

# Subordination and insubordination in contemporary spoken English

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*If*-clauses as a case in point

## Introduction

Over the last decade, a new term – *insubordination* – has entered into the grammar of English. This term designates constructions such as (1), which can be considered linguistic innovations that appear to derive from syntactically more complex sentences, in this particular case, from a conditional construction.

- (1) Uhm <,,> perhaps if you could tell me a little bit about your own father <,,> (ICE-GB: S1A-072 #042: 1: A)<sup>1</sup>

Insubordinate constructions are advantageous in discourse because they adhere to one of Grice's (1975) conversational maxims, i.e. the maxim of manner, which argues, among other things, that speakers should be brief and avoid unnecessary prolixity. This brevity is characteristic of insubordinate constructions and other fragmentary structures, whose meaning is, nonetheless, complete in the discourse situation (Bowie & Aarts, 2016: 259). For instance, in the insubordinate construction in (1), it is clear that the speaker wants the addressee to talk about his/her father. This complies with other submaxims also comprised in the maxim of manner, namely, avoid ambiguity and obscurity of expression. The insubordinate clause is shorter than its full counterpart, a conditional sentence, but the meaning is still transparent.

Although the constructions under analysis here were briefly mentioned in some descriptive grammars, they were classified as somehow idiosyncratic and hence belonging to the periphery of the language system (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Huddleston & Pullum et al., 2002). It was not until Evans (2007) coined the term *insubordination* – by

metaphorical extension from their subordinate counterparts – that these constructions began to receive scholarly attention. Linguists became aware of the widespread use of insubordination across languages, especially in speech (Debaisieux, 2013; Mato-Míguez, 2014, 2016; Evans & Watanabe, 2016; Schwenter, 2016a, 2016b; Traugott, 2017; D'Hertefelt, 2018; Lastres-López, 2018; to name but a few).

However, to date insubordination remains a phenomenon of grammar largely unknown to the general public, despite the fact that insubordinate clauses can often be heard in everyday conversation. Therefore, this paper seeks to draw attention to this feature of English grammar. First, the paper addresses the notions of subordination and insubordination. The discussion turns to the pathway from subordination to insubordination.



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Following this, *if*-clauses are examined as a case in point, analysing the multiple uses and functions of these constructions in discourse. Finally, the paper closes with some concluding remarks.

### Subordination and insubordination

While *subordination* is defined as ‘a grammatical phenomenon which involves an arrangement of two or more units [...] that are in an unequal relationship’ (Aarts, 2011: 179), the term *insubordination* (Evans, 2007) designates instances of originally subordinate clauses lacking the corresponding main clause which have developed into new constructions that are considered main clauses in themselves. Examples of conditional subordination with *if*, and an instance of insubordination with the same conjunction are illustrated in (2) and (3) respectively.

- (2) **If he answers me**, *I’ll drop you a note* (ICE-GB: S1A-078 #176:3:A)
- (3) *If I could add just a personal note* (ICE-GB: S2B-020 #033:1:C)

While (2) illustrates a prototypical conditional, with the protasis or subordinate clause indicating the cause (in bold type) and the apodosis or main clause the consequence (in italics), the construction in (3) lacks the corresponding apodosis and functions as a main clause in itself. Although it can no longer be considered as subordinate, example (3) nevertheless retains some of the formal markers of a subordinate clause, such as the presence of *if* –which cannot now be described as a *subordinating conjunction*, since the main clause is lacking.

Examples such as (3) cannot be parsed as cases of ellipsis, but as separate constructions in the language (Evans, 2007), which are able to stand alone in discourse, exactly as main clauses would do. One of the reasons supporting the analysis of these constructions as new structures is that the

fuller versions of insubordinate constructions cannot be reconstructed or, at best, can only be reconstructed as possibly originating in various different alternatives. For instance, the example in (3) could be traced back either to a conditional clause, as in (4), or to a complement clause introduced by the interrogative complementiser *if*, as in (5).<sup>2</sup> Another criterion for the consideration of these clauses as insubordinate rather than as cases of ellipsis is their prosodic patterning. Most of the insubordinate clauses exhibit the prosodic pattern typical of declarative clauses, with falling rather than rising intonation (Kaltenböck, 2016; Elvira-García et al., 2017). This is illustrated in Figure 1.

- (4) If I could add just a personal note [I would be grateful]
- (5) [I wonder] if I could add just a personal note

Another difference between insubordinate and subordinate clauses is the range of meanings they can express. For example, in (2) the sentence codes a conditional relation between two events (*answering* and *dropping a note*), whereas instances of insubordination with the same conjunction, as illustrated in (1) and (3) above, do not explicitly express conditionality. While the utterances in (1) and (3) may express a certain degree of hypotheticality or caution on the part of the speaker due to the use of *if*, the meanings implied in the utterances are no longer fully conditional. For instance, the utterance in (1) is a request so that the addressee tells the speaker about his/her father. Similarly, in (3), the speaker uses the insubordinate construction to ask the addressee for permission, most probably rhetorically, so as to add a personal note to his/her discourse. This shows that insubordinate constructions display their own range of functions in discourse.

The phenomenon of insubordination is not exclusive to English and has been widely documented across languages (see for example Otori [1995] on Japanese, Debaisieux [2013] on French, Schwenter

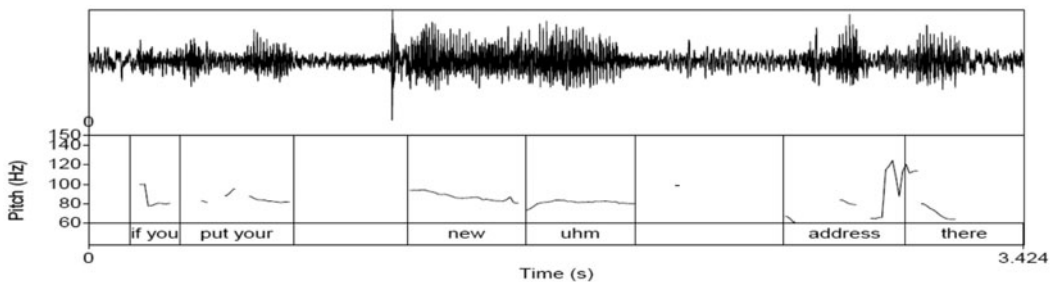


Figure 1. Prosodic pattern of an insubordinate *if*-clause (based on Kaltenböck, 2016: 360)

[2016a, 2016b], Gras & Sansiñena [2017] and Pérez Béjar [2018] on Spanish, among others). It is not exclusive, either, to conditional conjunctions. For instance, Brinton (2014) discusses what she considers as an extreme case of insubordination, namely the use of free standing *as if*, which she traces back to the use of this conjunction to introduce an adverbial subordinate clause of manner. An example of this use is in (6), in which the insubordinate clause consisting solely of *as if* denies an implied state of affairs. On the other hand, example (7) presents an instance of insubordination with *that*. In this case the insubordinate clause derives from a complement clause and functions as an exclamation.

- (6) He thinks you'll be impressed. As if. (Brinton, 2014: 93)
- (7) That he could say such a thing! (Evans & Watanabe, 2016: 2)

### A pathway from subordination to insubordination

What are the paths leading to insubordination? Evans (2007) argues for the existence of a clear link between insubordinate clauses and their full counterparts, not only in formal terms but also as to their diachronic evolution. He proposes a diachronic pathway in the formation of insubordinate constructions that consists of four steps, i.e. subordination > ellipsis > conventionalised ellipsis > reanalysis as main clause structure. Evans (2007) suggests a pathway of change in which insubordinate clauses originally derive from complex sentences with a main and a subordinate clause, which ultimately evolve into insubordination through ellipsis of the main clause.

Although corpus-based research, such as Sansiñena, De Smet and Cornillie (2015), appears to support the ellipsis hypothesis, the pathway of development proposed by Evans (2007) has also received criticism. Some scholars argue that ellipsis can be postulated only in certain types of insubordination and that other alternative pathways would lead to the same result. For instance, Mithun (2008: 108) points out that cases of insubordination could also be accounted for as 'extension of markers to functions at levels beyond the sentence'. In other words, markers which by default are employed at the sentence level, as is the case of *if*, become pragmatically and functionally enriched, so that their use is extended to the higher level of discourse. In line with this idea, Heine, Kaltenböck and Kuteva (2016: 44) argue that insubordinate constructions are freed from syntactic constraints and they are redefined by their

new environment in the discourse situation, where they may acquire new pragmatic uses. Although further diachronic research is still needed, it seems that multiple pathways in the formation of insubordinate constructions could and should be envisaged.

Another question to consider is whether one can discern a correlation between the various functions displayed by conditional conjunctions at the sentence level and their subsequent development into insubordination markers. Instances of conditional subordination introduced by *if* already show considerable variation in terms of discourse function. For example, truly conditional sentences indicating a cause-consequence pattern between clauses, as illustrated in (2), coexist with other conditional patterns in which the 'conditional' relation between the two clauses is far more tenuous, as in (8), (9) or (10).

- (8) And if I remember rightly, you had jaundice didn't you? (ICE-GB: S1A-028 #051:1:A)
- (9) Uhm so I wouldn't say that I actually looked on religion as a bad thing, if you see what I mean (ICE-GB: S1A-076 #156:1:B)
- (10) And also, if people have a very limited vocabulary which a lot of people do, it's interesting at them and seeing in what ways it's limited (ICE-GB: S1A-037 #162:1:B)

Examples (8) to (10) all belong to the interpersonal dimension of language, which can be briefly defined as 'using language to interact with other people' (Thompson, 2014: 30). None of these examples conform to the prototypical pattern of a conditional, with the protasis indicating the cause and the apodosis the consequence. Rather, examples (8) to (10) are used to interact with others and to express speakers' opinions and judgements or to exert an influence on the addressee, for example.

In both interpersonal conditionals, as in (8) to (10), and insubordinate *if*-clauses, as in (3) above, the conditional nuance is much weaker than in prototypical examples of conditionality. This suggests that it is primarily interpersonal conditionals that may develop into insubordinate clauses, the primary use of which is precisely to code interpersonal meaning. Sansiñena et al.'s (2015) findings from a corpus of online question-answer interactions in Spanish, French, German and English also seem to point in this direction.

### On the uses and functions of insubordinate *if*-clauses in discourse

In the previous sections I have discussed the notion of insubordination and have outlined possible pathways of development for the constructions under analysis, from instances of subordination to

insubordination. The next question I address is how speakers use these constructions in interaction and what purposes they serve in discourse.

Broadly considered, as Van Linden and Van de Velde (2014) and Sansiñena et al. (2015) point out, insubordinate constructions express interpersonal meanings in discourse. Examples illustrating some of the multiple uses of *if*-insubordination in spoken interaction are presented in (11) to (16).

- (11) If you could get that across to her (ICE-GB: S1A-054 #131:1:A)
- (12) If anyone would like some ice cream <unclear-words> (ICE-GB:S1A-073 #285:1:A)
- (13) If I hear that bloody one more time (British National Corpus, KP4 605)
- (14) Now if I can just uh pause there <,,> (ICE-GB:S2A-067 #090:1:A)
- (15) A chance gone begging there I think. If Offiah had stayed outside. (ICE-GB: S2A-004 #232:1:A)
- (16) A: If you didn't put your feet on me  
B: This is going back a long way. Jane's feet were on the Christmas table nineteen seventy <unclear-words> (ICE-GB:S1A-032 #021:1:A)

Example (11) illustrates one of the most common uses of insubordinate *if*-clauses, to express a request.<sup>3</sup> In (12) the use is similar, in that the speaker wants something from the addressee. But, in contrast with (11), example (12) is an offer on the part of the speaker. In (12) the addressee will benefit from the action expressed in the clause, whereas in (11) it is the speaker who will be the beneficiary of the action. Examples (13) and (14) are similar to (11) and (12) in that they also function as directives, that is, they direct the addressee to do something or not to do it. In particular, (13) is used as a threat, thus directing the speaker not to do a certain action, while (14) is a request for permission, directing the speaker, in this case, to grant such permission. Examples (15) and (16) illustrate considerably different uses of insubordination. In (15) the speaker uses an insubordinate clause to express a wish, whereas in (16) the speaker utters a complaint about a situation.

As it can be observed in (11) to (16), all these clauses stand in isolation in discourse, without the support of any other clause that completes their meaning. Also clear from the above examples is that, very often, the employment of these insubordinate structures is closely related to politeness. Insubordinate clauses can serve as useful devices to make requests, offers, or to ask for permission

in a polite way, without resulting in an imposition on the addressee. Yet in other cases, as in (15) and (16), *if*-insubordination expresses the opinion or viewpoint of the speaker. In this function, the use of *if* brings in an idea of hypotheticality, which allows the directive or the opinion to appear as more polite, less assertive or detached.

## Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have provided a descriptive account of insubordination in English, with particular reference to *if*-clauses, by far the most frequent insubordination type in the contemporary language. Examples of insubordination illustrated here and elsewhere have evidenced the multifunctionality of insubordinate *if*-constructions in spoken discourse. Insubordinate *if*-clauses can code different kinds of directives, but also opinions and evaluations on the part of the speaker. The presence of a conditional conjunction in the utterance contributes to the idea that what is expressed in the clause is less imposing on the addressee and can therefore be regarded as a polite way to make a request or to render a threat hypothetical, to mention just two possibilities.

Insubordinate *if*-clauses are novel and daring constructions and can be found especially in English spoken interaction, where they seem to be rapidly increasing in use. A study by Mato-Míguez (2016) on directive constructions in discourse reports that, for the expression of requests and offers, insubordinate clauses are already more common than imperatives, as in, for example, 'Have a handful'. In view of the fondness for compressed expression which is characteristic of spoken language, one may hypothesise that insubordinate constructions will continue to increase in use in the future.

## Notes

1 Examples used to illustrate cases of insubordination in this paper are retrieved from the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (Nelson, Wallis & Aarts, 2002), unless otherwise indicated. Punctuation marks have been added in some cases for easier reading.

2 Evans (2007) argues for a conditional origin of these constructions, as in example (4) rather than (5), on the grounds that *whether*, a conjunction which occurs in variation with *if* in interrogative complement clauses, is not found in insubordinate structures; but further diachronic research is still needed to clarify this issue.

3 For a full discussion of the discourse-pragmatic properties of insubordinate *if*-clauses, see my earlier work on insubordination, where I offer quantitative data on their occurrence in a corpus of contemporary spoken English (Lastres-López, 2018).

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