

More on Non-restrictive Relatives

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Non-restrictive relative clauses (NRCs) are subordinate clauses like that in (1a); the corresponding part of (1b) is an example of a restrictive relative.

- (1)a. Kim has three cats, which her mother looks after.
b. Kim has three cats that/which her mother looks after.

The most obvious difference is that the restrictive introduces a 'contrast set' (Kim's other cats), so (1b) can be continued '... and several others that fend for themselves', but this is not possible with non-restrictive in (1a).

NRCs in English have a number of properties that have been a source of considerable pain to students of English grammar, both native and non-native, and considerable interest to theoretical linguists. Dealing with them has led to a wide variety of analyses, and has involved not a little mis-information, which has only recently been dispelled. I will try to show that a very simple story can be told which accounts for the distinctive properties of NRCs, and has some surprising, and strikingly correct, predictions regarding the way NRCs interact with ellipsis. This story is compatible with a wide variety of theoretical approaches and formalisms, but it has nevertheless important consequences for the relation of syntax and semantics.