

The Syntax of ‘As’

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A. INTRODUCTION

The most cursory glance at English dictionary entries for the word ‘as’ reveals a seemingly bewildering, and somewhat inconsistent, picture with regard to the possible grammatical functions of this omnipresent, and ostensibly simple, word. Although *Merriam-Webster Online*¹⁾ duly divides its syntactic classification of ‘as’ into the four main categories of adverb, conjunction, pronoun and preposition, it lists under the heading ‘pronoun’ only its functions as an adnominal relative, making no reference to its concomitant functions as nominal relative and relative adverb. *Collins*²⁾ (p. 86), on the other hand, dividing its entry three ways into (1) conjunction (2) adverb, conjunction*¹ (3) preposition, makes no reference whatsoever to its role as a relative, while *The New Shorter Oxford*³⁾ (p. 123), after mentioning initially that ‘as’ may be an adverb, conjunction or relative pronoun, goes on to cite specific examples under only the two headings of (1) adverb (2) relative *adverb or* conjunction (my italics and boldface), thus not only suddenly and mysteriously supplanting the heading ‘relative pronoun’ with that of (grammatically quite distinct) ‘relative adverb’, but even suggesting some difficulty in distinguishing between the word’s functions as a relative and as a conjunction! *² There would seem, therefore, to exist a need for a clear and comprehensive overview of the functionality of ‘as’ in the contemporary language, and it is in an endeavor to go some way toward addressing that need that the following overview has been written. *³

B. OVERVIEW

‘As’ can serve a wide variety of grammatical functions :

1. as a (true) subordinating CONJUNCTION

1.1. of MANNER, meaning ‘in the (same) way in which’, introducing adverbial clauses functioning in two ways :

1.1.1. as an ADJUNCT, e. g.

[1] He played the role AS he had always done.

N. B. This kind of ‘as’ lends itself naturally only to predication adjuncts, as in [1]. Except

for rather archaic-sounding locutions with insertion of a supportive adverb such as 'so',
e. g.

[2] As you performed the piece before, so should you perform it again now!
, sentence adjuncts cannot normally be formed.

1.1.2. as a DISJUNCT, e. g.

[3] He was, AS it later transpired, the boy's real father.
N. B. This use of 'as' bears a close functional affinity to the sentential relative clause use noted below, differing from it only in the insertion of an expletive 'it' as subject.

1.2. of TIME, meaning 'when', e. g.

[4] AS I turned the corner, I noticed an old man sitting by the side of the road.
N. B. Both sentence and predication adjuncts are possible where the main clause is positive. Where it is negative, however, a sentence adjunct will usually be strange, e. g.

[4a] ?AS I turned the corner, I didn't see the old man in his usual place.
Cf. acceptable

[4b] WHEN I turned the corner, I didn't see the old man in his usual place.
('when' introducing sentence adjunct)
and

[4c] I didn't see the old man AS I turned the corner ; I saw him only AS the bus
pulled away.
('as' introducing predication adjunct) .

1.3. of REASON, meaning 'because' (disjunctive only), e. g.

[5] As I was tired, I sat down and had a rest.
(content disjunct)

[6] AS you're such an expert, let's see you try to solve the problem!
(style disjunct)

1.4. of CONCESSION, meaning 'although' (disjunctive only), e. g.

[7] Big AS he is, I'll defeat him!
N. B. A correlative adverb 'as' is generally optional here before the concessive clause :
[7a] AS big as he is, I'll defeat him.
Cf. the obligatory correlative accompanying comparative clauses (see 1.5. & 3.).

1.5. of COMPARISON, meaning 'to the (same) extent to which' and modifying a preceding adjective or adverb, e. g.

[8] She's as pretty AS a picture.
(elliptical for ... AS a picture is pretty).

2. as a QUASI-PREPOSITIONAL CONJUNCTION, meaning 'acting/speaking in the role/capacity of ...', e. g.

[9] AS your friend, I would say 'fight him', but AS your lawyer, I must advise you to do nothing.

(This type of verbless as-clause differs from a fully-fledged prepositional phrase in that it requires an implicit subject, which typically must be the same as that of the main clause. while prepositional phrases, by their very nature, do not have subjects.)

3. as a comparative ADVERB, meaning 'to that/such an extent', occurring as correlative to the conjunction 'as' of 1.5., e. g.

[10] He runs AS fast as you (run).

N. B. (1) This 'as' is obligatory in formal use, but sometimes ellipted informally :

[8a] *She was pretty as a picture.*

(2) In negative comparatives, esp. in AmE, 'so' often replaces 'as' as adverbial correlative :

[11] He's not SO clever as you are.

4. as a RELATIVE, functioning in two ways :

4. 1. as a relative PRONOUN, functioning in two ways :

4.1.1. as an ADNOMINAL relative pronoun (i. e. one introducing an adnominal relative clause), equivalent to 'who, which,' or 'that', with a twofold function :

4.1.1.1. as a GENERAL (i. e. non-sentential : see below) adnominal relative pronoun, normally restricted to occurrence with antecedents consisting in noun phrases containing 'same' or 'such' either as nominal head or as an adjunct to the head, e. g.

[12] Handicapped people are just the the same AS other people.

[13] Such things AS these are difficult to understand.

(See also, however, [31], in which 'such' stands as modifier to a noun serving merely to realize a phrase modifying the antecedent head.)

N. B. (1) 'As' differs markedly from other relative pronouns in that it lends itself readily to the formation of verbless clauses (cf. the quasi-prepositional 'as' of 2.). Nonetheless, the formation of full clauses is quite possible, with the ellipted verb (normally a form of the verb 'to be') being invariably recoverable. Thus [12] is an ellipsis of

[12a] *Handicapped people are just the same as other people are.*

and [13] of

[13a] Such things *as these are* are difficult to understand.

(2) With antecedents consisting of 'same' acting adjectivally on a head noun, 'that' can replace 'as', e. g.

[14] I have exactly the same worries THAT you have.

, which could substitute for

[14a] I have exactly the same worries AS you have.
 However as mentioned above, if a verbless clause is required, only ‘as’ may serve :

[14b] I have exactly the same worries AS you.
 but not

[14c] *I have exactly the same worries THAT you.

3 ‘As’ may stand not only as complement in its clause (as in [12] and [13]), but as subject, e. g.

[15] I saw things of such beauty AS cannot be described in words.

or even as object, e. g.

[16] These are the same problems AS countless generations have experienced before.

(4) The use of ‘as’ as a general relative pronoun with other kinds of antecedent tends to be restricted to dialectal use, e. g. Northern British

[17] There are some people AS would do better to mind their own business!

Cf. standard

[17a] There are some people WHO/THAT...

4.1.1.2. as a SENTENTIAL relative pronoun, taking an entire clause as its antecedent, a function otherwise served only by ‘which’, e. g.

[18] She cried at the funeral, AS was perfectly natural.
 equivalent to

[18a] She cried at the funeral, WHICH was perfectly natural.

where the antecedent of the pronoun is not ‘the funeral’ but the putatively nominalized main clause ‘*the fact that* she cried at the funeral’.

N. B. (1) Although ‘which’ (except with regard to clause-order : see below) subsumes entirely the functions of ‘as’ in this respect, the two are far from interchangeable, since there are fairly severe restrictions on when ‘as’ may be used as a sentential relative. The main requisite syntactically is that, with ‘as’ as subject, the verb phrase of the relative clause be intransitive. Therefore, although we may have

[19] He passed all his exams, WHICH greatly pleased his family.

, we may not (except, perhaps, archaically or dialectally) have

[19a] *He passed all his exams, AS greatly pleased his family.

Thus Quirk and Greenbaum’s⁴⁾ observation that “relative *as* may have the function of subject in its clause, but only if the operator is *be* or another copular verb” (p. 1117) is not quite accurate, since the operator may be a modal auxiliary, e. g.

[20] This is a picture of the Milky Way, AS *can* be seen from its discoid shape.

or there may even be none at all, with a full intransitive verb as clause-predicator, e. g.

[21] Thus it turned out that the husband was the killer, AS so often *happens* in these cases.

It is, however, interesting to note that idiomatic restrictions seem to make certain verbs, or

even specific tense-forms of these, resistant to occurrence as predicators in sententials with subject 'as'. Consider, for instance, completely acceptable [21] with structurally dubious

[22] ?The husband, AS later *transpired*, was the killer.

despite the fact that 'transpire' is not only intransitive but even synonymous with 'happen'.

In these cases, a transformational device tends to be implemented, whereby an expletive 'it' is inserted as subject and the sentential clause is changed into a disjunct adverbial, with 'as' reverting to the role of conjunction (see [3] above).

Interestingly, however, this transformation cannot be applied in every such case. [19a], for instance, cannot be changed to

[19b] **He passed all his exams, AS it greatly pleased his family.*

except by the addition of a complemental infinitive phrase, e. g.

[19c] *He passed all his exams, AS it greatly pleased his family to learn later that day.*

(although this, of course, merely turns the as-clause back into a sentential relative, with 'as' now standing as object of the added infinitive !)

Quirk and Greenbaum⁴⁾ also note the intriguing requirement for so-called 'semantic congruency' between a sentential as-clause (with 'as' in any role-subject, object or complement) and the main clause, meaning essentially that the as-clause should not represent the actions/events of the superordinate as being in any way contrary to reason or expectation, citing acceptable

She has married again, *WHICH was unexpected.*

in contrast with unacceptable

She has married again, **AS was unexpected.*

(ibid.)

Compare this with the semantically 'congruent' as-clause of [18], where the action (crying at a funeral) is viewed as normal and unsurprising in light of the situation.

(Since this congruency will no doubt be influenced as much by cultural values/social mores as by any strictly linguistic factors, a systematic attempt to ascertain its parameters would unfortunately go beyond the scope of this article.)

(2) Sentential as-clauses possess a mobility not shared by which-clauses that enables them to be placed even before their antecedent. Thus we may have

[23] As you know, he was a very fine general.

but not

[23a] **WHICH you know, he was a very fine general.*

(3) In certain cases, the antecedent of a sentential 'as' must be construed, not as the entirety of a clause, but simply as its predication, likewise putatively nominalized. Compare, for instance, the adverbial clause of [1], which may not be preposed without a radical, and rather strange, change of meaning,

[1a] *As he had always done, he played the role.*

(saying nothing about the *manner* in which he played the role, but simply asserting that he

was in the habit of playing it)

with the predicate-focused sentential as-clause of

[1b] *He played the role with great sensitivity, AS he had always done.*

meaning that ‘playing the role with great sensitivity’ is that which he had always done, invertible to

[1c] *AS he had always done, he played the role with great sensitivity.*

with no change of meaning.

In such cases, it may be no more than the presence or absence of a comma (needed for the sentential, but normally not for the adverbial) that will readily distinguish the two types.

4.1.2. as a NOMINAL relative pronoun, equivalent to ‘what, that which’, e. g.

[24] Rice is to the Chinese AS bread is to Europeans.

4.2. as a relative ADVERB, equivalent to ‘where, when, how’ etc. in the sense ‘in/on/at/... which’, sharing both the same restrictions on occurrence and the same facility to form verbless clauses as noted above in connection with general adnominal pronoun ‘as’, e. g.

[25] I was born in the same hospital AS you (were).

Finally, regarding the positivity/negativity of the main types of as-clause :

(1) Re. adjunctive adverbial clauses : generally speaking, as-clauses of time may be positive only, so that we may not have

[26] *It’s unfair to hit people AS they’re not looking.

Cf. acceptable

[26a] It’s unfair to hit people WHEN/WHILE they’re not looking.

Adjunctive as-clauses of manner also do not readily lend themselves to the use of negated verb forms, e. g.

[27] *He sings the song AS Sinatra didn’t.

(cf. acceptable

[27a] He sings the song *in a way in which* Sinatra didn’t.)

but may employ positive verb-forms modified by negative adverbs such as ‘never’, e. g.

[28] He sang the song AS he had never sung it before.

(2) Re. disjunctive adverbial clauses : those of manner and those of reason may be either positive or negative, but concessives are positive only :

[29] *As difficult AS it wasn’t, he just couldn’t solve the problem.

Cf. acceptable

[29a] ALTHOUGH it wasn’t difficult, ...

(3) Re. comparative clauses (as ... as) : these may normally be positive only, irrespective of the negativity/positivity of the main clause :

[30] *She’s as clever AS he isn’t.

[30a] *She isn’t as clever AS he isn’t.

(4) Re. general adnominal relative clauses : these may be either positive or negative, *insofar as sense permits*, hence acceptable

[31] He was a man of such courage AS wouldn't have been afraid to fight a lion.
but unacceptable (because absurd)

[32] *(!) He was the same man AS they had never seen before.

(5) Re. sentential clauses : in common, as expected, with their near-relatives, the manner disjuncts, these may be positive or negative.

(6) Re. nominal relative clauses : (generally) positive only :

[33] *A is to B AS X isn't to Y.

C. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Clearly, certain aspects of the use of 'as' remain relatively unexplored, most significantly restrictions on the occurrence of certain verbs/verb-forms in sentential as-clauses, and the issue of semantic congruency.

It is to be hoped that further research into these areas will be undertaken in the near future.

FOOTNOTES

*¹ Referring jointly to the correlative pair as ... as.

*² Relative adverb 'as' is clearly distinct from its conjunctive homomorph in that the latter may be considered as representing an inherently more complex syntagmatic sequence (prepositional phrase – preposition + relative pronoun) than the former (preposition + relative pronoun).

*³ We will be concerned here with 'as' only where as it stands as an independent grammatical unit within its clause, and not, therefore, where it forms part of indivisible compounds such as 'as for' or 'as of'.

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