Hypotaxis and Parataxis; Periodic and Running Style

**HYPOTAXIS [— + / — ETC.]**

Hypotaxis represents unequal relationships between words, phrases or clauses grammatically. The most common kind is *subordination* (Gk hypo- “beneath” + taxis “arrangement”; transliterated in L as sub- “beneath” + ordinare “arrange”), or the use of complex or compound-complex sentences. For example,

1. **a subordinate sentence**: a construction in which one or more clauses are dependent on a main clause, either
   - a subordinate complement clause introduced by a complementiser (that [a determiner], why [an interrogative], if, whether [conjunctions], etc.), e.g., *I don’t know if George is awake yet*, or
   - a subordinate modifier clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction (after, because, while, etc.), e.g., *George overslept because his alarm clock was broken.*

2. **a premodification**: in the phrase “inexpensive composite materials” “composite” modifies “materials” while “inexpensive” modifies the complex head “composite materials,” rather than “composite” or “materials” — note that such hypotactic modifiers cannot be separated by commas

Thus, hypotaxis signals the causal, logical, spatial or temporal relationship between words, clauses or sentences.

Hypotactic style *un- or enfolds* — and is characteristic of élite or literary speech (*acrolect* [akros Gk “at the top”]). It gives the effect of experience reworked — or in the process of being so.
Compare periodic style, based on the periodic sentence, which is often left-modifying, i.e., uses parallel phrases/clauses or dependent clauses as modifiers at the start, and that thus isn’t grammatically complete until the final phrase or clause. It uses suspension, parallelism, balance and climax. As in Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson or Thomas de Quincy.

(Contrast pointed style, a.k.a. curt or exploded periodic style, the inversion of periodic style, that is often right- not left-modifying; it offers its conclusion and then reflects, and is based on cumulative (or loose) sentences. As in Francis Bacon — or current “academic style.”)

Here’s a classic hypotactic periodic sentence:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. (I Corinthians 13)

This sentence from Joan Didion is hypotactic, but pointed not periodic:

Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend of whatever interest these pages may have, as she sits at her writing table in her own room in her own house on Welbeck Street. (From Democracy)

And here’s a cumulative sentence from George Saunders:

At work he was known to punctuate his conversations with brief wild laughs and gusts of inchoate enthusiasm and subsequent embarrassment, expressed by a sudden plunging of the hands into his pockets, after which he would yank his hands out of his pockets, too ashamed of his own shame to stand there merely grimacing for even an instant longer. (From “The Falls”)

Although such prose is often more complex formally, it supplies the reader with all they need to interpret the content of the sentence.
Parataxis [—,— etc.]

Parataxis represents equal relationships between words, phrases or clauses grammatically. The most common kind is juxtaposition (Gk “act of placing side by side,” fr. para beside + tassein to arrange; transliterated in L as juxta- “next” + poser [Fr] “place” [cf. L positio placing]), or the use of simple sentences with or without coordinating conjunctions.

1. Sun was shining. We went for a walk. Or: Sun was shining; we went for a walk. Or, “incorrectly”: Sun was shining, we went for a walk (comma splice, a.k.a. parallel clause); and: Sun was shining—as per usual for February—we went for a walk (run-on sentence, a.k.a. interruptive embedding). These are both forms of asyndeton (the omission of conjunctions).

2. He’s a musician, isn’t he (an aside)?

3. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner . . . (a list).

4. I don’t think again we’ll go (an adjacency violation).

5. Time I haven’t got (fronting). Or: Sean—he was a nice guy (left-dislocation).

6. He ran and jumped and whooped for joy (polysyndeton: this uses coordinating conjunctions, more than one, in fact—but to paratactic not hypotactic effect).

All the words, phrases or clauses carry the same weight: the relationship between them is supplied by the reader based on context or, more commonly, on the sequence in which they appear, i.e. prior = causal (post hoc ergo propter hoc). Simply speaking, parataxis uses compound sentences, or two or more simple sentences in combination.

Paratactic style adds or accumulates — and is closer to everyday or conversational speech (basilect [cf. base, ult. f. basson “deeper,” f. bathys “deep”]). It gives the effect of experience in process — of piling up, swiftness, and sometimes compression.

Cf. running style, the opposite of periodic style; it uses anaphora (repetition), parenthesis, absolute phrases, etc. As in Laurence Sterne or Henry James.
Here’s a couple of classic examples:

*Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better — splashed to their very blinkers.* Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street corners. . . . (*Charles Dickens, Bleak House*)

*I came, I saw, I conquered.* (*Caesar*, in Plutarch’s *Life of Caesar 50*)

Because such prose is less complex formally, it requires the reader to do more work to interpret the content of the sentence.

Interestingly, *Webster’s Third* suggests in its **definition** of the related term *parataxic* that there might be such a thing as *psychological parataxis* (and, potentially, *hypotaxis*):

*a mode of individual experience in which persons, events, and relationships are perceived as discrete phenomena, in which occurrences in the real are seen as having no sequential or logical relationship [as they might in hypotaxis], but in which all external stimuli have only idiosyncratic autistic significance.*

*(Quoted in Collins 68)*