

Maa Clause Combining: Four Basic Constructions
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Classic compendia of dependent/subordinate clause functions list ADVERBIAL, COMPLEMENT, and RELATIVE CLAUSES as major “functional” types (cf. Givón 1990, Cristofaro 2003). MEDIAL, CLAUSE CHAINING and SERIAL constructions may be sometimes included, but perhaps more typically are defined as “form+function” types. As anyone who has researched even a single language quickly learns, there does not seem to be a one-to-one relationship between the broad functions of dependent clauses and the clausal structures that a language has. For instance, in Chickasaw (Muskogean), dependent switch-reference marked clauses achieve all or nearly all of relative, complement and adverbial functions. In English, multiple structures are argued to function just as complement types.

In this paper I approach Maa (Eastern Nilotic; Kenya & Tanzania) from the form-first side, to begin an evaluation of how well the constructions do, or do not, correspond to the classic COMPLEMENT versus ADVERBIAL divide. Maa has four basic (non-relative) clause combining constructions. I refer to these as the FINITE, HIGH CONTINUITY, LOW TONE, and INFINITIVE constructions. They are “basic” in that other complex clause constructions are built on the basis of them (e.g. using a variety of subordinating conjunctions). I briefly introduce these four, spending relatively more time on the Low Tone and Infinitive constructions. This is a first and incomplete step in exploring the function of Maa dependent clause constructions within a system of constructions, with the aim to explore the functional extension and limits of the various constructions.

In the conclusion, I briefly evaluate the Maa constructions relative to Cristofaro’s (2003) “deranking” hierarchy. The study illustrates the typologist’s challenge of saying what a particular construction in a language “is” in terms that may be applicable to constructions in other languages. It hence bears on the question of to what extent comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2010) have any validity.