Subordination as Distinct From Embedding:
Evidence From English and Arabic

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Abstract. Subordination and embedding are two processes of forming non-simple sentences in different languages. But these two processes have been used interchangeably to describe structures which are not really of the same status. As a result, there has been a confusion in terminology. In addition, the two processes have never been distinguished in the literature.

This paper sets to examine how each process is used and what structures it handles. It is felt that a distinction ought to be made between subordination and embedding on structural and functional grounds. Data drawn from English and Arabic seem to support this stance. If this distinction can be established, two objectives will be achieved: (a) the confusion in terminology would be resolved (b) this could be extended to other languages that make use of subordination and embedding in forming non-simple sentences.

00.   Both traditional grammar and modern linguistic studies recognise two processes of forming non-simple sentences in English: coordination (which is not the subject of this paper) and subordination. With the advent of transformational grammar a new term has appeared and has come to replace the older one of subordination. Some writers still use the two terms interchangeably. This paper argues that subordination is different from embedding, and consequently, three syntactic processes are employed in forming non-simple sentences, rather than two.

01.   In traditional parlance, two major types of sentences are recognised by grammarians and linguists: simple and non-simple sentences. A simple sentence consists of one clause only. A clause is defined as a unit of structure with an identifiable subject and verb and, optionally, an object, adjective, complement, etc. A non-simple sentence, on the other hand, is a sentence that consists of more than one clause.

In traditional grammar, two types of non-simple sentences are recognised: the compound and the complex. A compound sentence is that which results from the coordination of two or more sentences. A complex sentence is one which results from the connection or fusion of two or more sentences by a syntactic process other than coordination. Moreover, a sentence may be compound and complex at the same time. In the following examples, sentences 1 (a) and (b) are compound, 2 (a) and (b) are complex, and 3 is compound-complex. The brackets are used to indicate the sentence of any type.

1. (a)   [He doesn't talk to me] and [I don't talk to him.]
   (b)   [John keeps nagging at me] and [I don't listen to him.]

2. (a)   [One should think carefully] before [he says anything.]
   (b)   [I'll give you the book] [you asked for.]

3.   [Lend me your book] and [I'll give it back to you] whenever [you need it.]

Complex sentences are formed by a process that has come to be known as subordination; a notional term deriving from the fact that one clause is subordinated to another in such sentences.

As mentioned above, with the advent of transformational grammar the term subordination was relinquished and the term embedding came to be used by some linguists. The new term is no less notional than the old one; it refers to the same syntactic structures. Structures handled by subordination or embedding are thus known as subordinate or embedded clauses. Other labels used for the same structures include 'dependent clauses'[1] and 'included sentences'.[2] A mixture of traditional and modern terminology is found in Langacker who points ot subordinate clauses being embedded in main clauses. We will come back to this point later on.[3]

Let me mention at this point that the subordinate clause, or a dependent clause in its traditional usage, fulfills a specific function within a larger complex sentence. Thus, it can be the subject, complement, object of a preposition, or modifier of the larger clause, as in the following examples:

4. *As soon as it started to rain,* all the children began to yell with excitement. (Subordinate adverbial clause)

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(1) Peter H. Matthews, *Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.168-70.

(2) Charles C. Fries, *The Structure of English: An Introduction to the Construction of English Sentences* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 100.

(3) Ronald W.Langacker, *Fundamentals of Linguistic Analysis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p.137.

a. *ḥina tawaqqafat sayyāratuhu,* 'iṭṭurra al-sā'iqu 'ilā saḥbihā 'ilā 'aqrabi war-šatin.
"*When his car stopped,* the driver had to tow it to the nearest workshop." (subordinate adverbial caluse)

5. I know *that he is honest.* (Noun clause: direct object of 'know')

a. yaʿtaqid baʿḍu-l-ʿulamā'i *'anna al-zarāfata lā taḥtāju 'aktara min ʿišrina daqiqatin li al-nawmi.*
"Some scientists believe *that a qiraffe does not need more than twenty minutes of sleep.*" (Noun clause: object of 'yaʿtaqid' or 'believe')

6. A cynic is a man *who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.*
Oscar Wilde

(Adjective clause modifying 'man')

a. 'aʿāra Fu'ādun darrājatahu li al-waladi *allaḍi yalʿ abu dā'iman maʿahu.* (Adjective clause modifying 'walad')
"Fuad lent his bike to the boy *whom he always plays with.*"

7. [a]*As it appeared,* John was tackled [b]*as he threw the pass* [c]*that might have saved him.*
(a = sentence adverbial   b = adverbial|clause   c = adjective clause modifying 'pass')

a. *maʿa 'anna ḍālika lam yakun mustaṣāġan 'abadan,* faqad 'aṣarra Fu'ādun *ʿalā 'an yuwāṣila muḥābātihi li al-šaxṣi allaḍi kāna al-sababa fi-l-'iqāʿi baynahu wa bayna 'aʿazzi 'aṣdiqā'ihi fi-l-ʿamali.*
(a = sentence adverbial   b = noun clause, object of *'aṣarra ʿalā*   c = adjective clause modifying šaxs)
Though it was utterly distasteful, Fuad insisted *that he would continue to butter up the person who was responsible for the rift between Fuad and his closest friends at work.*"

In sentence (4) above, the clause 'as soon as it started to rain' serves an adverbial function. Similarly, the Arabic clause 'ḥina tawaqqafat sayyāratuhu' in (4a) serves an adverbial function, too. In sentence (5), the clause ' that he is honest' functions as object of the transitive verb 'known'; similarly, the Arabic noun clause ''anna al-zarafata .... al-nawmi' functions as object of the verb 'yaʿtaqid'. In sentence (6) the relative caluse 'who knows .... nothing' serves an adjectival function of modification, i.e. it modifies the antecedent 'man'. The Arabic clause 'allaḍi yalʿabu dāiman maʿahu' in (6) also serves an adjectival function. Sentence (7) includes three dependent clauses performing sentential adverbial, adverbial, and adjectival functions, respectively. In (7a), the three clauses perform adverbial, nominal, and adjectival functions, respectively.

02.   A closer look at these sentences, however, will show that the dependent clauses within these structures are not of the same status though they are generally viewed as subordinate clauses.

We mentioned earlier (p.2) that the new term 'embedding' replaced the old one 'subordination' in transformational circles. We also mentioned that structures treated under this new process came to be known as embedded clauses. In fact, because of the lack of uniformity in terminology a lost of confusion was evolved; thus in the works of some linguists[4] we find an exclusive use of the term 'embedding'. In the works of some other linguists[5] the term 'subordination' is used exclusively. Still in the works of the third group, especially relatively recent works[6] the two terms are used interchangeably, though in the case of Brown & Miller, the term 'subordination' is used once[7] while the other term 'embedding' is used regularly through the book.[8] Another writer, Jeanne Ambrose-Grillet, in *Glossary of T.B.*[9] uses the term 'embedding' as synonymous to 'nesting'. He also considers embedding as a simple case of subordination, but he doesn't mention 'subordination' anywhere in his Glossary.

Whatever the case may be, the two terms are used to describe structures like those above and the following ones:

8.   a.   The claim [that dinosaurs still exist] is untrue.
     b.   Mary believes [that dinosaurs still exist].

9.   a.   [Whenever she calls], she brings her children with her.
     b.   [Whether she is happy or sad], she still manages to survive.
     c.   A carpenter needs some tools [in order that he can do his job properly].

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(4) Robert P.Stockwell, Paul Schachter and Barbara Hall Partee, *The Major Syntactic Structures of English* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1973), pp.630-35, 665-68.

(5) Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, *University English Grammar* (London: Longman, 1973), pp.313-15.

(6) John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 225; Adrian Akmajian and Frank W. Heny, *An Introduction to the Principles of Transformational Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1980), pp.369-70; Andrew Radford, *Transformational Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 198, 219.

(7) Edward K.Brown and Jim E.Miller, *Syntax: A Linguistic Introduction to Sentence Structure* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1980), p.134.
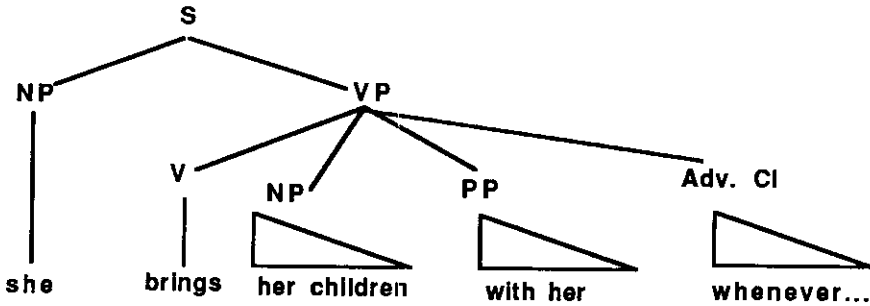
(8) Brown and Miller, pp.30,134,148.

(9) Jeanne Amrose-Grillet, *Glossary of T.G.* (Rowley, Mass.: Newburry House Publishers, 1978), p. 73.
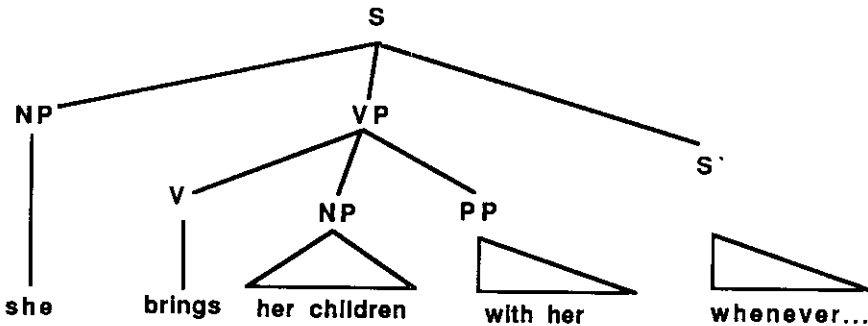
It is felt that a distinction ought to be made between subordination and embedding. This distinction can be substantiated both structurally and functionally.

Structurally, a subordinate clause in English may be part of the verb phrase (VP) or part of the matrix sentence; this is a controversial issue. Anyway, if it is part of the VP, it would be dominated by the VP node in a tree-diagram. Consider the phrase marker (PM) for (9a):

Subordination

```
                         S
              /                   \
          NP                       VP
           |              /    |  |      \
           |          V    NP    PP       Adv. Cl
           |          |   /\    /\        /\
          she      brings her children  with her   whenever...
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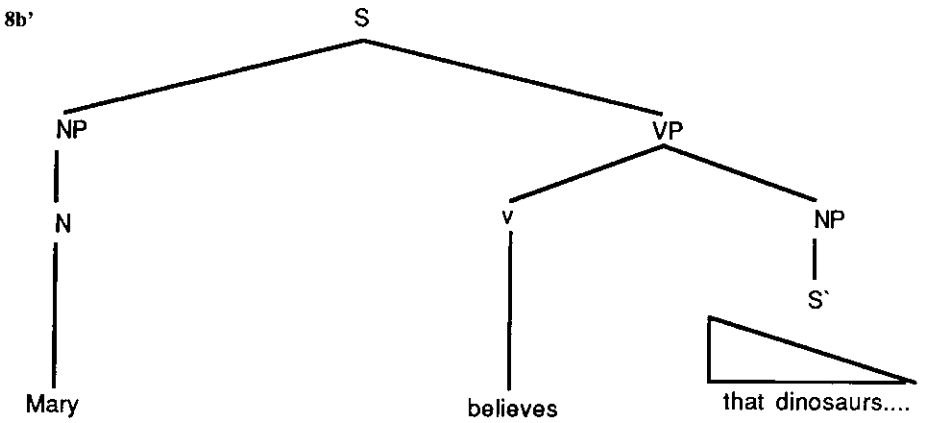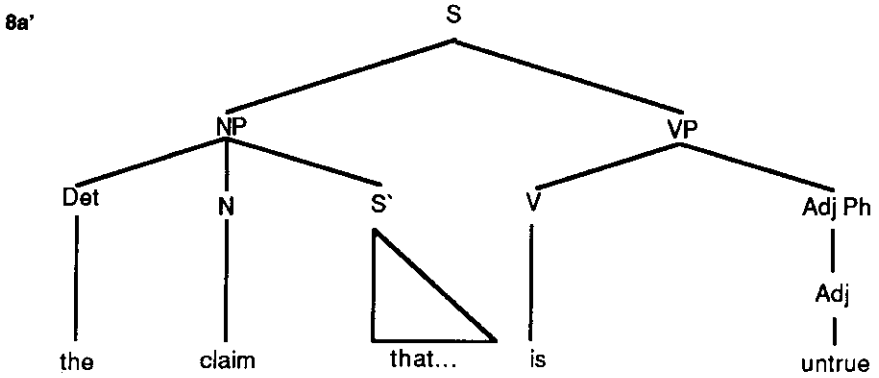
The adverbial clause in the above diagram serves an adverbial function of time. If it is part of the matrix clause, it would be dominated by the S node, as in the following phrase marker for (9a):

```
                          S
              /                   |        \
          NP                      VP         \
           |           /    |   \             S`
           |        V    NP    PP             /\
           |        |   /\    /\             /\
          she    brings her children with her  whenever...
```

In the above diagram the clause 'whenever she calls' is immediately dominated by the higher S node; it performs an ad-sentential function.

By contrast, an embedded clause is an integral part of the matrix sentence. In formal terms, an embedded clause may be either an NP or a constituent of the NP. This means that the embedded clause is directly dominated by its higher NP node in a tree diagram. Consider the following phrase markers for sentences (8a) and (8b), respectively:

8a'

```
                              S
                  ┌───────────┴──────────┐
                 NP                       VP
          ┌───────┼────────┐        ┌─────┴──────┐
         Det      N        S`       V          Adj Ph
          │       │       ╱│         │            │
          │       │      ╱ │         │           Adj
          │       │     ╱__│         │            │
         the     claim  that...      is         untrue
```

8b'

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                         S
              ┌──────────┴──────────┐
             NP                     VP
              │                ┌─────┴─────┐
              N                v          NP
              │                │           │
              │                │           S`
              │                │          ╱│
              │                │         ╱_│
            Mary            believes   that dinosaurs....
```

In diagram (8a') above, the embedded relative caluse 'that dinosaurs still exist' performs an adjectival function; it modifies the antecedent head 'claim' and constitutes an integral part of the subject NP, and the entire construction is a topic NP. By integral is meant that any movement of the element of a major constituent will result in ungrammaticality, as in (8c) and (8c') below:

*8c.   The claim is untrue *that dinosaurs still exist.*

*8c.   *That dinosaurs still exist* the claim is untrue.

In diagram (8b'), the embedded clause serves as the grammatical object of the main clause. This embedded clause is part of, and consequently dominated by, the higher NP node.

Another difference between a subordinate clause and an embedded one can be seen in the order of the clause in relation to the matrix sentence. Since the subordinate clause constitutes part of the matrix sentence and performs an adverbial ad-sentential function, it may show up in sentence-initial, medial, or final position, as in 9(a), (b), and (c) below:

9. a.   His mother was advised to stay in bed *because she was ill.*

    b.   *Because she was ill,* his mother was advised to stay in bed.

    c.   His mother, *because she was ill,* was advised to stay in bed.

The same is true of the Arabic subordinate clauses:

10. a.   al-sayyāratu murihatun *rugma 'annahā qadīmatun.*
             "The car is comfortable although it is old."

    b.   *rugma 'anna al-sayyārata qadimatun* fa-hiya murihatun.

    c.   al-sayyāratu, *rugma 'annahā qadīmatun,* fa-hiya murihatun.

By comparison, an embedded clause does not enjoy this freedom of movement; it is an integral part of the NP and cannot move away from it. Such movement will result in ungrammaticality, as in (8c) and (8c') above and in (11a) and (11b) below:

11.   I don't know *what angered her.*

  *a.   What angered her I don't know.

  *b.   *What* I don't know *angered her.*

The same is true in the case of the embedded clause in Arabic. Consider the ungrammaticality of (12a) and (12b) below:

12.   ma^crūfun min al-jamī^ci *'anna al-rajula jayyidun.*
       "It is known to all *that the man is good."*

  *a.   ma^crūfun *'anna al-rajula* min al-jamī^ci *jayyidun.*
      *"It is known *that the man* to all *is good."*

  *b.   ma^crūfun *'anna al-rajula jayyidun* min al-jamī^ci.
      *It is known *that the man is good* to all."

It should be mentioned, however, that the English translation of (12b) is grammatical, but the meaning is totally different. Thus, in (12b) the adjective 'good' is associated with the prepositional phrase 'to all'; in (12) the adjective is associated with, and describes, 'man'.

A third difference between a subordinate clause and an embedded one can be seen in the syntactic behavior of each clause. Thus, an embedded clause may always be negated (as in 13) whereas it is quite common to find a subordinate clause which may not be negated, as in the following sentences:

13.   Medical researchers have long been seeking a cure for a disease *that doesn't spare the lives of its victims*.

14. a.   Switch off the lights before you go to bed.
  *b.   Switch off the lights *before you don't go to bed*.

15. a.   I tried to speak politely with him although he offended me.
  *b.   I tried to speak politely with him *although he didn't offend me*.

16. a.   I will give you the paper as soon as I finish reading it.
  *b.   I will give you the paper *as soon as I don't finish reading it*.

The same applied to Arabic constructions where subordinate clauses may not be negated. Consider these sentences:

17. a.   fakkir jayyidan *qabla 'an tuqdima ᶜalā 'ayyi šay 'in*.
          "Think carefully before you do anything."
  *b)   fakkir jayyidan *qabla 'an lā tuqdima ᶜalā 'ayyi šay'in*.
          "Think carefully before you don't do anything."

18. a.   ᶜālij al-xaṭa'a *hayṯumā tajidhu*.
          "Deal with any wrong action wherever you find it."
  *b.   ᶜālij al-xaṭa'a *hayṯumā lā tajidhu*.
          "Deal with any wrong action wherever you don't find it."

19. a.   *'iḏā 'aradta 'an tuṭāᶜ* fa-sal mā yustaṭāᶜ.
          "If you want to be obeyed, then ask for the possible."
  b.   ᶜ'iḏā 'aradta 'an lā tuṭāᶜ* fa-sal mā yustaṭāᶜ.
          "If you don't want to be obeyed, then ask for the possible."

Thus, the negation of subordinate clauses in the above English and Arabic constructions results not only in ungrammaticality but also in semantic or logical oddity.

A fourth difference, emanating from the preceding point, can be seen with regard to the scope of negation. The negation of the embedded clause usually spans the entire construction which includes that clause; at the same time, the negation of the matrix sentence entails the negation of the embedded clause. Thus, the two readings of sentence (20) below are equivalent in meaning, or at least in their truth-value:

20. a.   I don't believe that she is prejudiced.
   b.   I believe that she is not prejudiced.

Arabic exhibits the same phenomenon in this area. Consider the two readings of sentence (21) below:

21. a.   la 'aḏunnu 'annahu kaḏibun
          "I don't think that he is a liar."

b)   'aḏunnu 'annahu gayru kaḏibin.
     "I think that he is not a liar."
     (Note that in 21b), we normally use "ṣadiq" instead of ġayr kaḏib.)

However, the negation of a subordinate clause would yield a totally different meaning. Observe the semantic difference between (a) and (b) of sentence (22), though they are logically equivalent:

22. a.   I don't believe her because she is prejudiced.
    b.   I believe her because she is not prejudiced.

In (22b), the main clause is emphasized; thus, 'believing' takes place, as it were. In (22a), the subordinate clause is emphasized; thus, she is already prejudiced. The same applied to (a) and (b) of the Arabic sentence (23):

23. a.   lā 'uḥibbuhu li'annahu maġrūrun.
         "I don't like him because he is self-conceited."
    b.   'uḥbbuhi li'annahu laysa maġrūran (i.e. mutawāḍiᶜ).
         "I like him because he is not self-conceited, i.e. humble."

A further difference between subordination and embedding can be seen in the area of coordination. Thus, while it is possible to coordinate two embedded clauses or two subordinate ones, it is not possible to conjoin an embedded clause and a subordinate one at the same time. The reason is fairly obvious: coordination conjoins two syntactically equivalent units or structures. Consider the grammaticality of (24 a + b) and the ungrammaticality of (25 a + b) below:

24. a.   I don't know *what she said* or *why she said it.*
    b.   You can call on us *if you like* and *whenever you like.*

25. *a.   *As soon as he read the paper* and *that he wanted,* he got up and left in
          a hurry.
    *b.   *If you want to have a nice job* and *that you will,* you should work hard
          towards it.

The same thing can be said of the Arabic sentences (26) and (27) below: the former is gramatical while the later is not:

26. a.   lā 'aᶜrifu *'ayna yaskunu* 'aw *māḏā yaᶜmalu.*
         "I don't know where he lives or what he does."
    b.   *maᶜa 'anni muḥtājun* wa *lā 'amliku dirhaman,* fa-lan 'aṭluba min ḏālika
         al-baxili.
         "Although I am in need and I am penniless, I will not ask that miser."

27. *a.   *'in sa'alta ma^crūfan* wa *'anta turidu ḏālika,* fas'al bi-'adabin.
      *"If you ask for a favor and that you want, ask politely."
  *b.   'uškur Allāha *ba^cda 'an ta'kula* wa *māḏā ta'kul.*
      *Thank the Lord after you eat and what you eat."

Finally, subordination differs from embedding in the number of formal devices employed; in English and in Arabic, the number of subordinators is quite large and heterogeneous.[10] By contrast, the number of embedders is relatively small, including a somewhat closed set of relative pronouns and complementizers such as *that* and *to* cited in sentence (28) below. Arabic embedders are more-or-less equivalents of *that* in English, as in (29) below:

28. a.   I think (that) the recession is bottoming out.
    b.   He submitted a summary of the story (that) he read.
    c.   To make such a dreadful accusation infuriates me.

29. a.   'aḏunnu 'anna al-mas'alatna wādiḥatun.
      "I think that the case is obvious."
    b.   'an taḏriba man huwa 'aṣġaru minka sinnan ^caybun ^calayka.
      "To hit someone (who is) younger than you is quite shameful·"
    c.   marartu bi-waladin ḏuriba.
      "I passed by a boy who was beaten."

It is evident that these complementizers and relative pronouns can be deleted in English embedded clauses, without violating the grammaticality of the sentence. This is indicated by the parentheses in (28) above. In Arabic, it is possible to delete such elements, but the resulting structure would be totally different from the original with the complementizer. Thus, (29a) is traditionally parsed as a sentence consisting of subject-verb as one unit "'aḏunnu" (literally: I think) and a nominal clause functioning as the direct object of the verb 'yaḏunnu' (literally: he thinks). This embedded clause, which begins with the complementizer *'anna* 'that', consists of the topic 'al-mas'alat' and the comment 'wādiḥat'. Deletion of "anna' would yield a SIMPLE sentence with a ditransitive verb 'yaḏunnu', thus inflecting the two elements 'al-mas'alat' and 'wādiḥat' in the accusative, marked with the / -a / or / -an / for the definite and indefinite, respectively. However, it is quite possible to delete the complementizer if the first NP is indefinite, as it is the case in (29c) above.

On the other hand, omission of the subordinators results in ungrammaticality in both English and Arabic, as in (30b), (31b), (32b), and (33b) below:

_____

(10) Quirk, pp. 313-15.

30. a.   I'll go wherever you go.
    *b.   I'll go you go.
31. a.   Don't talk unless you are asked to.
    *b.   Don't talk you are talked to.
32. a.   'in tadrus tanjaḥ.
    *   "If you study, you will pass."
    *b.   tadrus tanjaḥ.
         "Study, you will pass.
33. a.   lā 'astaṭīᶜu al-ᶜamala li'anni mutᶜabun.
         "I can't work because I am tired."
    *b.   lā 'astaṭīᶜu al-ᶜamala 'anā mutᶜabun.
         "I can't work I am tired."

03· *Summary and Conclusion.*   In the preceding pages, an attempt was made to distinguish between subordination and embedding as two distinct processes, rather than one, of forming non-simple sentences in English and Arabic. Together with coordination, three processes ought to be recognized. The data drawn from both systems seem to provide ample synthetic evidence of treating the two processes as different from each other. This is simply because clauses which are constituents of NPs – and they are constituents of constituents of sentences – behave in a manner which is different from that of clauses which are constituents of sentences. These seem to be different categories. If our conclusion is correct in the case of English and Arabic, there is sufficient ground to bolster such a distinction and extend it to other languages that make use of these syntactic processes. Probably, other syntactic constructions which include such subordinate and embedded clauses may be reconsidered. It is also hoped that this piece of research has offered something towards solving the riddle of confused terminology.

الإلصاق والدمج في العربية والإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث . يُعد الإلصاق والدمج من الطرق المستخدمة في تكوين الجمل غير البسيطة في اللغات الإنسانية، وتختلف كل لغـة عن الأخرى في طريقة استخدام هاتين العمليتين اللغويتين . ورغم كثرة استخدام هاتين الطريقتين، لم ينبر اللغويون إلى التمييز بينهما من حيث البناء أو العمل النحوي ، فكثيرا ما يُستخـدم الإلصاق بمعنى الـدمج أو الدمج بمعنى الإلصاق، مما أسفر عن تشويش في استخدام اللفظتين وعن الخلط في التراكيب النحوية .

وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إنعام النظر في وظيفة كل طريقة وأنواع التراكيب التي تخضع لكل منهما، مستعينة بنماذج لغوية من التراكيب العربية والإنجليزية بهدف الوصول إلى الغاية المرجوة، ألا وهي اختلاف الإلصاق عن الدمج من حيث المبنى والوظيفة، وكذلك المعنى . كما تهدف إلى حل مسألة الخلط اللفظي الناجم عن استخدام الكلمتين، أضف إلى ذلك أن هاتين الطريقتين يمكن تعميمها على لغات أخرى تستخدمهما في تكوين الجمل المعقدة أو المركبة .