Abstract

Karlsson, Fred, fgk@ling.helsinki.fi, Professor of General Linguistics, Dept. of Modern Languages, University of Helsinki, Finland: “Restrictions on the syntactic complexity of sentences”. Språk och stil 20, 2010, pp. 36–50.

There is a common view (held e.g. by Meillet and Chomsky) that there are no restrictions on multiple embedding of clauses. Syntax would thus be fully recursive. The author demonstrated in 2007 for inter alia English, German and Finnish that clauses can be recursively embedded in initial position maximally two times, and three times in center-embedded position. Now, Swedish is shown to obey the same restrictions. Double initial and center-embeddings can be found in written Swedish, but no fully authentic triple center-embeddings are on record. Even double initial and centerembeddings are quite rare in written Swedish, and not documented at all in spoken Swedish, supporting the claim that only one cycle of initial and center-embedding of clauses is productive. There is no real clausal recursion in these embedding positions. Final clausal embedding is fully productive to depth three. Deeper final embeddings are restricted to complex genres. Multiple final embeddings in excess of degree five are extremely rare. These restrictions are soft constraints, that is intermediate between grammatical rules and performance limitations.

Keywords: center-embedding, clausal embedding, embedding, final embedding, initial embedding, soft constraint, Swedish, syntactic complexity.