

Prosody as a cue for syntactic dependency. Evidence from dependent and independent clauses with subordination marks in Spanish



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Abstract

Insubordination studies often refer to some prosodic features of insubordinated constructions but, to date, no systematic research has been carried out on the effects of insubordination on prosody. This paper analyzes the prosody of both independent and semi-dependent clauses, with subordination marks, using a corpus of 1,230 utterances. The data show that while subordinate and elliptical clauses that can recover the elided clause show prosodic markings of continuation (rising boundary tones), insubordinated clauses do not. In a word, the level of dependence of a grammatical construction with subordination marks is reflected in its prosody.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that intonation can shed light on syntactic events. In particular, when it comes to the creation of prosodic units (phrasing), previous studies support the idea that prosody marks syntactic boundaries. In this paper, the current knowledge about intonational phrase marking is extrapolated to establish a link with the notion of syntactic dependence. This is exemplified by the behavior of prosodic cues in clauses that show different degrees of independence (i.e. subordinate, elliptical and insubordinate clauses).

To date, insubordinated clauses have been said to share the same formal lexical marks as subordinate clauses (Evans, 2007). However, non-lexical markers of insubordinated clauses, such as intonation, have never been systematically studied and compared to those of dependent clauses. This paper aims to shed light on the role of intonation as a formal cue in distinguishing between insubordinated and subordinate clauses.

In fact, as we shall discuss in the following paper, our data indicate that prosody can provide reliable clues for distinguishing insubordination and other semi-independent uses of subordinate clauses. Specifically, we argue that syntactically dependent (i.e., elliptical) constructions have rising intonation patterns, while syntactically independent (i.e., insubordinated) clauses show falling patterns. In other words, intonation acts as an acoustic cue for the level of syntactic dependence of a construction in Spanish.

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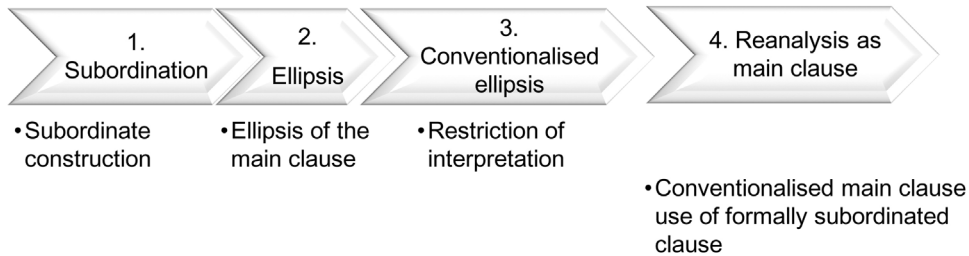


Fig. 1. The stages of the process of insubordination.
Adapted from Evans (2007).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 1.1 presents the different degrees of independence that we will be dealing with. Section 2 describes the prosodic features that, according to the literature, mark syntactic boundaries. Section 3 puts forward the hypothesis of this paper, namely that each degree of dependence has an expected prosodic behavior. Section 4 describes some methodological aspects, namely the corpus and the labeling system (Sp_ToBI). Section 5 outlines the different intonational contours found for elliptical (3.1) and independent (3.2) clauses. Finally, in section 6, an interpretation and discussion of the data is offered along with the conclusions in section 7.

1.1. Syntactic dependence: ellipsis and insubordination

In 2007, Evans made a typological account of different grammatical constructions that, despite showing subordination marks, act as independent clauses in discourse. He proposed a historical explanation for this phenomenon. In his opinion, such clauses had, at some point, been subordinate clauses and later acquired syntactic independence through a process of grammaticalization based on ellipsis. According to Evans (2007), constructions gain independence progressively and this process can be divided into four distinct stages (Fig. 1).

The diachronic path to insubordination, put forward by Evans (2007), was the first to be proposed and has since attracted some criticism. Over the last decade, in fact, different authors have suggested alternative models to explain how the insubordinate stage is achieved. One of the most notable models of this kind is based on Mithun's (2008) work. According to her research, the developmental path of insubordinated clauses consists of: an extension of dependency from the sentence domain –subordination– to the discourse domain –insubordination– without the need for a hypothetical ellipsis stage (Mithun, 2008). Following this, D'Hertefelt and Verstraete (2014) suggested that a dependency shift would give a better account of the development of insubordination in Germanic complement constructions.

Moreover, Van Linden and Van de Velde (2014) argued that Evans' (2007) hypothesis does not explain why the speakers would produce an ellipsis. Furthermore, alternate claims state that throughout the insubordination process one can find additional semi-insubordinate stages in addition to those suggested by Evans (2007) (i.e., ellipsis and conventionalized ellipsis) (Sansiñena et al., 2015).

However, the formal elements that are usually considered to determine the degree of dependence of a construction are grammatical, syntactic, and pragmatic but not prosodic. This paper will attempt to fill this gap by completing the description of the formal marking of insubordinated clauses through additional prosodic properties. Moreover, we will aim to distinguish between insubordinate and other semi-dependent uses of subordinate clauses by using intonation to predict the degree of clausal dependence.

2. The state of the art: the continuation rise and “suspended” intonation as cues for syntactic levels of dependence

Syntactic events can be reflected in prosody. The prosodic phenomenon that is most clearly associated with syntax is phrasing, which is a set of prosodic strategies used to mark syntactic non-final boundaries. More generally, phrasing is said to group together the parts of an utterance (Frazier et al., 2006). Although prosodic phrasing is commonly found across languages certain strategies can be language-specific. In fact, the acoustic features commonly used to obtain phrasing are pitch marks (pitch reset, distinctive pitch contours, which may vary from one language to another. . .), but also lengthening and pauses.

As far as common cross-linguistic features are concerned, it is generally accepted that all languages have intonational phrases (IP) (Jun, 2005). These, in very broad terms, can be thought of as the prosodic units formed by complete utterances. Below the IP level, there are different prosodic units, whose edges are transcribed in prosodic studies by means of Break Indices (BI) (Beckman and Elam, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, only two prosodic levels will be

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