



If-insubordination in spoken British English: Syntactic and pragmatic properties

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses in subordinate *if*-clauses in spoken British English (e.g. *If you'll just come next door*) as independent from full conditional clauses and indirect interrogative complement clauses, using data extracted from the British component of the *International Corpus of English* and the *British National Corpus*. The study shows that such constructions occur most frequently in conversation and that they express a wide variety of functions in discourse. The polyfunctionality of in subordinate *if*-clauses is presented together with other, alternative grammatical patterns that may express the same function in discourse. The analysis also reveals a correlation between the discourse function of the clause and the type of verb (modal or lexical) used in it.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses in subordinate *if*-clauses in spoken British English, as exemplified in (1), as multifunctional constructions which can have a variety of uses in interaction:

- (1) Uhm well uh if you could just remind me for example what age he was when he left (ICE-GB:S1A-072 #045:1:A)

While conditional subordination and clause complexity have been studied from many different perspectives (Greenbaum and Nelson, 1995, 1996; Bybee and Noonan, 2002; Verstraete, 2011; Kortmann, 2012; Ehmer and Barth-Weingarten, 2016; Traugott, 2017; among others), instances of conditional clauses in which the clause appears in isolation from the main clause have generally been regarded as exceptions to the norm and, as such, have received little attention in grammars and more specific studies (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Huddleston and Pullum et al., 2002).

The aim of this paper, then, is to analyse the linguistic phenomenon of in subordination itself. In particular, the focus will be on clauses introduced by the conjunction *if*¹ in English, paying special attention to the syntax and the pragmatics of such constructions and to the interconnection between these two areas with regard to in subordination, using a corpus-based approach. More specifically, the aim is to shed light on the diversity of functions these constructions may have in discourse, looking at their frequency in the language and at alternative grammatical patterns that may also be possible to

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¹ Following many mainstream grammars, the distinction between *if* conjunction and *if* preposition made by Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002) is not contemplated here.

express the same discourse function. Furthermore, the analysis will consider whether certain functions increase the likely use of specific sets of verbs, and whether these can therefore be considered predictors of the function of the clause. The methodology used will be corpus-based. The data will be extracted from the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (henceforth ICE-GB) (Nelson et al., 2002) and from the *British National Corpus* (henceforth BNC).

After this brief introduction, this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers a preliminary characterization of insubordinated *if*-clauses. Section 3 reviews the literature on the topic, starting from the general notion of insubordination coined by Evans (2007)² and exploring more specific studies that have extended and broadened the notion (Mithun, 2008; Sansiñena et al., 2015; Cristofaro, 2016; Evans and Watanabe, 2016a; Heine et al., 2016). The section defines the notion of insubordination and examines the formation of insubordinate clauses diachronically, considering both Evans' (2007) ellipsis hypothesis and proposals made here by others (Mithun, 2008; Sansiñena et al., 2015; Cristofaro, 2016; Heine et al., 2016). Section 4 delves into prior research that has specifically addressed *if*-insubordination in English (Stirling, 1999; Mato-Míguez, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; D'Hertefelt, 2015; Kaltenböck, 2016; among others). Section 5.1 discusses methodology, corpora and data extraction, before providing a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus-based results in Section 5.2. In particular, Section 5.2.1 examines the discourse function of these constructions, and Section 5.2.2 discusses their distribution across the corpora, before addressing the correlation between discourse functions and verb types, in Section 5.2.3. Finally, Section 6 offers some concluding remarks based on the corpus-based data on insubordinate *if*-clauses.

2. Insubordinate *if*-clauses characterised

Clauses introduced by *if* have generally been classified as instances of subordination, in which the subordinate clause depends on a matrix clause. As such, they are usually conditional clauses, as in (2), or less frequently, complement clauses of the indirect interrogative type, as in (3).

- (2) **If it's a really nice day** *we could walk* (ICE-GB:S1A-006 #301:1:B)³
 (3) *I don't know* **if I can let you have that** (ICE-GB:S1A-085 #302:1:A)

In both (2) and (3) above, the clause introduced by *if*, highlighted in bold in the examples, is subordinated to a main clause, shown in italics. In (2) the main clause, also known as apodosis (*q*), expresses a situation that “is contingent on that in the subordinate clause” (Quirk et al., 1985: 1088), known as protasis (*p*); whereas in the syntactic pattern in (3) this contingency of situations is not present in the construction and, contrary to what happens in conditional clauses, the verb in the matrix clause licenses the subordinate *if*-clause, which expresses an indirect interrogative. For some authors, such as Matthiessen and Thompson (1988) (c.f. Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014: 428–588), sentences like (2) and (3) are instances of two distinct types of subordination. While complement clauses, as in (3), are classified as cases of embedding, adverbial clauses, as in (2), are not embedded, but rather are instances of clause combining or hypotaxis, with the two clauses considered to be at the same level. Both types of subordination, in particular conditional clauses, have been studied extensively (Traugott et al., 1986; Athanasiadou and Dirven, 1997; Couper-Kuhlen and Kortmann, 2000; Declerck and Reed, 2001; Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005; among many others). However, instances in which the *if*-clause stands in isolation, as in (4a) below, with no matrix clause preceding or following the subordinate clause, have traditionally been neglected or treated in grammars as marginal cases or exceptions to the rule. For instance, Quirk et al. (1985: 841–842) refer to these structures as *irregular sentences*, and Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002: 945) as a minor clause type, namely, *conditional fragments*. Major corpus-based grammars, such as Biber et al. (1999), also treat these structures as a minor type, under the label *unembedded dependent clauses*, but do note their frequency in conversation (Biber et al., 1999: 223, 1043).

- (4a) Uhm <.,> perhaps if you could tell me a little bit about your own father <.,> (ICE-GB:S1A-072 #042:1:A)

Example (4a) above not only differs in formal terms from (2) and (3) – in that it does not contain a main clause preceded or followed by a subordinate clause – but also has a different function in discourse. While the *if*-clause in (2) expresses a conditional, its counterpart in (4a) issues a directive, thus being an alternative, pragmatically, to other constructions which may have the same illocutionary force, such as an interrogative, as in (4b), or an imperative, as in (4c).

- (4b) Could you tell me a little bit about your own father?
 (4c) Tell me a bit about your own father

² As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, although the term insubordination was not coined until 2007, this linguistic phenomenon had been noted earlier. Ohori (1995) studies the pattern of adverbial clauses without main clauses in Japanese using the term “suspended clause constructions”, attributed to Fillmore et al. (1988). Likewise, studies on conditionality, such as Ford (1993), also mention that conditionals can be used without apodoses. However, with a couple of exceptions, the independent study of insubordination had largely been neglected prior to the publication of Evans' study.

³ All the examples are extracted from the two corpora analysed, ICE-GB and the BNC, unless otherwise indicated; and they follow the transcription conventions used in the two corpora analysed. In ICE-GB, short pauses are indicated as <.,> and long ones as <.,>. In the BNC, pauses, laughs and other relevant details are marked in square brackets. Overlapping between speakers is indicated as <-|> in both corpora.

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