

Between subordinate and insubordinate. Paths toward complementizer-initial main clauses



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Abstract

Insubordinate constructions have been argued to derive from regular subordinated clauses through ellipsis of the matrix clause (Evans, 2007). However, ellipsis in actual discourse has not yet been systematically studied with respect to its potential as a source of functionally specialized insubordinate constructions. This paper aims to fill this gap, by examining complementizer-initial dyadically dependent clauses (i) in a corpus of online question–answer interactions in Spanish, French, German and English and (ii) in natural conversation in Spanish and English. Dyadically dependent clauses have a complementizer in sentence-initial position. They lack an explicit matrix, but can be construed as dependent on a matrix from the previous turn. According to Evans' hypothesis, they should be a potential source for true complementizer-initial insubordinate constructions. Our analysis shows that dyadically dependent clauses develop specialized discourse functions, involving the organization of textual and interpersonal relations. If such functions are conventionalized, this would result in true insubordinate constructions. Next, we look for actual functional overlap between the dyadically dependent clauses in our data and attested insubordinate constructions in the four languages studied. Functional similarities between dyadically dependent clauses and insubordinate constructions are found for optative insubordinate constructions in Spanish, French and German, for discourse-connective insubordinate constructions in Spanish, English and German, and for copying insubordinate constructions in Spanish and English.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to sentences that exhibit certain properties of subordinate clauses – such as the presence of an initial complementizer – but are used independently, and resist, in one way or another, syntactic tests for subordination. Those constructions are instances of the phenomenon known as *insubordination* or “the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses” (Evans, 2007:367). For example, the Spanish complementizer *que* can introduce independent clauses, as in (1).

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- (1) A: *he engordado es que yo me siento más gorda es que es verdad*
 B: *que yo no te veo más gorda yo te veo perfecta*

A: I've put on weight it's like I feel fatter it's true

B: [que] you don't look fatter to me you look perfect to me

(COLA)

A broad variety of insubordinate constructions has been identified cross-linguistically (Evans, 2007, 2009; Evans and Watanabe, forthcoming; Gras, 2011, 2013; Mithun, 2008; Schwenter, 1996, 1999; Verstraete et al., 2012, among others), but it is as yet not entirely clear how insubordinate constructions arise historically.

Evans (2007, 2009) has argued that insubordination arises through the reanalysis of erstwhile subordinate clauses into main clauses following ellipsis of the original main clause. Specifically, in a first stage, a matrix clause that is recoverable from the context is omitted. In a following stage, the felicitous restoration of syntactic elements becomes restricted or excluded by convention. This paves the way to the final stage, in which the ellipsed material may not be recoverable at all. Evans' pathway is summarized in Fig. 1.

Subordination	Ellipsis	Conventionalisation of ellipsis	Reanalysis as main clause structure
A Subordinate construction	B Ellipsis of main clause	C Restriction of interpretation of ellipsed material	D Conventionalised main clause use of formally subordinate clause (Constructionalization)

Fig. 1. Historical trajectory of insubordinated clauses (Evans, 2007:370).

However, the ellipsis-based pathway is controversial. Mithun (2008) argues that Evans' analysis is a viable hypothesis about the origin of only some of the constructions he discusses. Specifically, it might explain constructions originated as complements, but not the ones that originated as adverbial (adjunct) constructions. On a different line, Van linden and Van de Velde (2014) give a diachronic explanation for autonomous and semi-autonomous subordination patterns in Dutch in terms of hypoanalysis (Croft, 2000). Their main criticism on Evans' proposal is that it does not clearly account for the reasons why speakers decide to drop the main clause. They argue that the emergence of insubordinate constructions does not need to be in elliptical contexts. Instead, even straightforward subordinate constructions may functionally specialize. As a next step, the specialized functions are reinterpreted as being expressed by the marker of subordination, which in turn justifies omission of the matrix clause. In other words, hypoanalysis offers the alternative that helps understand "the semantic and pragmatic motivations for the language user to do away with the main clause" (Van linden and Van de Velde, 2014:241).

In the face of the alternative accounts by Mithun (2008) and Van linden and Van de Velde (2014), it is fair to call into question the explanatory scope of Evans' pathway. At the same time, to our knowledge, no systematic study exists that looks for possible links between patterns of ellipsis and patterns of insubordination. Evans' pathway would gain in credibility, if it could be shown that ellipsed constructions do in fact associate with specific discourse functions that in turn serve as a basis for conventionalization, in the spirit of Traugott and König (1991). In brief, Evans' hypothesis would be corroborated if we can find a credible link between the pragmatics of ellipsis and the semantics of insubordination.

Against this background, this paper turns to what we will call dyadically dependent clauses, i.e. clauses occurring in spontaneous discourse that are construed as being 'projected' (Halliday, 1985:227) by a complement-taking predicate in an earlier turn. For example, in question–answer contexts, the answer can be construed as depending on a matrix verb in the question. This is what happens in (2), where the answer *que distingues...* ('that you distinguish...') is introduced as a dependent on the matrix verb *significa* ('it means') in the previous turn.

- (2) A: *¿Qué significa ser racional?*
 'What does it mean to be rational?'

B: *Que distingues entre el bien y el mal creados por un precepto social.*
 'That you distinguish among good and evil created by a social precept.'

(YCCQA)¹

¹ Yahoo!-based Contrastive Corpus of Questions and Answers (YCCQA).

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