

Parataxis and hypotaxis: formal and empirical perspectives

George Walkden (University of Konstanz)

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 more recent works with a functionalist orientation (e.g. Jucker 1991: 203; Deutscher 2001: ch. 11; Dąbrowska 2015: 230). However, the empirical evidence usually offered in support of the claim is flimsy at best. In this talk I revisit the question based on new data from parsed historical corpora. I show, first, that ‘parataxis > hypotaxis’ can be, and has been, understood in several different ways: any theoretical claim needs to be explicit on precisely what parataxis and hypotaxis are, and how they relate to each other over time. I focus on one version of the claim: the idea that the proportion of subordinate clauses increases gradually over time (cf. Dąbrowska 2015: 230). For the languages I investigate, this can be falsified. However, a more fine-grained look at the data reveals interesting patterns that challenge us to move past long-standing binary oppositions and think more deeply about the relation between syntactic structures and the sociohistorical circumstances in which they arise.

References

- Dąbrowska, Ewa. 2015. Language in the mind and in the community. In Jocelyne Daems, Eline Zenner, Kris Heylen, Dirk Speelman & Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *Change of paradigms – new paradoxes: applications of cognitive linguistics*, 221–236. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Delbrück, Berthold. 1900. *Vergleichende Syntax der indogermanischen Sprachen*. Vol. 3. Strasbourg: Karl J. Trübner.
- Deutscher, Guy. 2001. *Syntactic change in Akkadian: the evolution of sentential complementation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jucker, Andreas H. 1991. Between hypotaxis and parataxis: clauses of reason in Ancrene Wisse. In Dieter Kastovsky (ed.), *Historical English syntax*, 203–219. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Small, G. W. 1924. *The comparison of inequality*. Baltimore: University Press.