

The Dynamism of Complexity

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Syntactic complexity has traditionally been conceived of as a set of abstract structures, which may or may not be replicated cross-linguistically. Advances in techniques of data collection and analysis are now making it possible to look more closely at these structures in spontaneous speech, revealing a dynamism that is easy to miss on the printed page or in elicited translations of model sentences. This paper demonstrates some ways in which adding considerations of prosody, lexicon, and discourse context can enhance our appreciation of individual complex constructions and constellations of them.

Data will be drawn from Mohawk, an Iroquoian language indigenous to northeastern North America. This is a language which might at first appear to contain little if any complex syntax at all. Many Mohawk utterances that are translated into English complex sentences consist simply of sequences of finite clauses, each a grammatical sentence in itself. If this is true, the language would appear to be severely impoverished in its communicative capacity. Yet once the prosodic patterns of these sequences are examined, and their contexts of use taken into account, rich structures emerge. The consideration of prosody and context also does more. It can provide glimpses of the dynamic development of grammar over time. Such developments will be illustrated with a set of coexisting Mohawk constructions at various stages of evolution, from robust complement structures to abstract markers with modal, textual structuring, and interactional functions.