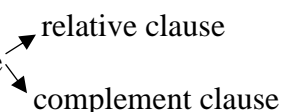From parataxis to finite subordination in the Ugric languages

In traditional historical linguistics it was a widely accepted assumption that finite subordination evolved from parataxis – see Schlegel (1808), Windisch (1869: 205), Delbrück (1900: 411-413), Brugmann (1925: 8), Paul (1920 [1898]: 299), Behaghel (1928:130), Meillet (1922/1937), etc. In mainstream contemporary linguistics, however, the parataxis-to-hypotaxis hypothesis lost its credibility (Harris and Campbell 1995; Roberts 2007; Walkden 2018) – because allegedly it implies that the emergence of finite subordination is development, the surpassing of a primitive stage of language, whereby it contradicts both the uniformity hypothesis of generative linguistic theory, according to which all languages of the homo sapiens sapiens are manifestations of the same genetically determined, invariant linguistic faculty, and the uniformitarian hypothesis of historical linguistics, according to which processes that operated in the past are of the same kinds that operate in the present.

This talk will fend off these assumptions. It will argue that parataxis is typical of SOV languages, along with non-finite subordination. Parataxis mostly occurs in the case of attitude predicates and verbs of saying, the propositional complements of which have their own tense, mood and modality (which are unexpressable in a non-finite projection). In the Ugric languages, finite subordination appeared/is appearing under Indo-European influence, parallel with the loosening of the SOV word order. The talk will document the following evolutionary paths:

(1) parataxis sentence → correlative clause → relative clause
                                                                complement clause

The paratactic sentence-to-correlative clause development will be pointed out in all three Ugric languages. The correlative-to-relative development will be illustrated by Khanty data, whereas the correlative-to-complement clause development will be demonstrated on Hungarian material. It will be shown that single sections of this evolutionary path have also been observed in different Indo-European languages. The parataxis-to-hypotaxis evolution was documented in Hittite (Hahn 1946); the correlative-to-relative clause evolution was pointed out in several early Indo-European languages (Clackson 2007); whereas the correlative-to-complement clause evolution was argued for in Germanic (Axel-Tober 2017). These reconstructions have several speculative elements, but the Uralic parallels provide empirical support for them, and help to integrated them into a coherent process akin to that in (1).