

Intonational Signals of Subordination

Author(s): Dwight Bolinger

Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1984), pp. 401-413

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

Intonational Signals of Subordination

Dwight Bolinger

Harvard University (Emeritus)

I start with a claim and a disavowal. The claim is that intonation is autonomous and one can speak of intonational subordination without reference to the segmental side of language. The disavowal is that intonation has any direct connection with subordination in syntax, however this is to be defined. Syntax nevertheless benefits handsomely from the games that intonation plays with it.

We must of course define what we mean by subordination, and that can only be done in reference to superordination. I see anything that is tributary to something else as subordinate to it. In syntax this means not only the classical dependent clauses in relation to main clauses, but also their reduced counterparts: adjectives as well as adjective clauses in relation to nouns, adverbs and adverb clauses in relation to verbs, and so on; and also, probably, themes in relation to rhemes, tags in relation to questions, and parentheses in relation to the matrix sentence. Parentheses will include more or less formalized elements such as vocatives, ascriptions (things like he said, she asked) and tentations (things like perhaps, I suppose), as well as an almost unclassifiable assortment of asides that may be anything from a complete sentence to a snort.¹ In Gestalt terms, what is superordinate is the figure; what is subordinate is all or part of the ground.

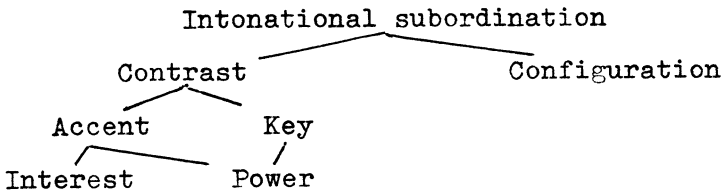
As this includes practically everything, I obviously can't touch on all the intersections with intonation. So I invite you to look first at subordination in purely intonational terms without reference to syntax except for illustration, and then to make a selection from among its contacts with words and syntax.

Intonation has two modes of action where subordination is concerned: contrast and configuration. Contrast simply delivers things at different levels of prominence: what it plays down of course is subordinated. An illustration is the spelling chant used in old-time spelling bees, which had three levels of prominence plus a terminal or cut-off level. The speller for instance would be given the word Constantinople to spell, and it went like this:

C-o-n s-t-a-n t-i
 con, stan, stan; ti, ti;
 Con Constan
 n-o p-l-e no
 no, no; Constanti
 Constanti
 ple; ple.

What seems to be going on is a top level in real time, so to speak, where the letters get spelt out, and then two lower levels, a kind of short-term memory filing system, which is played down intonationally.

I said that intonation has two methods of subordinating, contrast and configuration. The example I just gave is one of contrast. But contrast in turn divides two ways. Look at your diagram:



The Constantinople example is an instance of what Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980) call key, recognizing high, mid, and low. On the side opposite key is accent. This is an all or none matter: an item is either accented or not. What is not accented is subordinated, in the most straightforward sense of subordination. Normally the old or the expected or the presupposed is subordinated to the new or the unexpected or the asserted. If someone asks you what you think of the plan and you reply I'll tell you what I think of it, the whole clause what I think of it is subordinated accentually because it is repeated. In a case like The volcanoes are erupting or The volcanoes are dormant we have certain presuppositions about the background. Either can answer the question What's new? but The volcanoes are erupting pictures a background of dormancy interrupted by an explosion, while The volcanoes are dormant pictures a background of activity interrupted by a deafening silence. The most noteworthy fact about accentual subordination is that a speaker can accent only so much, and as a result a lot of important stuff gets relegated to the background. To answer Why do you despise Wilson? one may say Look at all the careers he ruined when he pushed his way to the top. The speaker subordinates everything after the accent not be-

cause it is unimportant but because it is less important.

Though accent and non-accent are a matter of all-or-none, there is another side to accent pertaining to a different form of subordination which is not all-or-none. Accents serve a dual purpose: to highlight individual items that are interesting, and to give impact to an utterance--accents of interest and accents of power. Power comes partly from multiplying the number of accents. The intent is to foreground not just the individual items in the utterance, but the utterance as a whole against the background of the discourse. The speaker in effect is refusing to subordinate himself. He may even add words to have extra accents. If I want to rebut the charge that I paid too much for something, I may say It didn't cost me a cent. Or I may say It didn't cost me one cent. Or I may say It didn't cost me one red cent. On the other hand, we have now not only introduced gradience in the number of accents, but we have reintroduced key, since relative subordination also depends on how much the accents stand out from their background and whether they are arranged climactically or anticlimactically. If I say

ce
re
o
didn't cost me n
It e d
nt.

I have gone almost the limit in foregrounding my part of the discourse and subordinating yours.

I won't dwell further on the accentual part of subordination because it has less to do with syntax, which is where I assume our interest lies. But let me emphasize that I am not setting it aside because it involves emotion, affect, and ego-tripping, on the theory that that sort of thing is irrelevant to the linguistic purity of syntax. I hold that intonation always manifests affect, whatever else it may do at the same time. A question, for example, is subordinated to an answer because the questioner is subordinating himself to the authority of the addressee. He approaches that authority as a suppliant and his intonation takes the appropriate shape.

We turn now to configuration. A variety of patterns are involved, and there is a sort of hierarchy of subordination among them that I won't have time to do more than mention. First I want to dismiss a form of configurational subordination that applies to all configurations in that it can be part of any of them without attaining to the status of independent configuration itself. I refer to the pro-

cedure of submerging something within a configuration. If I say

 people you see friends
The are
 of mine.

the adjective clause you see is intonationally just an extension of the same intonational profile that would occur alone on

 people friends
The are
 of mine.

The same profile could be extended further by saying

 people you see over there friends
The are
 of mine.

This swallowing-up kind of subordination is a consequence of there being no accent on the element in question, causing it to become part of the background of a nearby accent. It is the lack of independent pattern that marks the subordination.

What about independent patterns as marks of subordination? If someone asks your appreciation of something and you reply

Mmmmmmmmm
 mmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

I think it is safe to say that the first part is incomplete without the second part, but the second part might well be complete without the first part. To some extent that is because first parts are always incomplete without their mates, but if the pattern is reversed, being the second part is no help--the whole thing sounds incomplete. There is something in the intonation itself that signals or can be used to signal incompleteness, and it is obviously the terminal rise. Incompleteness is a way of marking subordination, and when we put words to that tune we come out with classical subordinate-superordinate sentences, such as

If you can catch him,
 sp^a
 n_k him!

The unfinished first part of the sentence need not be a full clause--the same pattern is heard in the Hyatt Lake Tahoe refrain

I like to fall down in the
 sⁿ^o
 w!

--so we can see right off that what the intonation is marking is the incompleteness, not the subordinate-clauseness. At the same time we can still speak of subordination: snow is the actor center-stage, fall down is the supporting actor, and the rest is props.

The configuration I've just described, the one in the clause If you can catch him, or in questions like Will you do it?, or in threats like I'll get you for this!, and other applications, is the one I call Profile B. When nothing is missing it has a preparatory low pitch followed by a jump up to the accented syllable and then a tail which does not fall appreciably. Usually it rises, and the overall effect is that of being left up in the air--I like to speak of up-in-the-airness as its metaphorical significance. That's what makes it useful for subordinate clauses, and this becomes more apparent when we reverse the order of the clauses, putting the subordinate one last. The intonation goes along with it:

sp^a
 n_k him, if you can catch him!

An example like this forces one to ask whether the intonation is only an automatic consequence of the subordinating conjunction if: does it have any independent significance--could it for instance convey the condition without the if? Try this. Imagine a police officer hesitating to arrest someone caught red-handed. As a public-spirited citizen you admonish him saying

simply reverse the expected theme-rheme relationship. Looking again at our spank him example we see that that can easily happen. Take it as an answer to the question Under what circumstances should I spank him?--

catch

Span^k him if you can

him.

or, in the opposite order,

catch

If you can

span^k him.

him,

This brings us back to the unfinished nature of the profile with the terminal rise, its general up-in-the-airness. No more is needed as a cue to our inferential powers: given the right circumstances it can tell us that we have a subordinate clause, or a theme, or a question, or a keyed-up admonition such as

Leave it a lone!

I suggested earlier that there is another way of subordinating an item intonationally, which is to bury it within a profile. Compare this with the configurational way as answers to the question What shall I do with him? The configurational way using a B profile gives

Span^k

him, if you can catch him.

The other way incorporates the subordinate clause in the tail of the preceding profile:

Span^k

him, if you can catch him.

Here the if clause is subordinated not by treating it as something incomplete but as something of little importance.

Looking further at the interaction with syntax, we find that intonation can be used as a test for degrees of subordinateness. It helps us to answer the question "How subordinate is a given type of subordinate clause?" That there are degrees of subordination can be seen in the extent to which supposedly subordinate clauses of certain types can be used as independent utterances. Take causatives, for example. A clause beginning with because is less subordinate than one beginning with since, as, inasmuch as, or now that. You ask me why I didn't go to the party and I reply Because I was sick; I can't use *Inasmuch as I was sick. Intonation shows a parallel difference. In answer to Are you going to the party? I can say Yes, I'm going,

well again.

now that I'm

with a B profile on the final clause. I'm not apt to say because I'm well again with that same intonation; the usual thing is with a terminal fall,

cause I'm well

be

again.

The subordinating intonation matches the more subordinate of the two clauses. The conjunction because makes a similarly striking contrast with if; the two are at opposite extremes of the subordination scale and the intonations behave accordingly. If you ask me Are you going to the funeral and I reply

No^o, if it's not necessary.

the fully subordinate if clause takes a fully appropriate B profile--the terminal rise requires no other motivation than that the sentence is incomplete. But if I reply

ne

No^o, because it's not necessary.

I normally use that terminal fall. And if I try to say

No^o, because it's not necessary^y.

with the terminal rise, the up-in-the-airness requires some other explanation than mere incompleteness. It will probably be taken in some sense of Why do you ask? Perhaps I'm genuinely puzzled at your asking; or I may imply 'What right have you to ask?' which translates into 'What business is it of yours?' In the case of genuine puzzlement I might elaborate with

No^o, because it's not necessary^y-- did you

feel otherwise about it?

In the case of Why do you ask? I could elaborate with

No^o, because it's not necessary^y, and I hope that

answer will satisfy you^y-- too bad if it doesn't!

containing a string of B profiles. The point of this comparison is that the intonation signal remains constant: what makes it appropriate for subordination is the same up-in-the-airness that makes it appropriate for questions.

But the fact that it has a broader meaning does not signify that it is any less important to subordination. It may be the only overt signal we have. This again is clearest with conditions, as we saw in the with all that loot example earlier. It is the regular thing with conditional imperatives and other conditions without an expressed if. To answer Why are you so stingy where your boy is concerned? one may say

Give him mon^{ey},

he spends it on do

pe.

or (using the same intonation) You give him money, he spends it on dope, or I give him money, and he spends it on dope. A few other clause types without explicit conjunctions behave the same. When, for example: Winter comes, we trot out the boots and parkas; I get home, everybody starts scolding me. Here again we observe a difference between degrees of subordination. An unexpressed if is more subordinate than an unexpressed even though, and the intonation carries the contrast fairly well: You try with all your might, nobody appreciates you with terminal rise suggests 'if you try'; with terminal fall it suggests 'even though, in spite of the fact that'.

I've tried to show that some clause types are more subordinate than others, and that intonation is to some degree clued in with the difference. But intonation also serves as a clue to degrees of subordination within a given utterance. This was noted by Pierre Delattre (e.g. 1965, 25), who gave the intonation signals the names major continuation and minor continuation. I can illustrate with a sentence that is ambiguous without the intonational contrast, which we generally mark simply with a comma at the major break:

If you need it, when you get there call me.

If you need it when you get there, call me.

I've given B profiles to both subordinate clauses, but the subordinate subordinate one has a lower terminal pitch. This use of relative height is quite widespread--Delattre found it in several languages.

But again, as with all the other syntactic uses of intonation, the syntactic meaning, which in this case is the bracketing of clauses, is a byproduct of subordination in a much broader sense, which may have nothing to do with syntax but only with how the speaker feels about his utterance. The sentence may be one in which the embeddings are irrelevant, yet the lower rise will be subordinate in terms of its importance. Here is an example in which I am going to permute both the relative heights and the order of the elements:

know

You'll

that I'm telling the truth, if you think about it.

With this arrangement the speaker puts in first place your giving the matter your careful attention. Reverse the heights of the two subordinate clauses, and thinking about the matter becomes incidental to truth-telling. To permute

the clauses themselves I must paraphrase, but that does not affect what the relative heights tell us:

If you think about it my truthfulness^s will be obvious.

First place goes to truthfulness, but with the heights reversed it goes to thinking about it.

Actually the B profile is not the most frequent way of showing relative subordination where American English is concerned. We are more apt to put a fall-rise at the major break (I'll illustrate in a moment), and this points the way to intonational configurations as being themselves rankable in terms of which ones subordinate the most strongly. I've been leaning heavily on the B profiles, as they are the best subordinators, being the most up in the air. The fall-rise is also handy for subordination because of the terminal rise, but the rise usually does not go very far and the falling part tones it down further. Listen again to the major and minor continuation example, with fall-rise substituted for one of the B profiles. I'm going to exaggerate, and you can see that no matter how high the simple rise of the B profile goes, the fall-rise is still the major break, which means that it is not as strong a subordinator:

If you need it, when you get there call me.

We can generalize that the major break comes at the point of greater completeness, and that completeness is manifested in two ways: by relative height in B versus B, and by configuration in B versus other profiles.

The subordinate clauses we have been looking at have been mostly adverbial clauses. What about adjective clauses? The most important distinction with these is between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. Intonation plays a role, but not in the way we are apt to expect. Nonrestrictive clauses are sometimes termed parenthetical, and in general such clauses are treated as parentheses, with the pitch brought down. So we have the distinction between

People from Guam who are not required to have
passports may take Corridor B.
People from Guam, who are not required to have
passports, may take Corridor B.

