

The pragmatics of insubordinate if -clauses in British English: A corpus-based study

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Conditionals are prototypically formed by two clauses: a subordinate clause, most frequently introduced by the conjunction *if* in English, known as protasis (*p*); and a main clause, known as apodosis (*q*), as illustrated in (1) below.

(1) If it's a really nice day, we could walk (ICE-GB: S1A-006 #301: 1: B)
p *q*

However, clauses introduced by *if* can also stand in isolation in discourse, without the presence of an apodosis, as in (2).

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

While full conditionals as (1) have been widely studied (Traugott, Meulen, Reilly, & Ferguson, 1986; Athanasiadou & Dirven, 1997; Declerck & Reed, 2001; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2005; to name but a few), *if*-clauses such as the one presented in (2) have traditionally been neglected or treated as marginal cases in grammars (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985: 841-842; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 945). Evans (2007: 367) coined the term *insubordination* to refer to this grammatical phenomenon, which can be defined as “the conventionalised main clause use of what on *prima facie* grounds appear to be formally subordinate clauses”. In these constructions, the apodosis is not required and neither is it considered to be a case of ellipsis, since the clause no longer expresses a conditional relation between *p* and *q*, as in (1) above. Instead, example (2) issues a directive, thus being an alternative, pragmatically, to either an interrogative, as shown in (3a) or an imperative, as in (3b).

(3a) Could you tell me a little bit about your own father?
(3b) Tell me a bit about your own father

This paper aims to complement prior studies that have examined *insubordination* across different languages and have reported that these constructions may express a varied range of functions (Schwenter, 1996, 2016; Stirling, 1999; Evans, 2007; D’Hertefelt, 2015; Sansiñena, De Smet, & Cornillie, 2015; Evans & Watanabe, 2016; Kaltenböck, 2016). In line with Kaltenböck (2016), this study focuses on British English and resorts to corpus rather than elicited data. The aim of this paper is to contribute to throw light on the diversity of functions these constructions may have in discourse, analysing *insubordinate if*-constructions in British English and elucidating their uses and functions in spoken discourse. The analysis also focuses on the frequency of these constructions and on alternative grammatical patterns that may also be possible to express the same discourse function, as in (3a) and (3b) above. Furthermore, the study tests whether certain types of verbs increase the

likelihood that the clause expresses a certain function, and can therefore be considered predictors of the function of the clause. For this purpose, verbs are considered both in their classification modals/non-modals and in the semantic taxonomy proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014).

The methodology used is corpus-based, analysing manually data extracted from two different sources: the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB) (Nelson, Wallis, & Aarts, 2002), a one-million word corpus; and the British National Corpus (BNC), one hundred times bigger in size. On the one hand, the results obtained from ICE-GB offer an overview of the frequency and use of these constructions across a variety of spoken genres and reveal that they are more conspicuous in conversation, with more than 60% of the tokens extracted from this genre. Due to the infrequent nature of the constructions under analysis, the results obtained from ICE-GB require to be further complemented by a larger sample. Thus, on the other hand, the data from the BNC concentrate on the type of text in which they appear more recurrently. The subcorpus of conversations of the BNC, twenty times bigger than its counterpart in ICE-GB, is selected to examine and illustrate different uses and functions of *if*-insubordination in conversation. The results obtained from the analysis display that the constructions under examination may express a wide range of functions in discourse. Among them, the results report that insubordinate *if*-clauses most frequently express polite requests, but that up to seven other functions are attested, with wishes and suggestions, as in (4) and (5) occupying the second and third most frequent functions for these constructions in discourse.

(4) If we had a regular bus service [pause] rather than a regular train service (BNC, KCS 332)

(5) A: so you can take them as well, don't they? (BNC, KC2 1146)

B: Mm, mm

A: If you book serve

B: Serve, yeah Serve takes them, yeah I know

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