Subordinate clauses as a locus for morphosyntactic innovation

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Introduction

A now classical assumption: main clauses are innovative, subordinate clauses are conservative (Hooper and Thompson 1973, Givon 1979, Bybee 2002):

- innovation takes place in main clauses, rather or earlier than in subordinate clauses;
- subordinate clauses are also resistant to innovations that originate in main clauses.

Introduction

This claim has been formulated in relation to two types of innovations:

- word order permutations leading to the development of new word order patterns used for topicalization, contrast, and presentative focus (originally, 'root transformations': Hooper and Thompson 1973)
- the development of new morphosyntactic patterns through grammaticalization, particularly the grammaticalization of progressives and new TAM forms in general

These innovations have been claimed to take place in main clauses, whereas subordinate clauses retain pre-existing patterns (e.g. pre-existing TAM forms, pre-existing word order patterns, which become restricted to subordinate clauses).

Two proposed explanatory factors (Givón 1979, Bybee 2002, among others):

- **Assertiveness**: Being asserted, main clauses have a pragmatically and semantically richer structure than subordinate clauses, which makes them more prone to (pragmatically motivated) changes.
- **Processing**: Subordinate clauses have a higher degree of automatation and entrenchment and are processed as a single whole, which makes them more resistant to change (including both innovations that originate in the subordinate clause and ones that originate in main clauses and could be extended to subordinate clauses).

Introduction

'Subordinate clauses are constructions that are processed in relatively large chunks, which makes their constituents less independent and not so likely to change [...] many diachronic changes occur earlier in main clauses than in subordinate clauses. The reasons suggested are that main clauses are pragmatically richer, containing the focussed information and the possibility of setting off old from new information, while subordinate clauses tend to be pragmatically more even, replaying previously presented or supplementary material. Thus both word order permutations and new grammaticizations tend to occur in main clauses for the additional specificities they can supply in both the semantic content and pragmatic dimension.' (Bybee 2002: 2; 14)

Some general (perhaps unintended) implications of this view:

- Innovations originate in main clauses and proceed from main to subordinate clauses, if at all.
- New subordinate clause morphosyntax originates in main clauses.
- New main clause morphosyntax also originates in main clauses.

Is this really the case?

Research issues

A number of cross-linguistic processes of reanalysis (semantic and morphosyntactic reinterpretation) involve combinations of main and subordinate clauses, or subordinate clauses only:

- Subordinate clauses are easily restructured and not actually processed as a single chunk.
- Both subordinate and main clause morphosyntax may develop as a result of innovation in subordinate clauses.

Rebracketing

Rebracketing: reanalysis leads to changes in constituent structure within a complex sentence:

- subordinate clause material becomes part of the main clause;
- main clause material becomes part of the subordinate clause;
- elements within the subordinate clause are combined together, giving rise to new morphosyntactic units.

Rebracketing

Word order changes through reanalysis: Word order changes take place not only through permutation, but also through reanalysis, in which case they may involve combinations of main and subordinate clause material.

Word order from Egyptian to Coptic (Claudi 1994): Egyptian had a VSO order.

(1) Middle Egyptian (Afro-Asiatic)

rdj   sn-j   t   n   nḏs
give brother-1SG:GEN bread DAT   poor
'My brother gives bread to the poor man.' (Claudi 1994: 221)

Rebracketing

In Late Egyptian, a periphrastic construction became increasingly common involving the main verb 'to do' and an infinitival subordinate clause with a notional P argument indexed by possessive person markers.

(2) Late Egyptian (Afro-Asiatic)

jr-y-j   *snh*   *tꜣ-ḏr-f*
do-PAST-1SG.SUBJ   feed.INF   country-border-3SG:M:GEN
'I did the feeding of the whole country' (Claudi 1994: 223)

Rebracketing

In Coptic, this construction gave rise to a perfective construction:

(3) Coptic (Afro-Asiatic)
a-*p-kake*   *toom*
PERF-DEF:SG:M-darkness   close-INF
*n-ne-***f***-bal*
OBJ-DEF:PL-3SG:M:GEN-eye
'The darkness closed his eyes.' (Claudi 1994: 224)

- The verb 'to do' evolved into a perfective marker, the former infinitive became the only verb in the sentence, and its notional P argument became a P argument proper.
- This development affects the subordinate clause: the relationship between main and subordinate clause and the syntactic status of the notional P argument of the subordinate verb are reanalysed ([V A **[Poss V]**] > [**[PERF A P V]**]).
- This ultimately leads to the development of new main clause morphology (P indexes derived from possessor indexes).

Rebracketing

The grammaticalization of new TAM forms: Progressives and new TAM forms in general are argued to originate in main clauses, with subordinate clauses retaining older forms, which become specialized for those clauses:

'Many newly grammaticizing constructions occur primarily in main clauses ... the greater richness and explicit semantics of the newly grammaticized form is more appropriate in the assertive context of main clauses.' (Bybee 2002: 5)

But the grammaticalization of progressives and other new TAM forms often involves combinations of main and subordinate clause material, or possibly subordinate clause material only.

The grammaticalization of new TAM forms

Progressives in Avar (Harris and Campbell 1995: 187-9): Avar originally had a construction consisting of a main clause and a sentential complement in the participle, 'X is a VERBer (of Y)'.

(4) Avar (Northeast Caucasian)
ebel   *ret'el*   **b**-*uq'ule*-**y**   **y**-*ugo*
mother.ABS   clothing.ABS   N-sewing-F   F-is
'Mother is a sewer of clothing, one who sews clothes' (Harris and Campbell 1995: 188)

- The S argument of the verb 'to be' is in the absolutive and is indexed by a noun class prefix.
- The participle has an S or A argument coreferential with this argument (not encoded overtly), which is indexed by noun class suffixes on the participle.
- The participle may also have a P argument in the absolutive, indexed by noun class prefixes.

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Rebracketing

At a later stage, the construction was reanalysed as a monoclausal progressive construction, 'X is VERBing (Y)'.

(5) Avar (Northeast Caucasian)
    *ebel-**ał'a***   *ret'el*   **b**-*uq'ule*-**b**   **b***ugo*
    mother-ERG   clothing.ABS   N-sew.PTCPL-N   N-is
    'Mother is sewing clothing.' (Harris and Campbell 1995: 189)

- The participle and the main verb become part of a periphrastic form. The P argument of the participle becomes the P argument of this form, and the noun class suffix on the participle now indexes this argument.
- When the participle is transitive, the former S argument of the main verb becomes an A argument, and takes the ergative.
- This development affects the subordinate clause, in that the relationship between main and subordinate clause is reanalysed, leading to a change in the syntactic status of individual elements within the clause ([S **[(P) PTCPL]** V] > [S/A **(P) [PTCPL V]]**.

Rebracketing

The origins of deranked verb forms, that is, forms only or mainly used in subordinate clause (Stassen 1985, Cristofaro 2003: infinitives, nominalizations, participles, gerunds...):

- These forms have been shown to develop from the combination of a subordinate clause verb and other subordinate clause material, particularly adpositions and case markers (Haspelmath 1989).
- These forms also recurrently originate from the combination of (i) a demonstrative or a semantically generic expression in apposition to a nominal in a main clause and (ii) a subordinate verb modifying the appositive expression ('X, **that/ the one/the thing** (of) VERB(ing)', 'X, **the** VERB(ing) **one**', 'X, **that** (who) VERBs' > 'the VERB**ing** X, the X **that** VERBs').

Rebracketing

(6) Qiang (Sino-Tibetan)

upu   [tʂi-ʈhə-topu-**m**-le:]_{NMLZ}   ʈʈəu-la   ʐi
uncle   wine-drink-like/love-NMZR-DEF.CL   home-LOC   exist

'The uncle who likes drinking liquor is at home' (LaPolla 2003: 228)

- The nominalizer *-m* is derived from a noun meaning 'person', so that the original structure was '[uncle, **[[wine drink like] person]** V]'.

- This evolved into '[**[uncle [wine drink like NOMZR]]** V]', with the combination of apposition and modifying verb becoming a deranked (nominalized) form modifying a head noun in the main clause.

(7) Bilin (Cushitic)

'aqwa ja'ag-na-**x^w**-əl
water drink-1PL.NEG-M.REL-to

'to water that we do not drink' (Aristar 1991: 13)

- The relative marker -x^w- is derived from a demonstrative, so that the original structure was '[water, to **[the one (that) V]**]'.

- This evolved into ' [to **[water [V REL]]**]', with the combination of demonstrative and modifying verb becoming a deranked form modifying a head noun in the main clause.

Rebracketing

In these various cases

- New TAM forms originate from the combination of main and subordinate clause material, or different elements in the subordinate clause, not main clauses in themselves.

- The change directly affects the subordinate clause: the relationship with the main clause may be reanalysed, there are changes in the morphosyntactic status of individual elements within the subordinate clause, and new morphology (e.g. new verbal affixes) may develop within the subordinate clause.

- New main and subordinate clause morphosyntax originates from innovations in the subordinate clause, rather than being extended from main to subordinate clause.

Rebracketing

Relative markers in Ewe:

(8) Ewe (Niger-Congo)

nyɔ́nu	**si**	*vá*	*étsɔ*	**lá**	*mé-ga-le*	*o*
woman	REL	come	yesterday	REL	NEG-yet-be	NEG

'The woman who came yesterday is no longer here' (heine and Reh 1984: 51)

- The two relative markers are derived, respectively, from an adnominal demonstrative and an article in the main clause, which become part of the subordinate clause: '[woman **that** [having come yesterday] **the** is no longer here.]' (for 'the woman, the one (who) came yesterday, is no longer here') > '[woman **[REL** came yesterday **REL]** is no no longer here.]'.

Rebracketing

Focus markers in Ewe:

(9) Ewe (Niger-Congo)

    (a) *nye-**é**   vá*
         I-FOC   come

        '**I** (rather than someone else) came.' (Heine and Reh 1984: 111)

    (b) * *nye*   ***é**-vá*
          it.is.me   3SG-come

        'I came (lit. 'it is me (that) came').' (Heine and Reh 1984: 110)

- The original structure involves a copular main clause (with no overt copula) and a subordinate clause.
- The focus marker develops from a third person marker in the subordinate clause, as the latter is incorporated into the main clause ([NP **[3SG V]**] >**[NP FOC V]**.

Rebracketing

In these cases too, innovation affects subordinate clauses:

- Some main clause element is integrated into the subordinate clause, or some element is extracted from the subordinate clause and integrated into the main clause.
- Both scenarios involve the same process of reanalysis whereby some element migrates from one clause to another.
- This process can give rise to either new subordinate clause morphology or new main clause morphology.

Insubordination

Insubordination (Evans 2007, 2016 ; Mithun 2008, 2016; Cristofaro 2016):

- A main clause is structurally similar to and historically derived from a subordinate one.
- One proposed explanation for some cases of insubordination is that particular types of subordinate clauses are reinterpreted as general devices to encode background or stage setting information, so that they start to be used as main clauses encoding this type of information (Mithun 2008).

Insubordination

(10) Navajo (Na-Dene)

Nídę́ę́ éí náshdóí tsoh
then that wildcat=big thither

akǫ́ǫ́ch'éé-Ø-l-wod=lą́. Éí shį́į́ łééchą=í
out.horizontally-3S-CL-run=MIR that probably dog=NOMLZ

*shį́į́ bi-ná-ji-l-zid=**go***
probably 3-about-4.S-CL-fear.PFV=DEP

'That mountain lion ran. **I guess it was afraid of the dogs**.'
(Mithun 2008: 82)

(11) Kuku Yalanji (Australian)

*Ngadiku dubal nyanda-**nya**, minya*
long.ago bark.ABS chop-UM meat.ABS

*yaka-ji-**nya**, bana nyangarri-**nya** dubal-ba [...]'*
cut.up-INTRANS-UM water.ABS pour.UM bark.LOC

'In the old days **they chopped bark**, **meat was cut up into pieces**, **they poured water into the bark** ...' (Patz 2002: 227)

Insubordination

This is another case where main clause morphosyntax is a result of innovation in subordinate clauses

- The function of the subordinate clause is reinterpreted, in the sense that a condition on its use (being restricted to subordinate clause contexts) is removed, leading to its being used as an independent clause.

- This results into new main clause morphosyntax.

Conclusions

Concluding remarks: There actually is no evidence that innovation takes place in main, rather in subordinate clauses:

- Particular changes related to assertiveness may be restricted to main clauses.
- But subordinate clauses undergo several processes of reanalysis, often of the same type as those affecting main clauses.
- Innovation in subordinate clauses is, in fact, a source of main clause morphosyntax (either in the sense that subordinate clause material is incorporated into the main clause, or in the sense that some morphosyntactic pattern used in a subordinate clause is extended to main clauses following the reinterpretation of the subordinate clause).

Conclusions

- So there does not appear to be any property of subordinate clause that sets them apart from main clauses with regard to change in general.

- Whether change takes place in main or subordinate clauses depends on the nature of individual changes, and many changes (rebracketing) can affect both main and subordinate clauses, meaning that they are not sensitive to the status of the clause in terms of the main vs. subordinate clause distinction.

Abbreviations

ABS	absolutive	MIR	mirative
CL	(valency) classifier	N	neuter
DAT	dative	NEG	negation
DEF	definite	NOMLZ	nominalizer
DEP	dependent	OBJ	object
ERG	ergative	PAST	past
GEN	genitive	PL	plural
INF	infinitive	REL	relative
INTRANS	intransitive	S	subject
LOC	locative	SG	singular
M	masculine	UM	unmarked verbal inflection

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