



Zero, pronouns and clause-chaining: Toward a diachronic understanding[☆]

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Abstract

Morphological switch-reference systems have been described as complex structural phenomena with specific marking for chain-medial cataphoric referential continuity (SS) and discontinuity (DS). This paper attempt to place these synchronic structural systems in two explanatory contexts: First, the functional context of discourse structure and the management of nominal reference, with special attention given to the universal functions of zero, independent pronouns, anaphoric pronouns, pronominal agreement, conjunctions and non-finite verbal structures. And second, the diachronic processes via which complex synchronic switch-reference systems arise gradually from their simple building blocks.

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1. Orientation¹

Chained – conjoined, concatenated – clauses are the most common clause-type in natural language, a statistical predominance that is even more striking in spoken language and non-academic writing. The reason why they seem to tantalize theoretical linguists, ever since Longacre's (1972a,b) pioneering volumes came out, has to do with how data and formal theory interact and sometimes clash.

On the data side is the oft-extravagant grammaticalization of the cataphoric switch-reference (DS) vs. same-reference (SS) contrast. This piece of structural exotica, found in either chain-medial or chain final contexts, was first noted in Papua-New Guinea languages and then lay dormant for ten years till the advent of the GB formalism.

One striking feature of GB was its insistence that controlled syntactic processes, and in particular governed dependencies between referents in adjacent clauses, must be expressed in terms of a **subordinate syntactic configuration**. Conjoined clauses thus joined REL-clauses, V-complements and ADV-clauses, in effect rendering most clause-types in human language subordinate and giving rise, on occasion, to droll episodes of formal contortion (see e.g. Givón, 2017, Preface).

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As elsewhere in grammar, extravagant synchronic structure is best understood in terms of the diachrony that gave it rise.² The focus of this chapter is thus inherently diachronic, trying to understand the diverse gradual processes via which mundane building blocks may over time compound morpho-syntactic structure to the point of sheer extravagance.

2. Recapitulation I: clause-chains and discourse coherence

Human discourse is typically multi-propositional. That is, we string together event-clauses in coherent sequences that maintain **continuity**. The sub-element of coherence or continuity tends to persist from one clause to the next, across a stretch of discourse, most conspicuously across multiple clauses or **clause-chains**. And the overall thematic coherence of human discourse is a tapestry of multiple strands, the most concrete and easier-to-track ones being:

- (1) **Strands of coherence**
 - a. referents
 - b. spatiality
 - c. temporality and tense-aspect-modality
 - d. action routines

Most commonly, these strands tend to maintain their continuity together, breaking together at the end of thematic units. The latter are organized hierarchically, as in, schematically:³

- (2) **Hierarchic structure of discourse**

lower

=====

clause chain

paragraph

episode

story

=====

higher

The lowest, most basic unit of discourse coherence above the verbal clause is the clause-chain (trad. 'sentence'). It is the arena where the bulk of grammatical devices perform their specific communicative functions. The overall structure of clause chains can be given as, schematically:

- (3) **Structure of clause chain (schematic)**

..# RD, CI, CM,CM,CM,CM, (....),CF#...

RD = reorientation device

CI = chain-initial clause

CM = chain-medial clause

CF = chain-final clause

= chain boundary

Prosodically, clauses tend to come under unifying intonation contours. Within-chain (between-word) intonation breaks tend to be ca. 50 ms long. Between-clause – chain-medial – intonation breaks tend to be up to 100 ms long. And between-chain intonation breaks tend to be 100 ms or longer.⁴ Inter-clausal intonation breaks correspond roughly to comma punctuation [,] in written discourse, and inter-chain breaks to period [.] or semi-colon [;] punctuation.

² See Givón (2015a).

³ In spite of the fact that conversation involves changes of perspective ('turns'), coherent conversation still has a similar hierarchic structure as narrative, albeit more complex. This becomes clear when coherence is studied across multiple turns. For an extensive discussion of this, see Chafe (1997), Coates (1997), Ervin-Tripp and Kuntay (1997), and Linell and Korolija (1997).

⁴ For early inspiration and an extensive review of the literature, see Pawley and Syder (2000). For further discussion and the detailed experimental measurements, see Givón (1991, 2015a, ch. 23).

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