

A parametric multimodal approach to subordination in conversation

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As a synthesis of several multimodal studies on different types of syntactic subordinate constructions, we propose a multiparameter framework for modelling subordination in spontaneous conversation. Subordinate constructions have long been described in linguistics as dependent elements elaborating upon some primary features (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). However, Cognitive Grammar has challenged this view in showing that syntactic embedding often only reflects the starting point speakers choose to convey their message (Langacker, 2008), and represents only one parameter in a composite message, in which information is not presented in isolation but in a contiguity relationship (Ruth-Hirrel & Wilcox, 2018). While the independent pragmatic actions of subordinate constructions have been highlighted (Ford, 1997; Ehmer, 2016), few studies have focused on the articulation of prosody and gesture with the different communicative modalities in their production process.

Subordinate constructions are practices in interaction that offer an interpretative reconstruction of discourse. The different syntactic types of subordinate constructions refer to different interpretative frames in the speaker's experience. The selection of these interpretative frames is expressed by the different amount of prosodic and gestural boundary cues produced in co-occurrence with each syntactic type of subordinate construction.

Restrictive relative clauses mark an identity of interpretative frames between the main and subordinate clauses, with no break in prosody and gesture between the main clause and the subordinate construction.

Adverbial clauses enlarge the interpretative frame of the main clause, with a higher break index in prosody than for relative clauses, but a lower one for gesture.

Appositive relative clauses open a new interpretative frame compared to that of the main clause, which is marked by a higher prosodic and gestural break index. Two continuations are possible after the production of the appositive clause: either the interpretative frame of the main clause is resumed, or the interpretative frame of the subordinate clause is continued.

References

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