The origin of insubordinate meaning: Semi-embedded clauses in Aisi

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There has been increased attention lately on insubordination, the use of formally subordinate clauses as stand-alone main clauses (Evans 2007; Evans & Watanabe 2016; Beijering, Kaltenböck & Sansiñena 2019). Subordinate clauses usually convey backgrounded, non-asserted information (Cristofaro 2003), and insubordinate constructions often retain this backgrounded flavor (Mithun 2008). But sometimes they don't: a particularly common kind of insubordination in Papuan languages is non-embedded nominalization, in which subordination conveys vividness and foregrounding (Schapper & San Roque 2011). This creates a paradox. If insubordinate constructions originate in subordinate, backgrounded structures (which they do, by definition), how do they acquire a meaning that is precisely the opposite of that?

Aisi, a Trans New Guinea language of Papua New Guinea (Daniels 2015), offers a clue. Aisi subordinate clauses take the form of a finite clause followed by a demonstrative. This construction serves as a noun phrase in the matrix clause, and the demonstrative bears a case marker that signals its syntactic role. In (1), the middle accusative demonstrative *gakuŋ* subordinates the clause *abeŋ* 'I'm talking', and the subordinate clause is the object of *iro* 'perceive'.

(1) [*Ab-eŋ*]   *ga-kuŋ*   *ir-o!*
     talk-1SG.IPST   MID-ACC   perceive-2SG.IMP
     'Listen to what I'm saying!'

These nominalized clauses convey given, presupposed information (Reesink 2014). In special cases, though, they can convey new, asserted information. In (2), from a folk tale about giants, the subordinate clause introduces a new giant and asserts that it got up.

(2) [*Mo   ga-ku   kɨp-ɨs-i*]   *ga-ku,   kɨbɨ   nɨku   yo-s-i.*
     another MID-NOM get.up-PST-3SG MID-NOM in.law 3SG.POSS hit-PST-3SG
     'Another one got up and killed his in-law.'

This use of subordinate clauses is subject to certain restrictions: the demonstrative must be the middle form, not proximal or distal, and it must be in nominative or topic case. Because these clauses are asserted and occupy high positions in the matrix clause structure (they are less "hierarchically downgraded," per Lehmann 1988), I call them "semi-embedded." This structure can also become fully insubordinate, subject to similar restrictions.

The key observation is that these semi-embedded clauses are only seen at climactic points in narratives. As in (2), they contain a rise in narrative tension that sets the stage for a climax in the matrix clause. This is most plausibly accounted for by using Cristofaro's (2016) concept of 'disengagement', in which the bond between a subordinate clause and its matrix clause is weakened in some conversational exchanges. This allows the formerly subordinate clause to acquire an independent meaning based on the meaning associated with the original construction. In this case, just as the presupposed information in a subordinate clause sets the scene and prepares the hearer for the new information in the matrix clause, so the rise in a semi-embedded clause sets the scene and prepares the hearer for the matrix clause climax. This pathway explains how a backgrounding, scene-setting construction can give rise to a foregrounding one, and offers a solution to the paradox mentioned above.

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