

Coordination and subordination, and the relationship between grammar and discourse

Mark Donohue

The Australian National University

A dichotomy between coordinate and subordinate clauses underlies most discussion of complex sentences. A coordinate structure sees two clauses joined without any dependency relationship between them, while in a subordinate structure one of the clauses is dependent on the other.

Textually, it is generally the case that foregrounded materials is presented as a string of coordinate clauses, while excursions to the main storyline, backgrounded material, typically involve higher numbers of subordinate clauses.

Without affecting the coordinate/subordinate grammatical structures, many languages employ subordinate structures in their foregrounded narrative materials; similarly, we occasionally find examples of coordinate constructions used in subordinate, backgrounded functions.

This talk explores this mis-match of grammatical form and discourse function, drawing on data from languages of the Indonesia region, and explores the ambiguity in structure that we must deal with when the grammatical marking is non-overt, or optional. The variable discourse functions of subordinately-coded clauses, combined with the (at times) ambiguous coding of such clauses, can often lead to reanalysis, as has been hypothesised to have occurred in the history of Austronesian languages.