The morphosyntax of clause combining in Australian languages: a typological study

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The domain of clause combining in Australian languages has often been described as morphosyntactically restricted, with relatively few specialised means to mark subordination (e.g. Dixon 2002: 86-87). Accordingly, the bulk of typological work in this domain has been centred on a limited number of phenomena, like the syntactic status of the so-called 'adjoined relative clause' (Hale 1976, Nordlinger 2006), switch reference (Austin 1981), and complementising case (Austin 1988, Dench & Evans 1988). This paper develops a more comprehensive typology of clause-combining in Australian languages, using a sample of 35 languages. In doing so, we show that (i) specialised morphosyntactic marking is not rare, and the range of resources available is more diverse than is covered by the current typological literature, (ii) not all constructions erstwhile treated as subordinate can be confidently labelled as such, and (iii) specialised morphosyntactic marking of clause combining tends to be limited to a relatively restricted semantic subdomain, with other semantic relations relying on the co-optation of intraclausal resources (e.g. TAM-marking).

On the basis of our sample, we define a basic typology of five macro-types of morphosyntactic marking, with most languages in our sample having at least three of these. We show that well-known types like dependent verb forms are quite diverse, showing various combinations of clausal reduction (e.g. 'semi-participial forms' in Wirangu, Hercus 1999: 119-129) and nominal-like behaviour (e.g. 'nominalisations' in Gooniyandi, McGregor 1990: 396-411). More importantly, there are also less-often discussed types like distributed marking, where the 'arraying' of markers across the two clauses defines the interclausal link – as in Nyulnyul (ex1), where both clauses are inflected similarly (IRR+IMP = 'past unrealised') to produce a past conditional construction – and a broad range of conjunctions, often thought to be atypical in Australia but found in at least half of our sample – as in Kala Lagaw Ya (ex2).

(1) Nyulnyul (Nyulnyulan)

\[ \text{nga-la-k-an} \quad \text{derby-ung} \quad \text{i-li-jabal-an-ngay} \]
\[ 1\text{MIN.NOM-IRR-carry-IMP} \quad \text{Derby-ALL1} \quad 3\text{NOM-IRR-ask-IMP-1MIN.ACC} \]

'I'd have taken him to Derby if he had asked me.' (McGregor 2011: 658)

(2) Kala Lagaw Ya (Pama-Nyungan: Western Torres Strait)

\[ \text{apu} \quad \text{waku-n um-ay} \quad \text{waku-n um-ay} \quad \text{matha maythun thaya-n.} \]

\[ \text{mother(NOM)} \quad \text{mat-ERG weave-RPI} \quad \text{mat-ERG weave-RPI} \quad \text{until sleep come.up-PRES} \]

'The mother kept on making mats, until sleep overtook her.' (Stirling 2012: 163)

Based on this database of morphosyntactic phenomena, we take up Nordlinger’s (2006: 26) call to develop a more fine-grained analysis of the morphosyntax of clause-combining. Our alternative typology achieves this by validating the phenomena against basic behavioural criteria such as clausal ordering potential, sites of inflectional reduction, and the coding of dependents. In doing so, we
demonstrate that language-internal distinctions have been obscured by a priori descriptors such as ‘subordination’ and ‘non-finite’.

Finally, our analysis shows that while there is a broad range of morphosyntactic devices in the sample, specialised means are limited to specific semantic subdomains of clause-combining. For example, purposive and contemporaneous relations tend to have morphosyntactically specialised marking, while causal and contrastive relations tend not to (compare GIVÓN’S 1980 classic generalisation). These semantic restrictions may actually be what underlie the classic idea that Australian languages are morphosyntactically restricted in clause-combining. Outside of these strategies, the rest of the domain appears to rely on recruiting existing clause-internal resources for combining clauses (as presaged in MERLAN 1981, McGregor 1988, VERSTRAETE 2010), for instance modal marking being co-opted for suspended propositions.

References


