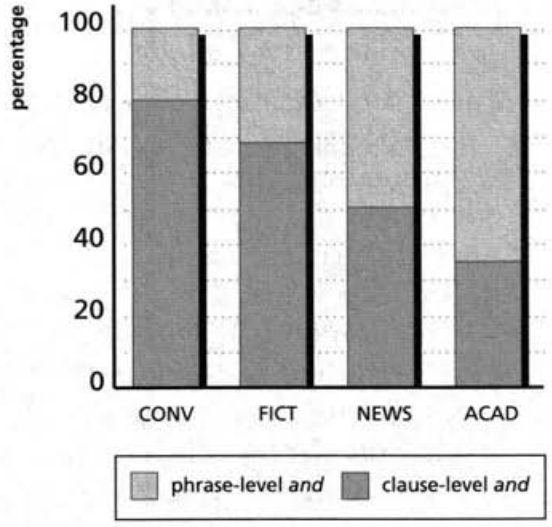
The other major coordinators—*but* and *or*—follow very different patterns: *but* occurs most often in conversation, whereas *or* occurs most often in academic writing. There is a fourth coordinator—*nor*—which occurs much less frequently, so that it does not show up in Figure 8.4.

Figure 8.4
Distribution of coordinators across registers



The registers also differ in the ways they use coordinators. Figure 8.5 shows that speakers in conversation are most likely to use *and* as a clause-level link, while in academic writing *and* is most likely to occur as a phrase-level link. Conversation often follows a simple mode of grammatical construction in simply adding one clause to another—what we later call the 'add-on' strategy (13.3.2). Hence coordinators in conversation are primarily clause-level links.

Figure 8.5
Percentage use of *and* as phrase-level v. clause-level connector



But is more frequent in conversation than the written registers, because people tend to highlight contrast and contradiction in dialog. Note the following typical use of *but* at or near the beginning of a speaker's turn:

1 *A: The golden rule is if you're reversing you must look behind you!*
B: Yeah, ***but*** *she said she did.* (CONV)

Academic writing contrasts very strongly with conversation in favoring phrase-level coordination, which helps to build up complex embedded structures:

2 *A distinction is needed between {$_1$ [elements, which include {$_2$ [nitrogen], [phosphorus]* ***and*** *[potassium]$_2$ }], which are mobile in the phloem]* ***and*** *[those which are comparatively immobile, for example, {$_3$ [calcium], [boron]* ***and*** *[iron]$_3$ }]$_1$ } <...> An example of the {$_4$ [uptake]* ***and*** *[transfer]$_4$ } of {$_5$ [nitrogen]* ***and*** *[phosphorus]$_5$ } during the period of grain filling of winter wheat is given in Table 2.5.* (ACAD†)

All the instances of *and* in **2** illustrate phrase-level coordination. Example **2** also illustrates two further aspects of coordination: (a) that the coordinator can link more than two elements, as in *nitrogen, phosphorus* ***and*** *potassium*; and (b) that structures of coordination can be embedded, one within the other (as shown by the brackets-within-brackets in the text). Curly brackets { } are used to show whole coordinate constructions.

8.4.2 Some special uses of coordinators

A Sentence-initial and turn-initial coordinators

There is a well-known prescription prohibiting the use of coordinators at the beginning of a sentence. Nevertheless, coordination often occurs in this position. Sentence-initial or turn-initial coordination is most common at the beginning of a turn in conversation:

A: They started late last year.
*B: **And** what are your academic classes you're taking next semester, you're taking the art history class?* (CONV)

However, it is also relatively common in writing.

The coordinators show different preferences for initial position: *but* and *nor*, as 'stronger' linkers, are much more likely to take this prominent position than *and* or *or*.

B Coordination tags

Like sentence/turn-initial coordinators, coordination tags are frowned upon in writing but popular in conversation. The most common coordination tags are the phrases *or something, and everything, and things/stuff (like that)*:

1 *She uses a food processor **or something**.* (CONV)
2 *He has a lot of contacts **and things**.* (CONV†)
3 *They're all sitting down **and stuff**.* (CONV)

Coordination tags are a kind of vagueness marker or **hedge**: they are a grammatical way of waving one's hand, and saying '... of course I could add more'. The coordinator *and* or *or* is followed by a general noun or pronoun. But this does not mean that the coordination is always at the word or phrase level. On the contrary, in **3** above, the coordination tag is added on to a whole clause.

In contrast to the expressions above, the tags *or so, and so on*, and *etc.* (*et cetera*, a Latin expression meaning 'and other things') are mainly associated with expository writing:

*I waited for a day **or so**.* (NEWS†)

*The Libertas catalogue menu offered a choice of six search modes (author and title, title, subject, **etc.**).* (ACAD)

C Correlative coordinators

The correlative coordinators *both ... and, either ... or, neither ... nor* were introduced in 2.4.6. They are also strongly associated with the written registers, probably because they add greater clarity and precision:

*Symptoms may appear first in **either** younger **or** older leaves.* (ACAD)

8.5 Ellipsis and structural condensation

Ellipsis is the omission of elements which are recoverable from the linguistic context or the situation. In the following examples, the ellipted elements are re-inserted in < >:

1 *He squeezed her hand but* <he> *met with no response.* (FICT)
2 *He and his mate both jumped out, he* <jumped out> *to go to the women, his mate* <jumped out> *to stop other traffic on the bridge.* (FICT)
3 *Perhaps, as the review gathers steam, this can now change. It needs to* <change>. (NEWS)

Notice that the words within < >, which were not part of the original text, can be added without changing the meaning of the clause and without producing an ungrammatical structure. These are the hallmarks of ellipsis: it **condenses** (or reduces) the same meaning into a smaller number of words.

8.5.1 Types of ellipsis: initial, medial, final; textual, situational

The words omitted by ellipsis can be at the front, middle, or end of a clause. In the examples above, **1** shows initial ellipsis (omitting the subject of the second clause), **2** illustrates medial ellipsis, and **3** illustrates final ellipsis.

Another distinction is between textual ellipsis and situational ellipsis. In textual ellipsis, the missing words can be found in the nearby text. Typically, the missing words occur in the preceding text, as in **1–3** above. Thus, textual ellipsis is a means of avoiding unnecessary repetition.

In situational ellipsis, on the other hand, the missing words are clear from the situation in which language is used (^ = ellipsis)

4 ^ *Saw Susan and her boyfriend in Alder weeks ago.* (CONV)

Here the subject *I* is omitted, but it can easily be supplied from the context. Situational ellipsis usually takes the form of omitting initial function words in a clause, such as a pronoun subject, an auxiliary verb, or the initial article of a noun phrase. It is a common feature of conversation, but it also often occurs in fiction texts imitating the elliptical habits of speech:

5 *Gillespie made his examination. '^ Middle-aged man,' he said '^ anywhere between forty-five and sixty, more probably in the middle or late fifties. ^ Body seems to be in fair condition, ^ own hair, ^ not thinning. ah, yes – ^ depressed fracture of skull. He's been in the water for some time, ^ clothing ^ utterly soaked, ^ body ^ chilled.'* (FICT)

In most cases, we can easily find and fill in the gaps left by ellipsis, using grammatical and situational knowledge. (See also 8.14 on non-clausal material and block language, and 13.5 for more examples of ellipsis in conversation.)

8.5.2 Other structures with ellipsis

Ellipsis, like coordination, is a variable device which can occur in many grammatical structures. In the above paragraphs we have noted ellipsis occurring:

- in coordinate clauses

- in dependent clauses
- at the beginning of independent clauses.

Ellipsis also occurs in more specialized cases:

A Ellipsis in comparative clauses

Comparative clauses generally mirror the structure of a preceding clause. Repeated elements in the comparative clause are normally left out (or replaced by a **pro-form**). In the following examples, the ellipted elements are reinserted in < >:

She looks older than my mother <does>. (CONV)

One result was that older people made greater head movements than younger people <did>. (ACAD)

B Ellipsis in question–answer sequences

A: Have you got an extra exam on Monday?
B: <I've got> *Two exams* <on Monday>.
A: What exams <have you got>?
B: <I've got> *German, reading and French oral – French oral's a doddle.*
A: Is it <a doddle>*?* (CONV) <note: *a doddle* = very easy>

In the quick give-and-take of conversation, speakers leave out what is easily recoverable from the linguistic context or the situation. This applies particularly to answers to questions. (On ellipsis in conversation, see further 13.5.)

C Ellipsis in noun phrases

Ellipsis is also common in noun phrases. We find ellipsis following independent genitives (**1** below), quantifiers (**2**), and semi-determiners (**3**):

1 *Under Reagan, everything bad that happened was either my fault or Nixon's fault or Congress's fault or some* ***foreigner's*** ^. (NEWS†)
2 *How's everyone's champagne? Tommy do you want some* ***more*** ^*?* (CONV)
3 *It gets you from one place to the* ***next*** ^. (CONV)

(Underlining shows the repeated words that have been omitted.)

8.5.3 Other forms of condensation

Pronouns and other pro-forms are similar to ellipsis in that they reduce the length and complexity of clauses. Pronouns substitute for full noun phrases that are retrievable from context, while other pro-forms, such as the substitute verb *do*, replace a whole predicate. The following examples illustrate how each of these methods can abbreviate what a person needs to say or write (the pro-form is in bold; the fuller expression is underlined):

- pronoun:

  We borrowed the tennis racquets when Bonnie and Steve were here. And we used ***them*** *twice I think.* (CONV)

- other pro-forms:

  A: Who took that picture?
  B: I ***did****.* (CONV)

Another form of structural condensation occurs with non-finite clauses, which usually omit the subject and auxiliary verb. (This makes a difference to the usefulness of these clauses; see 11.10 on adverbial finite and non-finite clauses.) Compare:

1 *I don't know* ***what to write about.*** (CONV) <non-finite clause>
1a *I don't know* ***what I should write about.*** <finite clause>

Generally speaking, pronouns and pro-forms, like ellipsis, are much more common in conversation, whereas non-finite clauses are more common in the written registers.

Review

Major points of **GRAMMAR BITE A**: Subordination, coordination, and ellipsis

- ➤ Subordination and coordination are ways of 'deepening' and 'broadening' grammar.
- ➤ Subordinate clauses are embedded as part of another clause.
- ➤ Subordination is signaled by an overt link (such as a subordinator) or by a non-finite verb phrase.
- ➤ Coordinate clauses are joined, with each having equal status.
- ➤ Coordination can also be used to join phrases.
- ➤ Despite prescriptive rules, coordinators are commonly used at the beginning of a turn in conversation, and at the start of a new sentence in writing.
- ➤ Ellipsis is a way of simplifying grammatical structure through omission.
- ➤ Ellipsis is common in a wide range of contexts. A listener can usually reconstruct the missing words from the preceding text or from the situation.
- ➤ Pronouns and other pro-forms also reduce the length and complexity of clauses.

GRAMMAR BITE

B Subject–verb concord

8.6 The subject–verb concord rule

The rule of **subject–verb concord** is that in finite clauses, the verb phrase in a clause agrees with the subject in terms of number (singular or plural) and person (first, second or third person). Except for the verb *be*, subject–verb concord is limited to the present tense, and to the choice between the base form (e.g. *walk*) and the *s*-form (e.g. *walks*) of the finite verb. There is no subject–verb concord with modal auxiliaries, non-finite verbs, imperatives, or the subjunctive: these do not vary for number or person.

Although the rules for subject–verb concord are easy to state, in practice they are not always so easy to apply. Difficulties arise because 'singular' and 'plural' can be understood either in terms of form or in terms of meaning. We consider some special cases below.