



Relative Clauses with Split Antecedents

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RELATIVE CLAUSES WITH
SPLIT ANTECEDENTS

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Sentences with extraposed relative clauses, such as

- (1) A woman entered the room who was wearing a fur coat.

may be stylistically infelicitous, but they are grammatical in English. Such sentences have been assumed to be produced by a rule of Extraposition of Relative Clauses, discussed in Ross (1967), from the structure which also underlies

- (2) A woman who was wearing a fur coat entered the room.

It has thus been tacitly assumed that for each sentence like (1), with a relative clause in sentence-final position, there is a corresponding grammatical sentence in which the relative clause occurs together with its antecedent, as in (2). However, this assumption is false. To see this, consider the sentence

- (3) A man entered the room and a woman went out who were quite similar.

Like (1), (3) is stylistically infelicitous, but it is grammatical, just as (1) is. The grammaticality of (3) raises a serious problem, for what is the antecedent of the relative clause in (3)? It cannot be either *a man*

- (4) *A man who were quite similar entered the room and a woman went out.

or *a woman*

- (5) *A man entered the room and a woman who were quite similar went out.

Neither of these singular noun phrases can serve as the antecedent of a relative clause whose predicate (*similar*) requires an underlying plural subject, and whose verb (*were*) is inflected to agree with a plural subject in surface structure. The only possible antecedent of the relative clause in (3) would seem to be the discontinuous noun phrase *a man . . . (and) a woman*. But how can a discontinuous noun phrase be the antecedent of a relative clause? No analysis of relative clauses that has yet been proposed in the theory of generative grammar is able to account for sentences like (3). Their existence thus presents the theory with a new paradox.

Reference

Ross, J. R. (1967) *Constraints on Variables in Syntax*, unpublished Doctoral dissertation, MIT.