‘Subordination’: Some reflections on Matthiesen and Thompson’s article “The structure of discourse and ‘subordination’” and its bearing on the idea of circumstantial clause in Arabic and Hebrew

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1. Introduction

Since ‘clause combining’ was a central concept in Isaksson et al. (2009), and still is in the project volume Clause combining in Semitic (Isaksson 2015 forthcoming) it goes without saying that a discussion of this concept and its relation to subordination justifies some further considerations. The answers are by no means self-evident.

In both of the above works the article by Matthiessen and Thompson, “The structure of discourse and ‘subordination’” (1988, henceforth M-T) turned out to present what could be called a core strategy. In their article, Matthiessen and Thompson ask for a clarification of the nature of “clause combining, including ‘subordination’ and its relationship to ‘co-ordination’” (M-T 275). They note in their introduction that the topic “has been the subject of much discussion” (M-T 275). This is not an exaggeration.

Matthiessen and Thompson ask for something very similar to the clause combining investigated in Isaksson et al. (2009), only in more general linguistic terms. While my intention was to discuss circumstantial clauses (CC), that is, clauses with a specific textlinguistic function, M-T intend to address the “problem of ‘subordination’ in terms of the structure of the discourse within which the ‘subordinate’ clause appears” (M-T 275). Their starting point is unusual: they think that in order to distinguish a subordinate clause from a main clause one must “appeal to the discourse context” (M-T 275), which means that you must have recourse to textlinguistics. Subordination has something to do with the textual web, with the function of clauses in a text. Quite surprisingly this is a rare perspective in studies on subordination (M-T 275). Their thesis is, more explicitly, that “Clause combining in grammar has evolved as a grammaticalization of the rhetorical units in discourse defined by rhetorical relations” (M-T 301).
Matthiessen and Thompson thus have a very general starting point for their discussion of ‘subordination’: they do not require from the beginning that a subordinate clause must be syntactically marked. Their operative strategy is semantic. They intentionally investigate the kind of clauses that are semantically marked as circumstantial, and they expect to find out various strategies by which languages grammaticalize circumstantial clause combining (CCC). This is also the strategy in Isaksson (2009; 2015). Circumstantial clause relations are investigated in order to observe in individual Semitic languages various syntactic strategies used to code circumstantial clause linkages, or, with M-T’s term: ‘circumstantial clause combining’.

If we take the step to require that a subordinate clause be morphosyntactically marked in some way, Matthiessen and Thompson say that this is ‘hypotaxis’. Hypotaxis means that the subordination has been grammaticalized in a specific language.

When we work with the concept of hypotaxis we have put a more severe constraint on the concept of subordination (M-T 275): in the case of hypotaxis there is a syntactic mark of the status of the subordinate clause in relation to the main clause.

It would be easy to conclude from M-T’s introduction that grammatical marking is left aside when they discuss subordination. This is not the case. They just start with the function, not with the coding. They “are looking for grammatical interpretations of clause combining that make functional sense”. They look for grammar, for grammatical marking, after having identified function. They say, let us look for clauses that have a subordinate function in clausal relations, and then let us observe how they are coded grammatically.

The hypothesis of Matthiessen and Thompson is that “Enhancing hypotactic clause combining has evolved as a grammaticalization of rhetorical relations in text of the enhancing Nucleus-Satellite kind” (M-T 301).

Matthiessen and Thompson clearly differentiate ‘embedding’ from clause combining (M-T 276). ‘Embedding’ is something else; it does not necessarily coincide with the concept of subordination. Strangely, this is felt to be controversial by some scholars.

When coining the specific term ‘circumstantial clause combining’ M-T refer to Halliday’s concept ‘circumstantial’ clause (M-T 276 f.; Halliday 2004). It is interesting to see how cautious M-T are about terminology. Traditional terms can become like fetters for the scientist. They bind the thought. Traditional terminology constitutes an obstacle to innovative ideas. Traditional names of observed phenomena invite to traditional thinking.

When the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss questioned the parallel postulate he in reality advocated a broader definition of a ‘parallel line’. Euclid’s fifth axiom was certainly in accord with common sense, but it was an axiom and turned out impossible to prove. So we could equally say that
the axiom was a definition of a term: ‘parallel line’. With Euclid’s definition of the term there could be only one line through a given point outside another line. Since it was impossible to prove such a definition sooner or later would invite someone to ask, what if there were two such lines, or three?

In one perspective it is “just a question of terminology”. We could be content with the traditional term, and say that whatever else we observe must also be called something else, like ‘nearly-parallel’ or ‘semi-parallel’, or whatever we would prefer. Let us stick to Euclid’s definitions! This is what science did for 2000 years. We could also do that in linguistics. Science is free to choose its own terminology. But would that have been fruitful? If the term ‘parallel’ had remained with the Euclidean definition, scientific thinking had remained thinking that a parallel line is a parallel line. As we all know, this is not what happened. Against the public opinion and many critics among his colleagues Gauss asked himself and the scholarly world what would happen if we, within a definition of ‘parallel line’ in mathematical geometry, allowed for the possibility of several lines through a given point being parallel to a given line.

This is not simply a question of right or wrong. The traditional definition of ‘parallel line’ was ‘true’ and good within the confines of a plane. It worked well for most practical tasks. Instead it is a question of fruitfulness. The wider definition of ‘parallel line’ gave rise to a new and initially unexpected non-Euclidean geometry (of which the plane geometry was only a special case). This theory became the basis for Einstein’s theory of relativity.

It is the same consideration of fruitfulness that Matthiessen and Thompson put up on the table concerning the concept of ‘subordination’. Instead of starting with a traditional definition, they begin with function: what if we ask for function first, and then discuss the definition in grammatical terms? M-T abstain from introducing “a specific traditional name” of the clause combinations under study, “since any name is likely to presuppose a particular kind of interpretation. Further, the traditional names for the clause combinations we want to study all imply interpretations we think are both grammatically misleading and unhelpful when we try to account for their discourse function.” (M-T 277).

What is the target clauses of Matthiessen and Thompson’s investigations? They investigate clauses that are related circumstantially.¹ All their English examples show clauses that are coded by a specific connective (M-T 277):

- *when, while, after, before* (coding various ‘temporal’ relations to the main clause),
- *if, unless, provided that, as long as* (coding a ‘conditional’ relation),

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¹ They are also the clauses investigated by R. M. W. Dixon 2009, but with another terminology. Dixon simply uses the term ‘non-main clause’ (with the exception of ‘complement clauses’ and ‘relative clauses’).
• because, since, as (coding a ‘reason’, that is, a causal or explanative relation),
• although, even though, except that (coding a ‘concessive’ relation),
• in order to, so that, in order that (coding a ‘purpose’, that is, a final relation),
• by (coding a instrumental relation, the means by which something is carried out),
• as if, as (coding a ‘manner’, that is, a comparative relation).

It is important to observe that the class of clause relations – M-T do not talk about a class of clauses – under investigation is wide. In accordance with Halliday’s terminology M-T call all such clause relations ‘circumstantial’. Circumstantial relations concern not only propositions expressing something concomitant or simultaneous with the main clause, nor do they only concern temporal relations. The examples of circumstantial clause combinations given by M-T in their introductory discussion looks like ordinary subordinate clauses with ordinary subordinating conjunctions:

(1) I made an appointment with the best hand surgeon in the valley [to see if my working activities were the problem] (M-T 277)

Yet M-T are unwilling to call such clausal relations ‘embedding’. They explicitly renounce that concept in relation to clause combining. And they have their reasons. Circumstantial relations involve condition, reason, purpose, cause, time, space, comparison, concession, manner, means (M-T 283-284). Let us observe that the number of circumstantial relations seems to be nearly unlimited. In particular, the number of circumstantial relations is not the same as the number of subordinating particles available in a specific language. This is exactly the type of clause combinations we are familiar with in Arabic and Hebrew. It is a strange fact that “There is simply no satisfactory term for them in traditional accounts” (M-T 284). Before we turn to a discussion of ‘embedding’ in relation to circumstantial subordination, we now make a digression in an attempt to clarify the ‘clause’ concept. If we know better what a ‘clause’ is, we are hopefully better off to understand the idea of an ‘embedded’ clause.

2. The concept of ‘clause’

The concept of ‘clause’ was discussed in a Semitic setting in Isaksson (2009, 5). With I defined a ‘clause’ as a syntagm containing one predication (1988, 182). This definition leads to some further observations:
1. an explicit subject is not required for the syntagm to be a clause; a
subject is often implicitly understood from the immediate context; in
such a case we may say that the subject is inferred from the context;
2. if the syntagm contains two predications it is no longer one clause
but two.

Let us also be specific about a finite clause: a ‘finite clause’ contains a verb
with a TAM specification, which in a Central Semitic context means that a
finite clause may contain a form of the suffix conjugation (Vsuff), a form of
the short prefix conjugation (VprefS), a form of the long prefix conjugation
(VprefL), or an imperative.²

As for ‘infinite’ clauses it is important to realize that “the traditional con-
cepts of finiteness and nonfiniteness are just two extreme points on a scale of
desententialization” as Haspelmath says (1995, 5) with reference to Leh-
mann (1988, 200). “In the traditional grammar of the classical languages, the
presence of a finite verb was regarded as a prerequisite for sentence (or
clause) status. Constituents consisting of nonfinite verbs (especially infini-
tives and participles) were not regarded as clauses but as ‘constructions’,
‘phrases’, or ‘turns’ (Russian oborot)” (Haspelmath 1995, 11). This is the
case also in traditional Hebrew grammars, in which “implicit-subject con-
structions are V[erb]P[hrase]s, whereas complete finite clauses are S[entence]s (consisting of an explicit subject NP plus a VP)” (Haspelmath
1995, 11). And Haspelmath comments further that “the traditional syntactic
distinction between clauses and phrases based on finiteness and an explicit
subject has no universal significance”. The same holds for Semitic syntactic
analysis. In a Semitic context it is “best to adopt a definition of the clause
that only specifies that the clause must contain a predicate” (Haspelmath
1995, 11). Thus the Hebrew liqṭōl practically always codes the verbal predi-
cate in a non-finite (‘desententialized’) hypotactic clause, although the sub-
ject is most often left implicit by reference to the main clause (Isaksson
2009, 13):

(2) Pattern: CONJ-Vsuff+[PREP-VN]
kaʾšær killā [lə-haqrīb ʾæt-ham-minhā]
‘when he had finished [presenting the tribute]’ (Judg. 3:18)

Example (2) shows a syntagm consisting of two clauses, of which the second
is infinite and subordinate to the first one. Both clauses lack an explicit sub-
ject.

As with the concept of ‘clause’, the notion of ‘subordination’ has been re-
garded unproblematic in Arabic and Hebrew grammar. Haspelmath’s remark
pertains to the standard grammars of Arabic and Hebrew as well: “every

² Cf. the discussion in Isaksson 2009, 125-141, and Isaksson 2011.
clause marked by a subordinating conjunction or another subordinator (e.g., relative pronoun) was identified as subordinate”, and at that point the analysis came to an end (Haspelmath 1995, 12). In this instance it is pertinent to remind of what Nyberg notes in his Hebrew grammar, “Hebrew is poor in specific subordinating conjunctions. Subordination of clauses is most often expressed by other syntactical means than a conjunction” (Nyberg 1972 § 30c).³

3. Embedding

None of the examples of English circumstantial clause combining initially given by Matthiessen and Thompson can be said to involve embedding. They are ordinary cases of clause relations with an ‘adverbial’ semantic meaning, and all of them contain a subordinating conjunction, but no examples of ‘embedding’.

‘Embedding’ is, simply speaking, “one clause functioning as a constituent, a complement, within another clause” (M-T 279). Such is for example the case with a defining relative clause, which functions as a post modifier of a noun (M-T 279).

When discussing this point Matthiessen and Thompson take a definite standing concerning the case of circumstantial clause combining. They are not willing to accept the adverbial clause as ‘embedded’ in another clause (M-T 279). They take this step fully conscious that other linguists, such as Quirk et al. (1985), and Foley and Van Valin (1984; see the discussion in M-T 319 note 8) have adopted the view that circumstantial clauses are embedded.

So, linguists are divided on this question. Longacre and Halliday regard ‘adverbial clauses’ as cases of clause combining, that is, of combinations of a main clause and an ‘adverbial’ clause.

The decision to regard a syntactic phenomenon as only one clause (although complex) or as two clauses in combination is a serious matter. This decision influences how you think. But science is innovation. It is of utmost importance that you adopt a terminology that opens up your thinking for new fruitful perspectives.

Matthiessen and Thompson take the decisive step to regard “adverbial clauses” – M-T want to discard this term altogether – as something functionally distinct from adverbs: “these clauses do not function as adverbials”, M-T says (280). The reason for treating adverbial clauses as adverbials (and thus embedded) is that they seem to express about the same things as ad-

³“Hebr. är fattig på underordnande konjunktioner i egentlig mening. Satsers underordning uttryckes oftast med andra syntaktiska medel än en konjunktion.” The same observation was recently done by Bloch (2009, 40).
verbs in one clause. This is to treat linguistic code as a matter of mathematical logic. It is like saying that if you can reasonably paraphrase an adverbial clause as an adverbial, then it is actually and functionally an adverbial constituent (and thus is also embedded).

M-T bluntly reject this argument of paraphrasing. The attempts to paraphrase adverbial clauses with prepositional phrases always involve a nominalization of the clause, “not an ordinary noun, and this is quite significant” (M-T 280).

(3) [Before he left Krishnapur] the Collector took a strange decision.4

(4) [Before leaving Krishnapur] the Collector took a strange decision.

(5) [Before his departure from Krishnapur] the Collector took a strange decision.

Matthiessen and Thompson’s decisive point is that such paraphrasing always involves (some level of) nominalization of a verb clause, and such nominalizations cannot be paraphrased by real adverbials like “before noon”, “afterwards”, etc. Christian Lehmann in the same book (Haiman and Thompson 1988) would have called such nominalizations ‘desententialization’, a term that has the advantage to emphasize the function of the syntagm as a clause. A nominalized (‘desententialized’) clause is still a clause, is still involved in clause combining as the example by M-T shows:

(6) [Before leaving Krishnapur] the Collector took a strange decision

In the adverbial clause *Before leaving Krishnapur* the ing-form represents a certain level of nominalization. The clause is infinite. But the paraphrasing argument is invalid, as M-T write: “Rewording the ‘adverbial clause’ with a prepositional phrase to show that it is an adverbial does not show that at all; it shows that the result of representing the event of leaving as if it was an adverbial is a metaphor.” (M-T 280). The corresponding nominalizations in Arabic are typically participles and maṣdars in the dependent case. Such desententialized adverbial clauses are still clauses being combined with a main clause (Isaksson 2009, 14 ff).

In this instance M-T point out that the whole concept of ‘embedded clause’ presupposes that there is one clause in which the other clause (the adverbial one) is embedded. But there are many examples of adverbial clauses which combine with several other clauses. In view of such examples the embedded-thinking turns out less feasible to describe what is going on in the linguistic code:

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4 This example is added by me to show the corresponding finite form of the adverbial clause.
(7) [While Ed was coming downstairs] Mary slipped out the front door, went around the house, and came in the back door.

If you think of the temporal subordinate clause *While Ed was coming downstairs* as embedded, in which one of the three main clauses is the adverbial clause embedded? (M-T 281). The subordinate clause in this example cannot reasonably be argued to be embedded in another clause. Let us also note from example (7) that a circumstantial clause may precede its main clause. There is nothing intrinsically impossible in a reversed clausal order with the main placed after the subordinate clause. Finally, let us also note that there may be a cluster of coordinated main clauses. In this example the main clauses also code a ‘main line’ of the text.

The whole controversy of embedding and clause combining boils down to a question of the most fruitful terminology. Which definition of adverbial clause is best suited to describe the actual usage of adverbial clauses? It seems evident that the ‘embedding’ metaphor fails to account for many cases of acknowledged adverbial clauses even in English and the metaphor of an adverbial shuts our eyes to a wider approach to circumstantial clause combining.

Which definition, then, is capable of opening new perspectives for linguistic research? On this issue we have found the perspective of Matthiessen and Thompson to be relevant to those cases of adverbial clauses we encountered in Arabic and Hebrew (Isaksson, Kammensjö and Persson 2009, 2, note 3). M-T remarks, “What we need at this point is a framework that is richer than the traditional one and allows us to interpret our examples as instances of clause combining without having to treat them as coordination” (M-T 282).

On this point Matthiessen and Thompson follow Halliday and call circumstantial clause combining a type of ‘hypotaxis’, since it is definitely not ‘parataxis’ (M-T 282). For M-T the question of using the scientifically most fruitful terminology is a paramount consideration when they discuss the circumstantially hypotactic clauses: “These are clause combinations where we do not gain any grammatical or discourse insight by interpreting one clause as a constituent part of another clause. Although the clauses are interdependent and stand in a kind of main–dependent relation to one another at some level, there is no sense in which one is a part of the other.” (M-T 283). The embedding metaphor shuts our eyes and imprisons our thinking for the linguistic reality of the clause combinations defined by Halliday (2004) as ‘enhancing hypotaxis’ and by M-T as ‘circumstantial clause combining’.5

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5 For a comment on Van Valin (1984), see Matthiessen and Thompson (1988), 319 note 8.
4. Hypotaxis

Hypotaxis includes the following cases (M-T 282-283):

1. *Embedded* clauses: a) defining relative clauses, b) subject clauses, c) object clauses. Embedding is not clause combining.

2. Hypotactically *combined* clauses (‘hypotactic clause combining’):
   a) non-defining (non-restrictive) relative clauses; b) clauses of reported speech; c) cases of circumstantial clause combining.

The divisions are still functionally defined. M-T make no attempt to specify the syntactic marking of hypotactical clause combining. Their approach is the observation that hypotactic clause combining (no. 2 above) reflects the general hierarchical organization of discourse, of a text. In the view of Matthiessen and Thompson discourse structure is generally carried out by hypotactic clause combining, and in particular circumstantial clause combining.

Since M-T discuss circumstantial clause combining (CCC) entirely from a discourse function perspective we hardly know anything about what kind of syntactic mechanisms they presume can be used to mark CCC in a crosslinguistic perspective. We are left with their introductory English examples of circumstantial clause combining (M-T 277), all of which show subordinate clauses with an initial subordinating connective. Some of the subordinate clauses are finite, as in

(8) [As your floppy drive writes or reads] a Syncom diskette is working four ways to keep loose particles and dust from causing soft errors, drop-outs.

Some other subordinate clauses show various degrees of desententialization, like that in example (9),

(9) [While attending Occidental College…] he volunteered at the station as a classical music announcer.

In the case of non-finite hypotactic clauses, the subordinate clause is hypotactically marked be a degree of desententialization in addition to the conjunction *while*. The hypotaxis in example (9) is marked in two ways: by a fronted particle *while*, and by a degree of nominalization of the predicate, *attending*. If we attempt to remove the fronted particle, the semantic relation would probably become too unclear for the proposition to work properly,

(10) [Attending Occidental College…] he volunteered at the station as a classical music announcer.

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6 For a discussion of possible degrees of desententialization I refer to Lehmann (1988).
We can see that in some cases of infinite hypotaxis the English linguistic competence needs the additional signal of a semantically explicit fronted connective like *while*. It is obvious that the circumstantial clause in the constructed example (10) is subordinate, but its relation to the main clause is too vague and would require too much analysis from the reader to be communicatively successful.

The terminology of M-T makes no distinction as to adverbial clauses with or without a subordinating connective. Both the mentioned research project publications (Isaksson et al. 2009; Isaksson 2015) put the adverbial clauses regardless of conjunction into focus. In the earlier project the emphasis was on adverbial clauses without a fronted subordinating connective. With the earlier definition, circumstantial clauses (CC) lack an explicit mark for the semantic relation to the main clause (it lacks a semantically explicit subordinating connective like *in order to*; Isaksson 2009, 7). The reason for this was that the particle-fronted adverbial clauses in some sense are trivial: they are easy to identify and already recognized in traditional grammars. By contrast, recognizing adverbial clauses without subordinating conjunctions represents a significant achievement.

It can be argued that allowing for a notion of triviality to influence a central linguistic concept is somewhat hazardous. It is not at all self-evident that circumstantial clauses with a fronted connective are trivial. On the contrary, it can be assumed that a comparison with their asyndetic counterparts might be of great interest. We will return to this question later in this article. It is also important to make the definition of *syndesis* more precise.

In the later CCC-project circumstantial clause combinations with and without subordinating connective are both of interest and should be compared, since as Lehmann says, “the presence or absence of a connective device between two clauses has nothing to do with parataxis or hypotaxis, but is exclusively a question of syndesis. In particular, it is not the case that either the concept of hypotaxis or the concept of subordination requires the use of a conjunction” (Lehmann 1988, 210).

So, if we make a distinction between syndetic and asyndetic clause combining in Lehmann’s sense, do the two fulfill the same functions in the text? Are they interchangeable? Which type of subordinate clause is the more frequent, the type with or the type without connective? The answers will turn out to depend on the branch of Semitic we study. It is also possible that we will discern diachronic differences as to how adverbial clauses are coded in a Semitic setting. Does particle-based marking of circumstantial clause combining increase in later diachronical stages?

Matthiessen and Thompson focus in their article on the circumstantial clause combinations, and call this kind of hypotaxis in accordance with Halliday’s terminology ‘enhancing hypotaxis’. M-T feel that “we need to recognize enhancing hypotaxis as a distinct category if we are to fully understand
it in discourse terms.” (M-T 283). This is certainly so also in a Semitic linguistic setting. But before we discuss the concept of subordinate clause, we must step into the concept of syndesis.

5. Syndesis

In Isaksson et al. (2009) syndesis was primarily a term used to refer to the conjunction wa. If a clause was fronted by wa, in Hebrew wə, the clause was termed ‘syndetic’, otherwise it was ‘asyndetic’.

This has turned out to be a too limited concept. In accordance with the terminology of M-T it is preferable to use the term ‘syndesis’ for the case when a clause is linked to another clause with a linking particle of whatever semantic implication.

Definition: a clause is syndetic if it is linked to another clause by a connective, be it wa, or another conjunction, and regardless whether the conjunction is subordinating or coordinating.

Some observations:

- The extremely frequent Semitic conjunction wa (and its reflexes) makes a clause syndetic. It should be regarded as neutral in relation to the concepts of ‘coordination’ and ‘subordination’. A clause with an initial conjunction wa may be coordinate or subordinate.
- The conjunction wa makes explicit the transition to a new clause.7
- The Central Semitic subordination marker k (in Hebrew kī) may denote any circumstantial relation to the main clause. In a Hebrew lexicon its meanings could be given as: 1. ‘because’; 2. ‘for’; 3. ‘that’; 4. ‘introducing direct speech’; 5. ‘when’; 6. ‘if’; 7. ‘in case of’; 8. ‘although, even though’; 9. ‘in order to, that’, and several other circumstantial shades of meaning. The conclusion is that kī in Biblical Hebrew has none of those meanings but is, as a conjunction, a general marker of a non-main clause linkage, including a circumstantial one. All the meanings given in the lexicons are just estimations of the semantic relations between the clauses connected by kī in specific contexts. When we encounter a syndesis with kī, the semantic relation to the main clause must be inferred from the context.8
- Syndesis may be marked by a semantically explicit conjunction, like Arabic ḥattā ‘until’ or Hebrew pæn ‘unless’.
- Syndesis may be marked by wa plus another conjunction.

7 This has already been observed in Phoenician by Krahmalkov (2001, 273): “The conjunction W- is commonly used for purposes of punctuation, specifically, to mark off constituent clauses of complex sentences”.
8 k is attested in Hebrew, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, Elephantine Aramaic, Akkadian and Epigraphic South Arabian. It should be noted that kī in Biblical Hebrew may as well be an asseverative adverbial particle (‘surely’).
With this definition of syndesis the CCC category includes clausal relations marked by another conjunction than *wa*. A clause linkage with a semantically explicit conjunction is no longer regarded as a quite separate class of clause relations.

6. ‘Subordinate clauses’

Isaksson, Kammensjö and Persson (2009) discovered that while their project started with a study of some specific types of “adverbial clauses”, they ended up with a discussion of the concept of subordination in general. I concluded in the Introduction, “The present book is to a significant part an investigation into the nature of subordination in Arabic and Hebrew” (Isaksson 2009, 3, note 4).

Matthiessen and Thompson are extremely cautious about the term ‘subordinate clause’. The reason is that it is used with different meanings in linguistic literature. In one school it is used to describe a specific class of clauses (with distinct syntactic characteristics). This is a notion M-T want to avoid. In their view, ‘subordination’, in order to be a meaningful concept, must involve a relation to another grammatical unit. To avoid this constant source of misconceptions M-T prefer to avoid the term ‘subordination’.

For the same reason they want to discard the term ‘adverbial clause’ (M-T 285). M-T believe that this term is scientifically unfruitful. It invites to the misconception that a “clause functions as an adverbial, treats it as embedded within another clause rather than as an instance of clause combining, and we have rejected the embedding interpretation for our set of examples” (M-T 286).

My own position until quite recently has been to use ‘subordination’ freely as an equivalent of ‘hypotaxis’ including embedding and clause combining. M-T uses the term ‘subordination’ in an even wider sense, allowing for cases of subordination without any morphosyntactic signal, while hypotaxis always involves an overt signal of the change in clausal status. I am hesitant on this point.9 Is it meaningful to talk about a subordination that is only semantically triggered? What should we call a construction like:

(11) Pattern: wa-VprefS+wa-VprefS

\[ \text{wa-ŷsaw yōsēp wa-ymalʾū ãet kōlē-hām bār} \]

‘Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain’ (Gen. 42:25; NIV)

The same type of purely semantic subordination is encountered in Classical Arabic, here in the Karbala drama when al-Huṣayn orders his servants:

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9 Dixon 2009 solves the problem by using the term ‘non-main clause’ for a syntactically marked clause that is not a main clause, while the ‘focal clause’ and ‘supporting clause’ are purely semantic terms. ‘Subordination’ is not used at all.
It is certainly crucial to make the distinction between semantic function and grammatical class (thus M-T 284). We observed in the earlier project that there existed no specific class of ‘CC’ clauses: a clause that is circumstantial in one context, could turn out ‘non-CC’ in another context (Isaksson 2009, 13). Other linguists, like Christian Lehmann (1988), take a divergent standing and accept the term ‘subordination’ with a careful definition (cf. M-T 319, note 11). But as M-T says, if we use the term ‘subordination’ freely, people will never know if we mean embedding or clause combining or possibly both. The term “fails to make the distinction between embedding and clause combining” (M-T 286). On the other hand, the draw-back of avoiding the term ‘subordination’ is a terminology that conveys a message to our own thinking (most important) and to our readers that what we are talking about has nothing to do with subordination. For it is obvious that circumstantial clauses usually describe typical ‘subordinate’ meanings. As we have discussed above, this is not a question of the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ terminology. It is a quest for the notions that permit, instead of restrain, new insights into how texts are structured. That is, concepts that are productive and lead to new research.

7. Grammatical marking of circumstantial clause combining

From their English perspective Matthiessen and Thompson envisage two strategies of grammatical marking of the hypotactic clause combination (M-T 304).

1. Connective: The clause coding the satellite is typically introduced by a connective.
2. Finiteness: The clause coding the satellite may be marked with respect to finiteness by being non-finite (infinitival or participial clause).

An example of the latter strategy, a ‘switch’ to a non-finite clause, is:

(13) John entered the house [singing a song].

So English has a way of marking hypotactic relations without using a connective, just by changing the verb from a finite form (in the main clause) to a non-finite form (= the circumstantial clause). In Arabic circumstantial clause...
relations may be grammatically marked by a switch from a perfective to an imperfective verb, as in (Waltisberg 2009, 3, taken from Wright 1898):

(14) Pattern: Vsuff+[Ø-VprefL]
   ʾatāʾ ilā ʾayni mā in [yašrabu]
   ‘he came to a spring of water [to drink]’.

(15) Pattern: Vsuff+[Ø-Snoun-VprefL]
   ǧamaʿa rasīlu llāhi ʿaw daʾā rasīlu llāhi banī ʿabdi l-muṭṭalibi minhum rahṭhuhu [kulūhum yaʾkulu l-ḡaq ṣata wa-yašrabu l-farqa
   ‘der Gesandte Gottes versammelte oder lud die Banū ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib ein, unter denen sich seine Verwandten befanden, [damit ein jeder vom einjährigen Böcklein esse und (ein) farq trinke’ (Waltisberg 2009, 164)

In (14) and (15) the circumstantial clause expresses a *purpose* in relation to the main clause. But this switch of verb forms may express practically all the relational meanings of circumstantial relations enumerated by Matthiessen and Thompson (Isaksson 2009, 8-18). In another example from Waltisberg (2009, 55) the switch from Vsuff to VprefL expresses an attendant circumstance:

(16) Pattern: fa-Vsuff+[Ø-VprefL]
   fa-qāla bnu ʿanamata fī ǧālika [yamdaḥu mutammiman]
   ‘Ibn ʿAnama sagte darüber [indem er den Mutammim lobte]’


Hypotaxis is defined by Halliday as “the binding of elements of unequal status” (1985, 198). It was one of the results of Isaksson et al. (2009) that subordination in Hebrew and Arabic is often marked by a shift in the basic clause structure (Isaksson 2009, 121, section CQ-marking: a pattern of ‘tense-switching’). It is true that subordination is sometimes marked by a subordinating conjunction, but such conjunctions play a role only in a minority of the massive interplay between main and subordinate clauses in classical Hebrew. As in early Romance literature with its roots in an oral tradition, “narrative subordination seems to be handled in large part through manipulation of categories of the verb within a predominantly paratactic main-clause structure” (Fleischman 1985, 869).

If subordination is defined as a shift to a clause with unequal status (in comparison with a main clause) this is, in Arabic and Hebrew, often signalled by a ‘switch’ of clause type without other connective than a possible conjunction *wa* (Isaksson 2009, 121 f), the ‘type’ being defined primarily by the verbal gram in the clause (VprefS, VprefL, Vsuff, IMP, PA, VN), or the absence of such a gram (NCl). Desententialized clauses with participles and infinitives are often involved in hypotactic clause combining, in which case
they function as subordinate clauses, and then in the dependent case (Isaksson et al. 2009, 15-18; 2013, 658). Desententialized clauses practically always represent a shift of clause type in relation to a finite clause.

Since a subordinate clause frequently lacks an initial subordinating conjunction, the specific semantic relation to the main clause often remains unexpressed and must be inferred by the listener (and reader) from the immediate context (Isaksson et al. 2009, 7, 10, 14, 19, 23).

When a subordinate clause has an initial subordinating particle, the linking between main and subordinate clauses in many cases retains the shift of clause structure,¹⁰ which means that a conjunction like kī often functions as an additional (redundant) mark of the hypotaxis, supplied for the sake of clearness. A conjunction may also be added in order to make explicit the semantic subordinate relation to the main clause (final, concessive, causal, temporal, comparative, etc.).

8. A definition of ‘circumstantial clause combining’

In Isaksson et al. (2009) we arrived at a working definition of Circumstantial Clause in accordance with the ‘absolutive clauses’ in Thompson and Longacre’s article ‘Adverbial Clauses’, as (Thompson and Longacre 1985, 200-201):

(i) the clause is marked in some way as being subordinate;
(ii) there is no explicit signal of the relationship between the main and subordinate clause; thus
(iii) the interpretation of this relationship is inferred from the pragmatic and linguistic context.

This definition has many advantages. It does not presuppose a subordinating conjunction. It recognizes the role of inference from the pragmatic and linguistic context.

At the same time the definition presupposes that there is a mark of subordination, which might seem to contradict our methodological approach to search for circumstantial clause combining with basically semantic criteria. This might open up for the criticism that we mix semantic and morphosyntactic criteria in our research project.

On this point it is decisive to distinguish between research method, that is, our operative strategy, and the goal of our investigations.

A reasonable goal is to investigate how circumstantial clause relations are syntactically coded in specific Semitic languages. A description of how circumstantial clauses are coded in specific Semitic languages is the expected

¹⁰ There are certainly cases when the conjunction alone marks the subordination (without a shift clause type).
result. So even though the operative strategy is semantic, the goal is a description of the morphosyntactic signals that code circumstantial clause combining in all major branches of Semitic.

We may envisage several possible cases in Semitic languages. The following three are only some of them.

a) A specific Semitic language has not inherited any CCC coded in a way similar to an Arabic ḥāl. We may expect other ways of coding CC, but no one that reflects an Arabic ḥāl.

b) A Semitic language has inherited CCC coded in similar ways as the Arabic ḥāl, but has lost most of the familiar constructions, and retained only ‘fossils’ of the old ones. The most frequent CC clauses in such a language deviate from the Arabic types.

c) A Semitic language has some or many types of CCC in common with Arabic.

d) It turns out that the Arabic ḥāl clause reflects an innovation in, say, Central Semitic.

9. An operative future strategy for ‘subordination’

In view of the complete lack of agreement about the definition of ‘subordination’ it is preferable to avoid the term as M-T do. This is also the position of R. M. W. Dixon (2009). Dixon’s corresponding term is ‘non-main clause’. It is fruitful to view this term as a textlinguistic concept rather than as a matter of a relation between only two clauses. At last, the phenomenon we encounter as linguists is always a text. A ‘non-main’ clause could be defined as a syntactic digression from a main line in the text. Using semantics in our research about ‘non-main clause linking’ or ‘non-main clause combining’ need not be more mysterious than that (Isaksson 2013).

Dixon’s cross-linguistic typology of semantic clausal relations constitutes a valuable analytic tool for all us linguists who study ‘dead’ languages for which there are no longer native speakers available. Such are the semantic clausal relations that we should expect to encounter also in classical Arabic and Biblical Hebrew.

At the same time the typology of R. M. W. Dixon has revealed several semantic types of clause linking that cannot reasonably be called ‘circumstantial’. Even if the concept of ‘circumstantial clause’ is allowed to include, as M-T do, ‘consequence clauses’, ‘temporal clauses’ and ‘manner clauses’ (with Dixon’s terms), there is still the large category of ‘addition clauses’, which cannot reasonably be called ‘circumstantial’, and they are often coded by a ‘switch’ of clause type, as Dixon’s English example of ‘same-event addition’ shows (Dixon 2009, 27):
(17) Mary came first in her race [winning the price].

Similarly, Biblical Hebrew often codes a same-event addition by a switch of clause type:

(18) Pattern: wa-VprefS+[we-Snoun-Vsuff]

\[\text{way-yaḥdolū} \ haq-ḡūlū \ wa-ḥab-bārād \ [ū-māṭār \ lō \ nittak \ ‘āršā]\]

‘The thunder and hail ended, [and the rain stopped pouring down on the earth]’ (Exod. 9:33; CJB).

A new general definition of non-main clause:\[11\]

i) the non-main clause is marked in some way as being off-line in relation to one or several main line clauses;

ii) if there is no explicit signal of the semantic relationship between the main and non-main clauses, then the interpretation of this relationship is inferred from the pragmatic and linguistic context as being circumstantial.

References


\[11\] I am aware that this definition includes also complement clauses and relative clauses, which, however, are usually easy to identify and study separately, if there is a need to do so. It should be added that another advantage of Dixon’s typology is his sharp distinction between syntactic marking (‘non-main clause’) and semantically unequal status (‘supporting clause’ in relation to ‘focal clause’).


Isaksson, Bo. 2014c (forthcoming). “The so-called we-qatal conjugation in Biblical Hebrew once again”. In *11. Mainz International Colloquium on*


