Altaic hypotaxis and the expression of rhetorical relations

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Hypotactic languages of the Altaic type, such as Manchu, tend to pack information into long sentences containing numerous phrases headed by verbs, but few finite clauses. The aspectual markers on the verbs heading such phrases function to mark rhetorical relations within discourses, not merely to indicate temporal relations. Little research has as yet been conducted into discourse in Altaic languages and further research will be required to specify their markers of rhetorical relations and the discourse functions served by their hypotactic structuring of sentences.

The majority of East Asian languages, including Japanese and Korean, are hypotactic, and they differ considerably from paratactic languages like Chinese and English in how they structure both sentences and discourses.

Certainly the sentence structures of Japanese, Korean, and Altaic languages such as Manchu, Mongolian, and Turkish, are in clear contrast with those of Chinese and English. In part this is because Chinese and English tend towards subject-verb-object word order, while languages of the Altaic type, in contrast, exhibit mainly subject-object-verb word order, as illustrated by the Manchu sentence in example (1). But mainly they contrast because of the quite independent difference between hypotactic and paratactic languages.

(1) \( A_a \) sere\(_b\) hergen\(_c\) ara\(_d\). ‘Write\(_e\) the letter\(_f\) [called]\(_g\) a\(_a\)’ (Li 2000:39, 322) (The subscripts link the corresponding words in the Manchu and the gloss.)

Hypotactic and paratactic languages structure sentences in radically different ways. It is rarely possible to translate from Chinese or English into Japanese, Mongolian, or Korean, or vice-versa, simply by altering word order within sentences. For instance, consider (2), from which (1) was taken.

(2) juwe biya de Taidzu sure beile «monggo bithe be kûbulime manju gisun araki» seci\(_a\) Erdeni baksi G’ag’ai jargu ci hendume\(_b\) «be monggoi bithe be tachi\(_c\) daiane sambim dere\(_d\) Julgeci jihe bithe be te adarame kûbulibumbi\(_e\)» seme marame gisureci\(_i\), Taidzu sure beile hendume\(_f\) «nikan gurun i bithe be hûlacig nikan bithe sara niyalma sarkû niyalma gemu ulhimbib\(_i\), monggo gurun i bithe be hûlacig bithe sarkû niyalma inu gemu ulhimbikai\(_j\), musei bithe be monggorome hûlaci\(_k\) musei gurun i bithe sarkû niyalma ulhirakû kai\(_l\), musei gurun i gisun i araci adarame mangga\(_m\) Encu monggo gurun i gisun adarame ja\(_n\) seme henduci\(_r\) G’ag’ai jargu ci Erdeni baksi jabume\(_o\) «musei gurun i gisun i araci sain mujangga\(_p\) kûbulime arara be meni dolo bahanarakû ofi\(_q\) marambi dere.»
Taidzu sure beile hendume\(_s\) «a sere hergen ara\(_a\), a i fejile ma sindaci\(_u\) ama wakao\(_v\) e sere
‘In the second month, when Taizu Sure beile wanted to write the Manchu language by changing the Mongol script, Erdeni Baksi and Gagai Jarguci said, “We have learned the Mongol written language, so we know it. Why now change the language that has come to us from olden times?” Taizu said: “When the writing of the Chinese country is read aloud, the people who know the written language and those who do not know the written language all understand it. When the written language of the Mongol country is read aloud, those who do not know the written language also understand. When we read our written language in the Mongolian manner, the people of our country who do not know the written language do not understand. Why is it difficult to write in the language of our country? And why is it easy to write in Mongolian?” Gagai Jarguci and Erdeni Baksi answered: “It’s good and well to write in the language of our country. But because we don’t know how to change the writing, we think it will be difficult.” Taizu Sure beile objected: “Write the letter a. If you put ma under the a, won’t it be ama?” Write the letter e. Then, if you write me under the e, won’t it be eme? I have already figured it out. You try to write it. It is possible.” In this way, alone resisting, he had the language that was read in the Mongolian manner changed to fit the Manchu language. 

Structurally, the 166 words of this Manchu passage belong to just two sentences, each consisting of a single clause, but the translation of the first of these sentences (which runs from subscript a to subscript r) requires three English sentences, containing 18 clauses (not counting five relative clauses). To be sure, embedded within this one Manchu sentence are three extended quotations, one of which itself consists of five sentences. But just as we would not analyze (3) as a sequence of sentences, we cannot regard the Manchu passage between subscripts a and r in (2) as anything but as single sentence. This is not an especially long sentence by Manchu standards. The passage in (4) is just part of a sentence that covers 31 lines in the Tale of the Nišan Shamaness (Nowak and Durrant 1977:121-22) and contains approximately 250 words, though, to be sure, again much of this verbiage consists of embedded quotations.

(3) Because we don’t know how to change the writing, we think it will be difficult.

(4) jing ni amtangga i abalame yabureda gaitai Sergudai Fiyanggo beye gubci geceme. gaitai geli wenjeme. uju liyelihun ofi. nimekulere jakade. uthai ahalji

Bahalji sebe hûlaf. musei aba fai dan be hahilame bargiya mini beye icakû serede golof. hahilame aba be bargiyafacaci de isinjif. beliyen age be dosimbufi tuwa dabufi. tuwa de fiyakûme neimtucibuki seci wenjere de taran waliyame beye alime muterakû. ojoro jakade fiyakumë ojorakû ofi. ahasi sabe alin moo be sacif. kiyoo weilefi belin age be kiyoo de debdubufi. (Nowak and Durrant 1977:121-2)

‘Just when they were happily hunting, Sergudai Fiyanggo’s body suddenly became cold all over, and then at once it became feverish. Since his head had become dizzy and he
was feeling sick, he immediately called to Ahalji and Bahalji, “Quickly gather in our battue lines; I’m not well!” Frightened, they hurriedly gathered in the battue and came to the tent. After putting their young master inside, they lit a fire. They were about to warm him by the fire in order to make him sweat, but he was already sweating so heavily from his fever that it was not suitable to expose him to the heat, so instead the servants felled a mountain tree, made a litter, and laid their young master down on it.’

(42)

Naturally, the languages called hypotactic are those in which hypotactic constructions predominate. Paratactic languages, correspondingly, are those like Chinese, which are typified by paratactic structures. From this point of view, English may well be taken to be hypotactic, as it often is by speakers of Chinese.

There is some disagreement amongst grammarians, however, as to the criterial difference between hypotactic and paratactic constructions. One school of thought identifies hypotaxis with subordination and parataxis with coordination, and so defines a hypotactic construction as one in which all but one of the elements comprising the construction are subordinated to its principal element. Accordingly, (3) is hypotactic because we don’t know how to change the writing is subordinated to the main, independent clause we think it will be difficult.

A paratactic construction, on the other hand, is one in which all of the sub-constituents are equal in status. A classic example of a paratactic sentence is (5), Caesar’s boast as reported by the historian Suetonius. This Latin sentence—and likewise its English gloss (‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’)—consists of three clauses, each one of which is capable of forming an independent simple sentence in its own right. None is subordinated to either of the others.


Another school of thought, however, focuses on the use of explicit markers, and holds (5) to be paratactic for a different reason, namely that it lacks any explicit marker of coordination. This is in distinction to the structure in (3), which is deemed hypotactic because it contains the explicit subordinator because.

While Manchu and the other Altaic languages do make use of explicit coordinators and subordinators (for example seme in (2), which functions like the complementizer that in English), subordination is generally indicated through the use of non-finite verb forms—participles, converbs, and verbal nouns. These verb forms head what traditionally are called phrases, as opposed to clauses, which are headed by finite, that is, tensed, verb forms. An example from English of such a phrase headed by a non-finite verb form is the participial phrase, building on available inventory information and preliminary examinations of Manchu records, at the beginning of (6).

(6) Building on available inventory information and preliminary examinations of Manchu records, scholars have challenged the previously prevalent view that Manchu documents are nearly all translations from Chinese and that little would be gained from reading the Manchu versions. (Li 2000:11)
While (6) is rendered partially hypotactic by the use of this participial phrase, a speaker of Manchu or another hypotactic language would recognize how paratactic most of the sentence is, with its sentence-conjoining and and the complementizer that, which governs a tensed clause.

Latin is a largely hypotactic language, yet it is up to producing a sentence such as (5). For that matter, Manchu too is quite capable of falling into parataxis. In this regard, we might compare the long sentence in (2) to the passage in (7), taken from a letter written by the K’ang-hsi emperor to the crown-prince Yin-ch’eng, reporting his campaign against Galdan, khan of the western Mongols.

(7) ere biyai juwan de du ši de isinjiha₂ juwan emu de giyase tučifi₃ genemi₆ cooga morin meni meyen ningge teksin sainₐ donjici sain sembi₇ damu meni meyen de dahalara morin. dorgi adun i minggan₈ coogai jurgan i minggan ci tulgiyen jai. akû₉ (Čimeddorj ᠣ i 1989:69)
‘On the 10th of this month we reached Tu-shih₂. On the 11th we left behind the gate [of the Great Wall]₃ and set off.₅ The soldiers and horses in our division are equally in order.₆ The bannermen behind I have not yet seen.₇ As I hear, they are in order.₈ Accompanying our division is a herd of 1000 imperial horses₉ and other than 1000 horses belonging to the war ministry there are no others.’₉ (My translation.)

To appreciate the paratactic quality of this passage we must contrast its seven sentences not only with the two sentences of example (2), but with the passage in (4), which is not even the whole of one sentence.

In (7), the arrival at Tu-shih and the setting off from the Great Wall are recounted in separate sentences, and the list of facts that follows utilizes four separate sentences. But in (4) the series of events and the various background circumstances that surround them are all presented within the confines of what is, formally, just a part of one sentence, one sentence that takes at least five sentences to translate into English. While English does have hypotactic constructions, it would be almost impossible to translate this Manchu passage into it by using just a single sentence.

What renders (7) paratactic is not the lack of hypotactic constructions (two of its seven sentences are in fact hypotactic), but instead the packing of the contents of the passage into a series of independent sentences. This is quite opposed to the normal style in written Manchu, as exhibited in (2) and (4), in which the content of a whole passage is crammed into one or two sentences. It is not the coordination of one member of a construction with others that is in question here, but rather the coordination of one piece of information in a discourse with others, or, as in (2) and (4), its subordination to other chunks of discourse. Hypotactic languages may be hypotactic because they subordinate parts of sentences to other parts of those same sentences, but they subordinate parts of sentences because they subordinate parts of discourses. From this point of view, the distinction of hypotactic and paratactic languages is not about sentence structure or the grammar of sentences; it is about discourse structure and the use of sentences.

Example (7) raises an interesting question. Why does the K’ang-hsi emperor utilize separate sentences when he could so easily have packed it all into one or two sentences, using the converbal phrases marked by -me or -fi, as in (2) and (4)? On the other hand, why are the events in (2) and (4) not narrated in separate sentences?

In contrast with paratactic languages, hypotactic languages like Manchu normally maximize the number of verbal phrases per sentence while minimizing the number of sentences.
per discourse. There is hence a trade-off between sentences and phrases. Clearly this has something to do with the discourse functions of phrases and sentences. For the sentence is the smallest linguistic unit that can be used to perform a speech act, while the phrase is the smallest unit that can be used to express a rhetorical relation.

The concept of “rhetorical relation” (Hobbs 1979, Mann and Thompson 1988, Lascarides and Asher 1993, Taboada 2006) remains a bit unclear, and students of pragmatics have yet to agree on a set of rhetorical relations, or on how to define the ones they do agree on. But the notion is intuitively clear. One of the things that renders a discourse coherent is that each of its clauses bears to another part of the discourse some functional relation, namely a rhetorical relation.

One such relation is narration, in which a temporal sequence of events is presented in iconic order, that is, in the order the events occurred in. Caesar’s boast in (5) can be viewed as an example of narration, the second and third sentences each recounting an occurrence that follows on the previously stated event. Because each sentence is party to a rhetorical relation, this brief discourse is coherent. In narration, the past tense serves not to indicate an occurrence in the past, but rather an occurrence that takes the event time of the clause it relates to as its reference time. This differs from its use in non-narrative genres, in which it may well mark a different rhetorical relation and bear a different temporal function.

Thus the second sentence of (8) bears to the first the rhetorical relation of elaboration, not narration, because we understand that there is no sequence of events here; the second sentence simply expresses aspects of the event recounted in the first sentence. In the non-narrative (8), the past tense does mean something like “in the past”, and the temporal relation of the events—that is, coincidence—is provided by the logic of elaboration rather than by the order of the clauses. Similarly, the temporal order in the relation of cause (as in 9) is anti-iconic, the event in the second sentence preceding that recounted in the first.

(8) John neatened up his office today. He filed his correspondence. He shelved his books. And he got rid of a lot of old files.

(9) The Titanic sank. It hit an iceberg.

Such rhetorical relations as these entail temporal relations, and temporal relations serve to mark rhetorical relations. In some cases, such as narration, the temporal order is iconic, and the dependent clause, what we call the satellite, is understood to express a later event than the clause it follows and depends on, what we call the nucleus. In cases such as that of the relation of cause, as in (9), the temporal order is not essentially iconic. And in the case of some rhetorical functions, there is neither a temporal order nor the dependence of a clause on another, no real nucleus and satellite. This is the case in the relation of listing. If (10) is the answer to a question such as “Which provinces have you been in?”, no temporal order is entailed, and there is no relationship between the clauses other than their shared membership in a list of facts. Of course, a passage may be ambiguous: (11) could exemplify narration and hence a sequence of events; it could simply be a list, in which cases the events could lack any relative ordering; or it could express some other relation, with one event or the other preceding the other (as in the case of the relations of cause or consequence—Bill sang because Jane played or his singing caused her to play).
(10) I’ve been to Alberta, I’ve been to Manitoba, and I’ve been to Ontario.

(11) Bill sang a song. Jane played the piano.

One of the puzzles of Altaic aspect has concerned the use of the imperfective and perfective converbs (in Manchu, –me and –fi). These are usually defined as expressing respectively temporal coincidence and precedence. In narration, -fi does seem to function this way. The events in (4) are recounted using a series of perfective converbs. Events or states of affairs that are coincident with another occurrence are normally expressed using the imperfective converb in –me. Thus in (4) hahilame ‘hurrying’ in hahilame aba be bargiyafi ‘having hurriedly taken in the battue’ expresses a concomitant of the action, and in (12) ulha adulambime ‘herding the animals’ is coordinate with booi baita be icihiyambi ‘takes care of household affairs’.

(12) kemuni hunći de duin jui bi.a ahûngga jui yasa dogo.b jacin jui niyalma hûlhi eberi.c ilaci jui. ulha adulambime.d booi baita be icihiyambi.e duici jui maimet yusub ere aniya orin juwe sef niyalma sure sain.g ‘Hunci left four sons.a The eldest son is blind;b the second is a confused and weak man,c and the third takes the animals to pastured and takes care of family matters.e The fourth son Maimet Yusub becomes twenty-two years old this year.f He is an intelligent and good man.’g (Di Cosmo 1993:38, 40)

But there are cases in which it is hard to see a temporal difference between the two. In (4), for example, we read gaitai sergudai fiyanggo beye gubci geceme. gaitai geli wenjeme, ‘Sergudai Fiyanggo’s body suddenly became cold all over, and then at once it became feverish.’ Here geceme ‘be cold’ could not be co-temporal with wenjeme ‘be feverish’ and so the translators have interpreted it as a sequence, rendered explicit with then. (Geli actually means ‘also’.) In English, then and when literally refer to the reference time, but often implicate an immediately subsequent time, a usage reflected perhaps in the use of the adverbial at once by the translators. The question is why the narrator does not use gecefi, indicating thereby a sequence of events: first the chills, then the fever.

The answer is that –fi functions to distance occurrences in time, but also in rhetorical function. Had it been used here it would have conveyed the wrong rhetorical relation. The imperfective –me, as we would expect, is generally used for those rhetorical relations for which English would use a co-temporal expression, and –fi for those where English would express precedence. In (13), the perfective converb with ombi ‘to become’ is used instead of a simple copula precisely to indicate causation, which the gloss captures with because.

(13) si ob sere niyalma ofi,b bi teni uttu tafulara dabala
 ‘I advised you (to do) like this, because you are an upright man.’b (Gorelova 2002:277)

In (4), as indicated partly by geli, Sergudei Fiyanggo’s body going cold and his having a fever are both coordinate with his feeling dizzy, and the form ofi ‘having become’ indicates that these three occurrences jointly underlie his not feeling well. That is, the sense is ‘because he didn’t feel well, having had his body go all cold and having had a fever and his head having become dizzy’.
Thus the concept of rhetorical relations casts light on the use of the Altaic converbs, which sometimes function primarily to mark rhetorical relations, not merely to express temporal relations.

Before returning to the questions of (a) why hypotactic languages tend to utilize relatively few sentences and clauses, instead cramming information into long, complex sentences built with phrases, (b) why paratactic languages do the reverse, and (c) why, sometimes, as in (7), a hypotactic language acts like a paratactic one, it is necessary to say something about clauses. We have been distinguishing clauses from phrases in terms of tensed and non-tensed verbs. But tense is not a universal; Chinese, for example, lacks tense. Insofar as Chinese has clauses and specifically things very like finite clauses, a tense-based definition of the clause is obviously incorrect. While it would not be too hard to find a definition of the clause that encompasses aspect-marking languages like Chinese as well as tense-marking ones like English, this doesn’t really get to the heart of the matter, particularly since many languages, including both Chinese and Manchu, readily allow predicates that lack verbs. In fact, the first of the two sentences in (2), four of the seven sentences in (7), three of the five in (12), and one of the two quoted sentences in (4) contain predicate phrases lacking verbs. Languages like Manchu omit these verbs for the same reason that they omit personal pronouns, because they are redundant in context.

Clauses are essentially structures that predicate things of subjects, not things that are headed by tensed verbs. From this point of view, in a language such as Manchu, which mostly omits the subjects of clauses—11 of the 19 quoted clauses embedded in (2) lack explicit subjects, and only two of the seven sentences in (6) contain them—there is no real difference between a clause, which classically contains a subject, and a converbal phrase, which normally doesn’t. But if tense is not the essential difference between phrases and clauses, it cannot provide it the reason why hypotactic languages minimize the number of clauses in a sentence and sentences in a text while maximizing the number of non-finite verbal phrases. The question is, what does.

The use of phrases in place of clauses not only reduces redundancy by omitting tenses, but reduces redundancy by rendering implicit discourse functions which tensed clauses and sentences make explicit. Each sentence brings with it a set of speech acts that subordinated material does not. It is entirely in the spirit of the Altaic languages not to make explicit what can be left implicit, what the context makes clear, if the text itself does not.

Parataxis focuses equally on the various members of the sentence or discourse in question, while hypotaxis may serve to background material rather than foregrounding it, may mark something as presupposed rather than asserted, etc. It may serve to treat an occurrence as a phase of a larger event or state of affairs.

In hypotactic languages like Manchu it is the use of separate sentences that is a marked, that is, unusual, usage, as in (7) and (12). In both these passages, the reported material is essentially a list, and the use of separate sentences serves to give each fact the status of a statement independent of the others. Similarly, in (7), the use of separate sentences functions to transform what could have been a narrative sequence followed by its background into two lists, as if the emperor is simply transcribing his notes made at various times, or writing down thoughts as they come to him, or providing a chronicle of independent events followed by a list of separate circumstances.

The discourse-functional role of aspect in converbs, in contrast to its purely semantic role of temporal marking, raises questions regarding the functional role of sentences in discourses and
texts. Given the paucity of research to date on discourse in Altaic languages, these questions invite further research.

References


