Symmetry in coordination

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The structure of coordination is one of the most controversial issues in syntax, with a plethora of proposals both in the generative tradition and in the dependency tradition. In both traditions, the proposed structures may be classified as either symmetric, where all conjuncts contribute equally to the syntactic properties of the whole coordinate structure, or asymmetric, where one – usually initial – conjunct is claimed to determine the behaviour of the coordination. In this talk, I provide novel arguments for symmetric approaches. One of these is based on the examination of lengths of conjuncts in corpora. It is well known that initial conjuncts tend to be shorter than final conjuncts in languages such as English, but it has not been examined until recently how this tendency changes with the length difference between the conjuncts and with the position of the governor of the coordinate structure. Assuming the robustly demonstrated principle of Dependency Length Minimization, I argue that the observed dynamics is only compatible with symmetric approaches to coordination and that it is in direct conflict with asymmetric approaches.