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In defense of cyclic coordination structures: The view from German

Claim. Based on novel German data, we claim that coordination with three or more conjuncts can have asymmetric, cyclic structures despite the presence of only one overt coordinator. This is in contrast to claims about English in the recent literature (Neeleman et al. 2023, Ke et al. 2023) and shows that coordination in German still shows evidence for cyclic, binary branching structures. Arguments for this claim come from the availability of subgrouped structures for purposes of Suspended Affixation and adjectival modification and from adversative coordination.

Background. The literature on the syntax of coordination contains a long-standing discussion about the question as to whether coordination is symmetrical/flat (e.g., Borsley 2005) or asymmetric/hierarchical (e.g., Munn 1993, Zhang 2010) in nature. While work within the Minimalist Program views the asymmetric, binary branching structure as standard, recent papers have cast doubt on the empirical validity of the arguments for it, and instead argue for flat/symmetric structures. Recently, Neeleman et al. (2023) argue that coordination is generally flat, (1), but recursive, cyclic structures, as in (2), are possible. Crucially, recursive structures can be diagnosed by the presence of one overt coordinator, represented as & in (1) and (2).



One of their arguments comes from adjectival modification showing that, with only one coordinator, no non-trivial proper subset of conjuncts can be in the scope of the adjective, (3).

- (3) Mary will buy crocuses, yellow pansies and tulips.
 a. [[crocuses, [yellow pansies] and tulips]
 b. *[crocuses, [yellow pansies and tulips] (Neeleman et al. 2023:71)

In an asymmetric structure, it should be possible to adjoin the adjective to the intermediate sub-constituent including only the second and the third conjunct and thus the reading in (3-b) should be available. The unavailability of (3-b) thus suggests that there is no constituent that includes the second and the third conjunct but excludes the first, which directly goes against asymmetric structures. We show, based on two areas of evidence, that German coordination is not flat and instead shows hierarchical, asymmetric properties even without additional coordinators.

In defense of cyclic structures. First, in 3-way coordinations with only one overt coordinator, German allows the subgrouping reading. This can be seen in the pattern of **Suspended Affixation** (SA), a phenomenon where a morpheme takes scope over a coordination despite surfacing only in one conjunct. We take SA to be a type of ellipsis (e.g., Booij 1985). In coordinations with three conjuncts and only one overt coordinator, this type of ellipsis can crucially affect only two conjuncts, (4), suggesting that SA can pick out a sub-constituent in the coordinate structure. A flat-structure analysis would predict that either all or none of the conjuncts take part in SA. Importantly, as (5) shows, it is not any linearly adjacent subset that undergoes SA. It is exactly those conjuncts that a cyclic structure would group together.

- (4) a. Holunderbüsche, [Kirsch-bäume und Birn-bäume]
 elder.bushes cherry-trees and pear-trees
 “elder bushes, cherry trees and pear trees”
 b. Damenhandtaschen, [Herren-gürtel und Herren-schuhe]
 lady.handbags gentlemen-belts and gentlemen-shoes
 “women’s handbags, men’s belts and men’s shoes”
- (5) a. *[Apfel-bäume, Kirsch-bäume] und Holunderbüsche
 apple-trees cherry-trees and elder.bushes

