

*Parataxis and hypotaxis in the history of English*

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 plenary lecture 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 English 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*

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