

Dependent marking, Indirectness and Insubordination in Aleut

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Identifying insubordination in Aleut is not straightforward, particularly since Aleut makes use of a very limited inflectional morphology for a wide variety of unrelated functions, both dependent and independent, and tolerates a great deal of ambiguity. To determine whether or not insubordination really exists in Aleut, we need formal ways of identifying subordinate structures, specifically clauses, on the one hand, and on the other, we need to examine the strategies for expressing the things that are commonly insubordinated in other languages.

There are many lexical, morphological, and syntactic markers of dependency in Aleut. They do not, however, always interact cooperatively, in effect creating various dimensions along which a clause may be viewed as independent or dependent. For example, a given verb mood may not have the 3rd/4th person distinction in its inflectional paradigm, this lack being a sign of independency; however it may have possessive pronominal endings, rather than enclitic pronouns, a sign of dependency. In this paper, I show that the various strategies for marking dependency interact in such a way as to create a dependency continuum; and many clauses can be used in both subordinate and superordinate contexts without obvious changes in clause structure. At the same time, other features of language use that often seem to give rise to insubordinate structures in other languages, such as ellipsis of a main clause, are not common in Aleut. Together, these result in a relatively low incidence of truly insubordinate clauses.

However, one of the functions of insubordination is to highlight the degree of speaker-listener alignment ('intersubjective alignment' in Evans 2007). Common presuppositions, cultural understanding, and so forth effectively allow greater levels of indirectness in speech—and Aleut turns out to have a very well developed system of indirect discourse, involving many of the types of structures that could otherwise be ripe for insubordination. For example, one of the most indirect and deferent ways of making a request involves the most unambiguously dependent mood, relative person inflection (a marker of dependency), and the unnecessary use of a negative form; and it also occasionally shows ellipsis. I suggest a strong link between the relative fluidity and ambiguity of dependency marking, the importance of indirectness, and the lack of formal insubordination in Aleut.