Abstract:

A core form of linguistic recursion involves multiple verb constructions with auxiliaries and verbal subordination configurations. A sentence with a main verb plus one or more auxiliary verbs is typically seen as a mono-clausal configuration, whereas a sentence containing an additional finite clause commonly instantiates a bi-clausal configuration. A simple mono/bi-clausal division becomes insufficient, however, once the entirety of embedding structures is considered. Instead we find different degrees of Œclausehood[1] along a scale of syntactic complexity, with auxiliaries on one end (least complex) and finite clauses at the other end (most complex). The over-arching hypothesis put forward in this talk is that the scale of clausehood is a deep property of language, which reflects an implicational hierarchy of minimal clause size as determined by an interplay of syntactic and semantic properties of embedding configurations. The hypothesis is based on the observation that there is a cross-linguistically stable split of embedded clauses (both finite and non-finite) into three types of complements which are defined semantically and form the following complexity scale: (most complex) propositional attitude and speech ? future, irrealis ? tenseless non-/semi-intensional (least complex). This scale is observable cross-linguistically through a diverse set of *restructuring signature* effects‹morphological, syntactic, semantic, and processing properties, which distinguish between the three types of complements in showing increasing transparency potential and/or decreasing syntactic complexity from the left to the right on the scale. While the distribution of restructuring and clausehood properties shows cross-linguistic variation, it is nevertheless possible to find restructuring signature configurations in a wide range of languages, suggesting that although language-specific factors often mask common properties among languages when viewed only on the surface, languages nevertheless share core grammatical properties at a more abstract level such as the predictable variable structural complexity.
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