

Parataxis and hypotaxis: formal and empirical perspectives

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The claim that parataxis precedes hypotaxis in language is often found in the traditional literature on language change (e.g. Delbrück 1900: 411; Small 1924: 125) and reiterated in works with a functionalist orientation (e.g. Jucker 1991: 203; Deutscher 2001: ch. 11; Dąbrowska 2015: 230). However, it has rarely been addressed from a generative perspective (cf. Roberts 2007: 174 for a brief but notable exception). Doing so is important, since a strong form of this claim is that early languages lacked embedding (Delbrück 1900: 411), which relates to the recent debate around Pirahã exceptionality and its implications for the architecture of grammar (Everett 2005; Nevins, Pesetsky & Rodrigues 2009 and subsequent work). Moreover, the evidence usually offered in support of the claim is flimsy at best.

In this talk I argue that the traditional claim must be broken down into a number of distinct subclaims, only one of which threatens a standard Minimalist conception of the human faculty of language. I show that that particular subclaim is false, as far as the historical evidence allows us to establish. I then present empirical evidence from large-scale diachronic corpus studies that bears on other subclaims, which – I argue – have important implications for comparative syntax nonetheless.

References

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