Subordination

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This is a very impressive book, and promises to be a very useful resource, even though it is not
quite what I expected. I approached this book with two main questions in mind: (a) Do all
languages have subordination? and (b) How can we identify subordinate clauses (that is, how can
we distinguish subordination from coordination) in previously undescribed languages? However,
I quickly learned that Cristofaro’s definition of subordination was quite different from mine.

I had been assuming a conventional, structural definition of subordination as embedding. Using
brackets to indicate clause boundaries, with X and Y representing strings of words, the difference
between subordination and coordination in the structural sense can be illustrated as in (1).

\[(X \ Y)\] \ Y is subordinate to X
\[[X \ Y]\] \ Y is coordinate with X

In contrast, Cristofaro (sec. 2.4.1) defines subordination in functional (or semantic-pragmatic)
terms, drawing on the work of Langacker (1991): subordinate clauses are those that are not
pragmatically asserted by the sentence. For instance, the sentence “John said that it is raining”
asserts that John made a certain statement, but does not assert that it is raining. There is a
fundamental asymmetry between the main clause and the subordinate clause: the former is
asserted, and the latter is not. Cristofaro refers to this principle as the Asymmetry Assumption
(p. 33).

There are various ways to test which parts of a sentence are pragmatically asserted, such as
negation and questioning. If I say “It is not the case that John said that it is raining”, I am
denying only that John said a particular sentence. I am making no claim at all about the actual
weather conditions. Similarly, if I ask: “Is it true that John said that it is raining?”, I am asking
about what John said and not about the weather. This same point can be made with tag questions:
“John said that it is raining, didn’t he/*isn’t it?”

Cristofaro (sec. 2.1) argues strongly that a functional definition is necessary in order to
accomplish the goal of her study, which is not simply to describe cross-linguistic patterns of
subordination but in addition to provide a functional-cognitive explanation for these patterns.
Her functional definition allows her to include languages in the study which do not use structural embedding for a particular function, e.g. languages in Australia that use juxtaposition rather than embedding for relative clause constructions (p. 21).

Cristofaro makes the important assumption that “all languages are able to express any cognitive situation” (p. 49). Since all languages can express the kinds of cognitive relationships that she defines as subordination, we might think that all languages should have the same inventory of subordinate constructions. However, monoclausal structures are excluded. So if a particular concept (e.g. WANT to eat, BEGIN to eat, ABLE to eat, CAUSE to eat, etc.) is indicated by a particle or verbal affix in some language, that language is not included in her sample for that particular type of subordination.

In principle, Cristofaro’s functional definition allows her to include the widest possible range of languages in her study. But as a practical matter, many reference grammars do not include enough information to determine which part of each complex sentence pattern is pragmatically asserted. Her solution to this problem is “to assume that the translation used preserves the conceptual organization of the linked [propositions or predications] in the original sentence” (p. 41). She argues that the translations should be at least as reliable as the other information in the reference grammar, and of course she is dependent on the accuracy of her sources. However, from my own experience I know that I use different styles for translating examples depending on what I am trying to show, ranging from the most literal possible formal equivalent to the most natural possible pragmatic equivalent. So the dependence on translation equivalents to identify subordinate constructions seems like a possible weak point in the study.

The core of her research is presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7, which deal with complement clauses, adverbial clauses, and relative clauses respectively. In each chapter, she develops a ranking or hierarchy of subordinate relations. The ranking itself is based on aspects of linguistic form, in particular the form of the subordinate verb and the expression of arguments in the subordinate clause. The criteria here are (a) “deranking”, which refers to using a subordinate verb form that could not occur as the main verb of an independent clause, e.g. nominalizations or forms that lack tense, aspect and/or agreement marking; and (b) the non-expression of subjects in certain subordinate clauses.

For example, Cristofaro classifies complement clauses (clauses which are selected, or subcategorized, by the matrix verb) according to the semantic type of the matrix verb, adopting the classification of Noonan (1985). These semantic classes are then ordered on a four point scale, the Complement Deranking-Argument Hierarchy (p. 131), on the basis of their formal properties. The Complement Deranking-Argument Hierarchy is shown in (2):

\[
\begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{Modals (e.g. can, must) and Phasals (e.g. begin to)} \\
& \quad \text{Manipulatives (make, order) and Desideratives (want to)} \\
& \quad \text{Perception (see someone Xing)} \\
& \quad \text{Knowledge (know that), Propositional attitude (believe that), and Utterance (say that)}
\end{align*}
\]

The generalization that emerges from her study is that subordinate clause types near the top of the hierarchy are more likely to be different from independent clauses, i.e. more likely to involve
deranking and/or unexpressed subjects, than clause types near the bottom of the hierarchy. Part of the explanation for this, she suggests, is that clause types near the top of the hierarchy involve a greater degree of semantic integration between the matrix and subordinate clauses than those near the bottom.

The hierarchy for adverbial clauses (Adverbial Deranking Hierarchy, p. 168) is: Purpose > Before, After, When > Reality condition (i.e., conditional), Reason. The hierarchy for relative clauses turns out to be the famous Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie (1977). Cristofaro expresses some reservations about Keenan and Comrie’s formulation, in particular concerning the relevance of “subjecthood”, but on the whole her findings seem to validate Keenan and Comrie’s original conclusions.

In chapter 8 she combines the three hierarchies, showing that the same patterns of formal expression apply to all three. In chapter 9 she provides functional-cognitive explanations for the observed patterns. Two of the basic principles of functionalist explanation are economy and iconicity. Cristofaro uses economy to explain why grammatical features that are “pre-determined” by the semantic relationship of the subordinate clause to its matrix should not be overtly expressed; this is the “Principle of Information Recoverability” (p. 249). For example, a purpose clause necessarily refers to a potential event which is later in time than the matrix clause, so tense marking on the subordinate verb is generally redundant and frequently omitted. The “Iconicity of Independence” (p. 251) is used to explain the correlation between semantic integration and deranking. In addition to these familiar principles, Cristofaro argues that some correlations in her data can only be explained by recognizing that subordinate clauses tend to be conceptualized, to varying degrees, as things rather than events or processes (p. 255ff.).

This is a stimulating book which summarizes a very large amount of information in a fairly condensed form (355 pages). One minor disappointment is that there are relatively few real language examples in the book. Most of the empirical results are presented in the form of tables which summarize the various coding properties for the 80 languages in the sample. (The list of figures and tables takes up four full pages in the front matter!) However, this is understandable given the very ambitious scope of the study.

Happily, many of the examples that are presented are taken from Ancient Greek, a language which has been largely ignored in recent syntactic research. (One of the few typos I noticed in the book was the omission of one of the Greek examples, which would have been example 5.40c on p. 109.) Cristofaro is an expert on complementation in Ancient Greek, having published a book on the subject, in Italian. It would be wonderful if that book could be translated into English.

References
