Pragmatic Strengthening is not Strong Enough: Meanings of Sequential Closed-Class Forms

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This study focuses on the semantics of word patterns and schematic constructions. Examples of constructions with purportedly rich meanings are shown to convey readings less complex than is claimed in the literature. Many previous studies stressed these constructions’ idiosyncratic properties which have been held up as arguments in favor of their special construction status—pairings of (usually unique, conventionalized) form and (usually idiosyncratic) meaning. I wish to argue that although the constructions reviewed here do have clear meanings, their form and function are not as idiosyncratic, irregular, or unpredictable as they are portrayed in the literature. Indeed, the formal and functional properties of one construction analyzed here, the Incredulity Response Construction fit well within traditional characterizations of items located on the syntactic side of the lexicon-syntax continuum. I will attempt to demonstrate that the form of the construction is an iconic representation of its reading. Additionally, I question the reading itself, arguing that the incredulity that gave rise to the construction’s very name is not its semantic contribution. Instead, I propose a more general and abstract reading of incongruousness or “cognitive dissonance”. Finally, it is argued that there are no known mechanisms that could equip constructions with overly rich semantic content. One potential candidate, pragmatic strengthening, capable of endowing constructions with meanings does not go beyond fairly sparse readings already known to occur in grammatical forms.

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1. Introduction

For a long time, linguistic theory, research as well as their didactic applications were predicated on the assumption that language knowledge is modular in nature. It was recognized that language forms should be divided into at least two compartments, namely the lexicon and syntax. The lexicon was understood to deal with individual lexical items, while syntax was naturally associated with more general categories, rules, and constructions such as the passive voice. The two components were considered not only separate, but, especially in the generative tradition, fundamentally dissimilar. In the most extreme developments, no doubt owing to Chomsky’s focus on core syntax, the lexicon was dismissed as the realm of randomness and rummage. Some, like Di Sciullo and Williams, openly expressed nothing short of disappointment with the lexicon, “incredibly boring by its very nature”, arguing that it is “like a prison – it contains only the lawless, and the only thing that its inmates have in common is lawlessness” (Di Sciullo & Williams, 1987, p. 3) This traditionally observed division of labor between syntax and lexicon seems to be such an intuitive reality that it went unquestioned until relatively recently.

However, in the last three decades in Cognitive Linguistic circles many arguments have been offered in favor of revising the lexicon-syntax division. One obvious reason to be skeptical about an alleged divide between the two components is the existence of complex words and collocations. These cannot be located with much confidence on either side of the border. While they could be treated as large lexical units and therefore fit to reside in the lexicon, they often come in groups of expressions and patterns that follow what can justifiably be considered grammatical rules. Thus, if groups of expressions like *go wild, go vegan, go medieval, go astray, go wrong, go cold, go Jean-Claude van Damme*, etc. were to be considered purely lexical phenomena, at least a part of syntactic operations would have to be shifted to the lexicon. If, on the other hand, multiword expressions belong to syntax, it then becomes necessary to relax the requirement that syntax be maximally general. Contrary to the formalist syntactician’s ambition to “seek explanations in terms of simple and maximally general formal principles” (Tallerman, et al., 2009, p. 136), syntax would have to accommodate many
context-sensitive rules, not to mention storing a great number of actual expressions, special cases and exceptions. Chomsky’s approach to such inconvenient data was to sweep all and any idiosyncrasies under the rug of periphery, a move he justified in the following words,

Throughout the history of the serious sciences many problems in explaining facts were put aside, in the hope that they would be explained some day. … The great success of physics is due in part to the willingness to restrict attention to the facts that seem crucial for the theory, without taking into account even evident facts … sometimes even when they appear inconsistent with it. (Chomsky, 1998, p. 108)

Idiosyncrasy as understood here can be both formal and semantic. A construction may but does not have to be “combined according to familiar combinatorial principles” (Fillmore, et al., 1988, p. 510). Typical examples given to illustrate this property include all of a sudden, by and large, etc. They are, in other words, unfamiliarly arranged forms which must be memorized as conventionalized units. From the semantic point of view, idiosyncrasy characterizes those constructions whose meanings cannot be predicted from their form compositionally (as sums of the individual parts). For example, while many nouns with the suffix -ity (like enormity or periodicity) follow the compositional pattern “quality, state or property of”, there are those like antiquity (in the sense ‘ancient time’) that “have become permanently incorporated into the mental lexicons of speakers, thereby often adopting idiosyncratic meanings”. (Plag, 2003, p. 91) As long as these idiosyncratic forms are single lexical units, they can be assigned their entries in the lexicon, and they do not pose a challenge to the strict lexicon-syntax division. However, larger patterns such as V up a storm (Jane talked up a storm), V x’s heart out (She cried her heart out) or V TIME away (They danced the night away) require a compromise and it is for them that periphery has been instituted.

The problem here is that the hope of some day explaining peripheral phenomena has become increasingly overdue, despite decades of intensive research. The number of smaller or greater grammatical constructions,
patterns and more or less bizarre collocations has gone well beyond a point where it would still be fair to consider them peripheral. As Culicover and Jackendoff (2005, p. 25) put it, “‘periphery’ tends to become a tempting dumping ground for any irregularity one’s theory cannot at the moment explain.”

The cognitive solution to these complications was to recast the division as a cline. Instead of viewing the lexicon and syntax as being two segregated areas, cognitive linguists argue that they are two extremes located on the same plane, in the middle of which one transitions into the other. This continuum view has perhaps its most concrete incarnation in Construction Grammar’s “constructicon”, a comprehensive superstore including not only primitive morphemes and simple lexical items, but also items ranging from complex words, through multi-word phrases and partially filled phrases to completely schematic syntactic patterns. All these have come to be referred to as “constructions”, a move which effectively equalized all language forms under the umbrella of a single term. This equitable approach to all forms is evident in assertions by construction grammarians like Goldberg, who stresses that “[p]hrasal constructions, like traditional lexical items, are learned pairings of form and function” (Goldberg, 2013, p. 15). As Langacker puts it,

“There is no meaningful distinction between grammar and lexicon. Lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum of symbolic structures, which differ along various parameters but can be divided into separate components only arbitrarily.” (Langacker, 1987, p. 3)

The conception of one common superstore constructicon seems intuitively consistent with another bold idea. It is natural to assume that since all language forms can be accommodated within one common store, they have much more in common than was traditionally acknowledged. One such point of similarity is semantics. While previously it used to be assumed that only lexical items were capable of conveying meaning, now cognitive linguists argue that forms formerly considered to be closed-class items too have semantic potential, a notion formalized as the Symbolic Thesis which
states that “grammar is symbolic in nature, consisting in the conventional symbolization of semantic structure.” (Langacker, 1987, p. 2). This of course is at odds with our traditional understanding of a closed-class form as a grammatical item with “little or no meaning apart from the grammatical idea it expresses.” (Fries, 1940, p. 109)

More strikingly, many constructionist analyses are based on the premise that closed-class forms may have any kind of meaning. Some authors make it an open assertion, as in the case of Kay & Michaelis, who propose that “[p]robably any kind of meaning that occurs can be the semantic contribution of a construction.” (Kay & Michaelis, 2012, p. 2278) As a working assumption, it can be seen adopted in various studies, such as Jackendoff’s (2002) analysis of the time-away construction, where he concludes that “the construction has a complex and rich semantics, approached but not exactly captured by any paraphrase.” (Jackendoff, 2002, p. 84) Similarly, Wierzbicka (2006) claims that there exist “[l]inks between culture and grammar” and that “grammatical categories of a language also encode meaning” (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 171), which she demonstrates by means of many items, among which an “extremely rich and elaborate system of expressive derivation applicable to proper names (specifically, names of persons)” In short, the impression one gets is that there are no reasons why grammatical patterns should not be treated on a par with lexical items. Whether it is openly acknowledged or not, the continuum-based constructicon with the traditional division torn down is taken to justify approaching all forms found within as equals.

However, it would be a gross oversimplification to claim that the matter is settled, as even now the division is not rejected outright by everybody. As the very name of Pinker’s Words and Rules Theory suggests, his model takes the division as a principal assumption, under which the lexicon (the Words) and syntax (the Rules) are taken to be distinct “subsystems for different kinds of computation” (Pinker & Ullman, 2002, p. 462) involving storage and combinatorial operations respectively. A qualitative difference between the lexicon and syntax is also presupposed in Talmy’s (2000) Conceptual Structuring System, which holds that open-class forms are responsible for the content of a sentence’s cognitive representation, while closed-class forms determine its structure. Further, even researchers
who insist that the lexicon and syntax “have the same network structure and there is no boundary between them” maintain the implicit difference between the two areas, acknowledging that the “lexicon deals with relatively specific word-types such as CAT, whereas the grammar deals with relatively general categories such as Noun” (Hudson, 2008, p. 99). The question of the semantics of closed- and open-class forms is discussed in Evans (2009) who characterizes the difference as follows:

“Whereas the meaning encoded by the lexical system is (perceptually) rich in nature, the meaning associated with the grammatical system is more schematic in nature. ... The grammatical system is unlikely to afford access to rich, perceptual rehearsals of experience (‘simulations’). This follows as the grammatical system encodes schematized parametrizations abstracted away from rich, perceptual experience.” (Evans, 2009, p. 30)

A similarly traditional approach is taken by Murphy (2010) who states

“the closed classes contain function words or grammatical words; that is, words that have grammatical functions rather than rich meanings. ... The closed classes represent a more restricted range of meanings, and the meanings of closed-class words tend to be less detailed and less referential than open-class words.” (Murphy, 2010, p. 15)

Although I do not contest the continuum model of linguistic knowledge, I believe that the traditional views insisting on spare meanings of closed-class forms still hold. To go from the continuum view to the proposal of rich meanings across the board is a non-sequitur. It is one thing to establish a graded rather than absolute boundary, and quite another to conclude that it means the absence of that boundary. To take this tack is to commit the continuum fallacy, which involves arguing that if two extremes are connected by small intermediate differences and if at no step can one indicate a decisive difference, then the extremes are the same. To use an
analogy, inability to specify at what temperature cold turns to hot should not lead to the conclusion that cold is really the same as hot. But this is more or less what happens when the fuzziness of the distinction is taken as a justification of viewing all language forms as constructions and granting them equal semantic potential.

In the present study, I will focus on a number of phrasal constructions and demonstrate that their semantic (and pragmatic) content is not as specific or graphic as has recently been claimed in the cognitive literature. The constructions in question are, to varying degrees, schematic constructions in the sense of Bybee (2010) who defines them as patterns with empty “positions that can be filled by a variety of words or phrases” (p. 25). Schematic constructions are understood here in opposition to a “substantive, or lexically filled, idiom … in which all elements of the idiom are fixed.” (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 233) The constructions analyzed here should therefore be treated as grammatical forms, closed-class constructions, which convey less meaning than do typical lexical items.

2. Arbitrariness

What has been taken to justify a de facto equal treatment of all language forms within one constructicon is the assumption that they all share an important property, namely the arbitrary relationship between form and meaning. Arbitrariness is invoked implicitly or asserted openly in cognitive analyses of constructions as conventional symbolic units. This attention to arbitrariness is echoed in Goldberg’s much quoted definition of constructions as “stored pairings of form and function, including morphemes, words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general linguistic patterns.” (Goldberg, 2003, p. 219) The very reason for their storage is arbitrariness and therefore unpredictability – quite simply, because their meanings cannot be predicted from their form, they have to be learned and stored. Goldberg adds that “any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist.” (Goldberg 2003, p. 219) In a similar tone, Traugott and Trousdale define constructions as “typically arbitrary associations of form
One consequence of arbitrariness and unpredictability is that constructions can be expected to exhibit a degree of idiosyncrasy, as is stressed by Traugott and Trousdale who observe that “[s]ince the arbitrariness of the sign entails idiosyncrasy, idiosyncrasy is present in a construction by default.” (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013, p. 11) Similarly, in their discussion of the Incredulity Response Construction (as in What? Him write books? He can’t even read!), Barðdal and Eythórsson write that

“…the semantics of the construction as a whole cannot be derived from either the semantics of the parts or from their form. This particular semantics of disbelief towards a proposition cannot in any way be derived from the fact that there is an oblique argument as a subject, a verb in the infinitive, and a complement, e.g. a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase.” (2012, p. 277)

However, the fact of the matter is that a construction is not always arbitrary, and it does not need to be idiosyncratic. Full arbitrariness in the classic sense applies to single morphemes, that is, to “atomic constructions” only such as tooth. As soon as morphemes combine and form composite units (e.g. tooth paste or tooth and claw), the burden of arbitrariness and unpredictability is eased. It should be rather obvious that if arbitrariness were not costly, no assemblage in the form of compounding, folk etymology would be necessary. Theoretically, all new concepts or even combinations of concepts could be given novel, completely arbitrary single-morpheme labels. Yet such unchecked arbitrariness is not embraced easily, and speakers do resort to recycling extant units to form multi-word expressions, collocations, and other larger, less arbitrary sequential structures. Goldberg and van der Auwera acknowledge that, at least in the case of what they call the is-to construction (e.g. The PM is to meet Obama), “while the properties are not strictly predictable, neither are they completely arbitrary” (Goldberg & van der Auwera, 2012) A construction defined by Bybee as “a form-meaning pairing that has sequential structure” (2010, p. 9) is characterized by less arbitrariness and idiosyncrasy than a single primitive sign. Such constructions are then motivated, and instead of being entirely arbitrary, the
form-meaning relationship is to some degree transparent and iconic.

More specifically, one can distinguish two layers of meaning. The first can be assumed to be arbitrary. Both in the case of simplex lexical items and simplex function elements, the meanings encountered must be learned and stored because they cannot be predicted from their form. But larger structures will exhibit less and less arbitrariness, because their meanings can be predicted compositionally: This second layer is thus a sum of the meanings of the lexical items present in a pattern and of the formal properties of that pattern.

It is now possible to hypothesize that fully arbitrary, rich meanings are found in single lexical items only. The more phrasal a pattern is, the less arbitrary (and less idiosyncratic) it is. Additionally, the more schematic (the less lexically filled) it is, the more it can be expected to convey spare, typically grammatical meanings. Detailed, graphic meanings (like specifications of colors) are thus typical of lexical items, not grammatical forms. One obvious corollary of this hypothesis is that phrasal constructions cannot and do not convey arbitrary, rich, remarkable, unusual, contentful meanings (despite frequent claims in the constructionist literature, addressed below). Meanings normally found in lexical items (such as ‘difficulty’, ‘obstacle’) would be a rather implausible semantic contribution of a phrasal schematic construction. If a phrasal construction does indeed exhibit an unusual meaning, it can be accounted for by reference to its form: In more substantive patterns, such meanings are traceable to lexical items embedded in them. In the case of schematic constructions, their meanings will be shown to be conveyed iconically by the construction’s formal properties, so they cannot be said to be very arbitrary.

In what follows, I will look at examples of closed-class elements claimed to express meanings that are more typical of lexical items. Each analysis will conclude with the observation that the rich meanings are not really dedicated semantic effects associated with the forms in question. The meanings are either more general or are only some among many other readings the constructions serve to convey.
3. Constructions with Implausible Meanings

3.1 The Give-Gerund CP Construction

Another example of a closed-class construction that seems to be associated with remarkably contentful meanings is the *give-gerund* construction. It is a composite predicate (CP) pattern, a subtype of the fairly large group of light verb constructions, which are characterized by a broad semantic common denominator. However, unlike the super-category they belong to, *give*-gerund patterns seem to have a specialized semantic contribution. In her study of light verbs, Kearns (2002) gives a number of examples of *give*-gerund predicates (*give John a beating/flogging/whipping/thrashing*) and suggests that the verbs in gerund form denote actions involving ‘bodily harm’. This observation seems consistent with a considerable number of examples like the following:

(1) a. The patrol officer tried to pin down his arms so that his comrade could *give him a good battering*. (Jeremy Wohlers, *People of Skies*)
b. …he had his mates *give them a kicking* to end all kickings.
   (Patrick Magee, *Gangsters or Guerrillas*)
c. I’ll *give you a serious hiding*, that’s what! So get out of here!
   (William Haycock, *Oppression*)
d. I have a good mind to walk out there and *give you a sound licking*. (Will Nathaniel Harben, *The New Clarion*)

A quick search through uses of the construction reveals that the construction allows practically any native root with the meaning of ‘beat’ (*spank, belt, smack, cane*). This could give the impression that the construction is indeed dedicated to the expression of causing harm. However, Trousdale (2008) notes that the range of verbs allowed in the construction is much broader. First, he points out that “there is a considerable subset of give-gerund CPs which involve not physical harm but verbal castigation, as in *he gave him a dressing down.*” (Trousdale, 2008, p. 41) Examples of this subset are attested frequently:
(2) a. I gave her a severe tongue-lashing on the plane on the way over. (John Hofman, Cassiopeia Wright)
   b. He was too big to spank, but I gave him a good chewing out. (James Coomer, Life on the Ohio)
   c. Jane’s lip trembled, but the midwife gave her a stern talking to and told her she was strong enough to do this. (Elizabeth Ann West, A Summer Shame)

Trousdale also shows that some uses can be ambiguous, as in the following example, where seeing to can mean either ‘beating’ or ‘having sex’:

(3) I’ll give her a seeing to. (Trousdale 2008: 35)

Further, there are examples, where the object is subjected to an action involving physical effort or a procedure:

(4) a. Sam was soon up in the tree, and proceeded to give it a vigorous shaking. (Norman Allison Calkins, Student and Schoolmate)
   b. To make the plants bushier and more compact, give them a pruning. (Barbara Perry Lawton, Mints: A Family of Herbs and Ornamentals)
   c. …gave himself a brushing down in front of the mirror. (Norman Collins, Love In Our Time)
   d. Lawn grass needs the equivalent of 1 inch of rainfall per week; if rain is in short supply, give your lawn a thorough soaking. (Taylor’s Guide to Ground Covers, Vines & Grasses)
   e. I unearthed my skinny black jeans and gave my black collared shirt a quick ironing. (Noah Ballard, Daily Nebraskan)

If there is anything these uses have in common, it is the sense that the object is affected by the action, which is a fairly general semantic element, one that is perfectly natural and typical of grammatical forms. Being subjected to an action and becoming affected as a result is a pervasive recurring theme that is the main semantic contribution of grammatical
categories such as the accusative case (Dowty, 1991), resultative construction (Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1993) or to take a less obvious case, the malefactive dative (Janda, 1993) (Wierzbicka, 1988).

More seriously, even if the non-harm meanings in (4) can be dismissed as a handful of unproblematic exceptions (or extensions of the bodily harm prototype), it should be recognized that the meanings credited to the construction do not come from the construction itself, but from the lexical material inserted in the slots the construction leaves open. There is hardly anything surprising about open-class lexical items carrying contentful meanings. Claims of rich constructional meanings would be more compelling if the construction featured gerundive verbs that do not so much as implicate physical harm – this would constitute evidence that the bodily harm meanings in question were conveyed by the construction independently of the lexical material. One potential candidate of a non-harm gerund would be seeing to, as at first impression, it does not seem to be a synonym of beating. However, the meaning ‘take care of’ of see to can also be interpreted as a euphemistic expression of the intention to confront someone facing trouble. To lend some credence to their arguments, proponents of the ‘bodily harm’ meaning would need to demonstrate that the construction functions similarly to the double object construction (I told her a joke; they sold us a car), which expresses a general meaning scenario “X causes Y to go to Z” but which also allows non-motion verbs (such as build or bake). Uses like He built her a home or The child sang us a song are interpreted as conveying metaphoric movement of a theme to a recipient by means of the syntactic pattern, not the verb. The only requirement that the verb needs to meet is general compatibility with the thematic core “X causes Z to have Y” (Pinker, 1989, p. 82). To put it another way, the verb does not have to express the same meaning as the thematic core; it should simply not clash with the semantic structure of the construction. In the case of the give-gerund construction, ‘bodily harm’ is not its semantic structure.

3.2 The Way Construction

The way construction (They clawed their way to freedom) has been a mainstay of much cognitive theorizing and has also been featured in many
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influential constructionist discussions. The construction merits mention here because it is widely recognized as an example of a construction with a fairly rich semantic content. According to Goldberg, the construction codes motion taking place despite some obstacle or difficulty. She argues that the construction should carry the “presupposition that the motion was difficult in some way” and that the motion involved “the creation of a path” (Goldberg, 2010, p. 53). In fact, a quick review of instances of the way construction confirms this characterization:

(5) a. What of those who struggled their way through the fierce winds...?  
    (Daniel Heath Justice, Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History)

    However, this reading is at best an implicature, and so cannot be the construction’s stable contribution. A more thorough treatment is offered in Szczeniak (2013), but for our purposes here, it is quite easy to question the ‘difficulty/obstacle’ reading by demonstrating that many uses are attested that do not convey any sense of experienced difficulty:

(6) a. Attired in jugglers’ costumes, the two frolicked their way to a splendid victory. (Spokane Daily Chronicle, April 24, 1978)  
    b. Inspiring gay athlete Blake Skjellerup has whizzed his way to the 2010 New Zealand Senior Speed Skating title. (http://www.gaynz.com/articles/publish/2/article_9355.php)  
    c. Schultz rollicked his way to the front of the stage, swinging his unruly mop of hair around like a young Eddie Vedder and hurling himself over the edge. (http://www.theblueindian.com/show-coverage/show-photos-videos/music-midtown-2011-a-retrospective/)

    Implicatures are triggered by specific contexts, and as the above examples illustrate, it is perfectly possible for many uses not to trigger the implicature of ‘motion in the face of an obstacle’ at all.

    This is not to say that the construction is semantically transparent. The way construction conveys the reading of an unusual path a distance of a nontrivial nature. It allows non-motion verbs to be used in motion scenes,
as in (7a). In the case of verbs that do feature an element of motion like *push*, the construction builds a special extended trajectory (7b), composed of a number of ‘push’ events. Sometimes it can also feature motion verbs normally found in ordinary intransitive motion constructions, such as *walk*. The difference is that here, the *x’s way* construction conveys a sense of unconventionality of the path: the walking descent in (7c) makes the path unusual or unexpected, given that a skier would typically ski down the slope. Finally, in (7d) the choice of *x’s way* suggests the verb *walk* conveys a path covered by an entity other than a typical animate agent.

(7) a. Overhead, an Air France plane *roared* its way toward the Atlantic. (Melina Morel, *Devour*)

b. Two cops jumped out and *pushed* their way into the bank. (Carole Burg, *Inside the Nightmare*)

c. The novice skier *walked* her way down the ski slope. (example 22a in Goldberg (1995))

d. Tony’s kisses *walked* their way through my body(...) (Sarah Peterson, *From Behind This Chair*)

The interpretation of an unusual path can be inferred through pragmatic principles given the form of the path phrase in the way construction, which features the NP *one’s way*. That is, the listener can assume that the construction suggests a special path other than a path conveyed by ordinary intransitive motion constructions if one follows the principle that “unmarked forms tend to be used for unmarked situations and marked forms for marked situations” (Horn, 1984, p. 26). This property is also captured by Levinson’s (2000, p. 38) M-heuristic, which says that “What’s said in an abnormal way isn’t normal.” Additionally we are probably dealing with an instance of windowing of attention. According to Talmy (2007, pp. 268-269), lexical units tend to focus attention more strongly than closed class units, which by nature serve to background presupposed meanings. In the construction, the phrase “one’s way” is an obvious device focusing attention on the path more effectively than the bare prepositional phrase of the intransitive motion construction.

As was shown in numerous studies, the path can be metaphoric.
Jackendoff (2002, p. 174) notes that the PP can be any expression of path in space, time, or metaphor. Apart from the most basic uses of the construction expressing paths through space, paths can run through time (8a-b) or metaphoric locations (8c-d). The distinction between (8a-b) and (8c-d) is rather subtle, and all the examples (a-d) could be thought of as metaphoric paths through time. Whatever spaces the imaginary paths in (c-d) run through, they must perforce coincide with the passage of time. There is a difference in that “the end of the round” and “midnight” define points in time, whereas “fame” and “wealth” are not even occurrences, but states. We shall not pursue the difference here, as paths through time and paths through metaphoric spaces both behave similarly in that they involve abstractions. What is important at this point is that these diverse types of paths are possible as trajectories put together by the construction. They testify to the considerable expressive versatility of the construction.

(8)  

a. Dempsey clinched, held, and mauled his way to the end of the round. (Harry Mullan, *Great Book of Boxing*)  
b. Nineteenth-century Europe and America binged their way to crisis in a few short years. (http://mikejay.net/watson-the-needle/)  
c. Until this point he has lied and cheated and bullied his way to fame, fortune, and sexual satisfaction. (Jonathan Price, *Classic Scenes*)  
d. Think your way to wealth (Napoleon Hill, *Think Your Way To Wealth*)

Are there kinds of paths that are not allowed in the construction? If the path is metaphoric and abstract, the goal must be abstract too. In (9a), the path is not through space, but through a career, and the goal is interpreted as a point in that career, not a physical location. In (9b), the goal is interpreted figuratively, and although the verb expresses a manner inherent to movement (riding a BMX bicycle), the path—the road to adoration—is imaginary.

(9)  

a. … he plunked and strummed and created and composed his way to his Bachelor of Music Education Degree. (http://www.fablevision.
b. And ET, who BMX-ed his way into our hearts in 1982, was cuter still. (http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/jan/11/features.stevenspielberg)

If the path is concrete, of course the goal is concrete too.

(10) En masse they pushed their way into the courtyard. (Loy VanNatter, And Then It Was Winter)

These correspondences between the status of the path and the goal occur regardless of the type of manner. Physical path uses are possible with both incidental and inherent manner verbs, and the same is true of sentences expressing abstract paths. Although some speakers, as was mentioned above, reject expressions of physical path if the manner is incidental, such sentences are generally possible, and considered much more natural than uses where an abstract path is combined with a concrete goal:

(11) *The boy cried his way to the ice-cream. (under the interpretation that by crying, the boy reaches a point where he tricks his parents into giving in and offering ice-cream)

It is interesting to point out that a similar sentence where the goal is abstract, in agreement with the path.

(12) …she’ll probably go to the dean at Southern Methodist University and cry her way to forgiveness. (http://thedirty.com/gossip/dallas/smu-thief/)

Sentences that seem to combine an abstract path with a physical goal like in (13a) below are really metaphoric. The physical objects that represent the goal stand in a metonymic relationship to abstractions. Here the podium is conventionally understood as victory. Sentences with goals that cannot be interpreted as metonymic synonyms for abstractions are awkward (13b). Such sentences may make sense in two scenarios. One is where the path
is understood to be physical, and the participants move in the direction of the physical objects. The other is where the path remains abstract, but then symbolic interpretations of the physical objects in question impose themselves.

(13) a. They danced their way to the podium / gold medal.
b. * I hand-whisked my way to beautiful whipped cream.

It should be recognized that the way construction is not a typical closed-class form. After all, it is partially lexically filled, and that can be expected to increase its potential for richer semantic content. However, whatever unusual meanings are observed, they should be traceable to the lexical material embedded in the construction. If an open-class-like meaning is found in a construction, one might expect that the open-class form inclusion should be able to account for it. Goldberg’s ‘difficulty’ reading does not straightforwardly correspond to the meaning of the lexical form “way”. Note that the path reading proposed here does not suffer from these problems. First, it is a possible closed class meaning, as paths and other geometric relationships are delineated by prepositions. Second, it is motivated by the construction’s formal properties, the lexical material present in it.

3.3 The Incredulity Response Construction

3.3.1 Basic Description

At first glance, the Incredulity Response Construction (IRC) exemplified below (14) may seem like an exception to the generalization that closed-class forms carry very minimal and general meanings. In the literature devoted to the IRC (Akmajian (1984), Lambrecht (1990), Tomasello (2000), Goldberg (2006), Taylor (2012)), the construction is recognized as a means of expressing disbelief at the proposition it presents.

b. What? Me, rat on you!?
In these examples, the sentences are built around a completely schematic pattern with no pre-inserted lexical material. The full schematicity of the form alone justifies placing the IRC firmly at the syntactic extreme of the continuum. Nevertheless, the meaning of emphatic incredulity the IRC is said to convey does not seem to be general in the least. The construction questions the validity of the proposition made in the preceding discourse, and it does so in a way involving intense emotions. According to Taylor, the IRC serves as a means of dismissing a preceding proposition as “absurd, unrealistic, preposterous” (Taylor, 2012, p. 86). In a pre-CxG study of the construction in French, Bally (1905, p. 8) characterizes the communicative content of the construction as that of surprise and indignation.

Many authors discussing the IRC agree that it is idiosyncratic and unique. As Michaelis notes, the form of the IRC “owes little or nothing to the ordinary English syntax or predication and subordination.” (Michaelis, 2010, p. 169) Tomasello claims that it is one of “productive constructions that do not behave like any (or many) other constructions in the language” (2000, p. 237)

In what follows I will question these assertions. I will attempt to show that the IRC is more transparent, predictable, and semantically compositional than is widely accepted.

3.3.2 Semantics

Although in uses like (15a), the IRC may indeed serve to convey the speaker’s incredulity, the range of other possible effects is much wider. While (15a) could reasonably be rephrased as ‘I don’t believe that he won a prize’, it should be obvious enough that (15b) does not mean ‘I don’t believe that I ratted on you’. And although an interpretation of an incredulity reaction could make sense in the case of (15c), which in some contexts could be paraphrased as ‘I don’t believe that she got pregnant’, the elaboration request (‘How? Tell me!’) suggests that the speaker is leaning
toward the scenario being true.

(15) a. Him win a prize?
    b. Me, rat on you for being nervous—never. (https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10820093/9/Beltane-Night)
    c. What? Sarah, get pregnant?? How? Tell me!

Indeed, there are probably no limits to the range of conceivable responses that IRC-based utterances can betray. In suitable contexts, the following could convey the emotional reactions suggested on the right.

(16) a. Him, propose to her? (Envy)
    b. What, John Goodman, be a ballet dancer? (Amusement)
    c. Them, win a medal? Whoa... (Awe)
    d. You, sail around the world, single handed? (Concern)
    e. Her, send a hit-man after me? (Anger / Fear)
    f. Him... Come out? Well, good for him. (Respect)
    g. Me, be an Orioles fan? Don’t insult me. (Offense)
    h. Morning-after pill? Over the counter? Finally! (Joy / Relief)
    i. Me? Reconcile with her? Over my dead body! (Refusal / Indignation)
    j. Me, drink and drive! How dare you!? (Protest)
    k. Well, well, well... His saintliness, in prison? (Schadenfreude)

Theoretically, one could argue that the amusement in (16b) is a result of incredulity, but that is an unnecessary distraction. The fact that a person may feel skeptical in the face of incongruous facts is no more to the point than the fact that it is equally possible to feel surprised. That should be no reason to argue that the construction conveys surprise or to call it the Surprise Response Construction.

There are at least a few advantages of the interpretation of incongruous parts over the incredulity response reading. First, incongruousness is a meaning general enough to encompass the wide range of expressive meanings observed in possible uses of the IRC, a sample of which is shown in (16). Second, unlike incredulity, the reading of incongruousness
can be inferred from the formal properties of the IRC, which contrary to widespread belief are not as arbitrary or idiosyncratic as they are claimed to be in the literature. The next section will focus on how the reading of two conflicting parts can be derived from what we call a binary composition of the construction.

3.3.3 Arguments in Favor of an Iconic Binary

I. Intonation Units andSegmentation

The subject and the predicate of an utterance of incredulity co-incide with what Chafe (1994) terms intonation units. These are spurts of speech that Chafe defines as “functional segmentations of discourse” (1994, p. 57). Intonation units are usually separated by pauses, but their delimitations are also signaled by intonation and stress. This form of an incredulity response utterance made up of two intonation units is not accidental or arbitrary. It is not too much to speculate that it represents an iconic reflection of a degree of cognitive dissonance experienced by the speaker in the process of regarding the two units. As Chafe argues, intonation units not only “provide a useful way of segmenting speech, they are profitably viewed as expressing constantly changing foci of consciousness, and hence their relevance to understanding the flow of thought.” (1994, p. 675). Here, the segmentation of discourse into two units signals the disjointed relationship between the pieces of information carried by the subject and the predicate.

Taylor argues that “the ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’ need to be spoken on separate tone units, usually with a rising (/), querying intonation.” (2012, p. 86) Typically, an utterance conveying incredulity will have the form illustrated in example (18a) below. However, it may be wrong to think of the rising intonation as standard equipment of the construction. The division into two intonation units will just as well be preserved even with falling intonation (\), as long as the two constituents are not uttered in a single breath (18b).

(18)  a. Me?/ Smoke?/
      b. Me… \ smoke.\ Right.\
Whether the pitch is rising or falling, the division into intonation units is relevant here, given that they function as “basic prosodic units of information flow in natural spontaneous spoken discourse.” (Matsumoto, 2003, p. 20). By highlighting a split between the subject and predicate, the intonation unit-based form of the construction conveys a lack of flow (≠) between the information contained in the two parts of discourse.

(19) Him… ≠ wear a tux?

II. Oblique subject and nonfinite predicate

Another hallmark of the IRC, the strange pairing of the oblique form of the subject and the nonfinite predicate—which can also be viewed as a feature of the binary composition of the construction—has been held up as an example of an idiosyncrasy justifying the IRC’s construction status. For example, in his description of the formal properties of the IRC, Taylor states that “...the combination of properties exhibited by the incredulity response expressions turns out to be largely unique to this construction.” (2002, p. 569) Tomasello remarks that IRC sentences “look like degenerate declarative sentences, lacking tense and subject-verb agreement, and with the peculiar property that the ‘subject’, if a pronoun, appears in oblique form” (Tomasello, 2014, p. 171). The infinitive predicate has been the focus of much research, and many authors have sought to account for its peculiar distribution. For example, Etxepare and Grohmann (2002) analyzed the IRC as being an instance of Adult Root Infinitive (ARI).

At first glance, the form of the predicate and the subject do seem rather idiosyncratic and unique to the construction. However, they turn out to be less irregular if viewed as an iconic means of suggesting a disruption of the subject-predicate flow. Like in the case of the path interpretation in the x’s way construction discussed above, here too the meaning can be viewed as being a reflection of pragmatic mechanisms. The logical disruption can be viewed as an interpretation following from Levinson’s Manner Heuristic “What is said in an abnormal way isn’t normal; or marked message indicates marked situation.” (2000, p. 33) That is, if a typical nominal subject followed by an unmarked finite predicate is a normal way of saying something normal, then an abnormal predicate is a heuristic signal that
something about the message is not normal or more specifically, what isn’t
normal is the pairing of the ideas conveyed by the subject and the predicate.
In fact, the disruption in question can also be hinted at by means of other
forms of the verb, as long as they are non-finite, which is precisely what can
be observed: Although the infinitive is by far the most commonly attested
manifestation of the IRC, the construction’s idiosyncrasy (if it can be called
an idiosyncrasy at all) consists in its resistance to tensed verbs. As a result,
any tenseless form will do, because it will then function as an iconic signal
of the subject-predicate clash. In (20a), the verb is in participial form and in
(20b), it is missing altogether.

(20)  a. Him, cooking? Yeah, right.
    b. Nat King Cole sings every Christmastime, “Chestnuts roasting
       on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose” . . . An open fire,
       in my house? (Philip Roth, Portnoy’s Complaint)

English is not exceptional in this regard, as other languages too allow the
predicate to be other than infinitive. In Czech (21a) and Polish (21b), the
verb can appear in the gerundive form or even as a cognate noun:

(21)  a. On a pít / piti / opilost!
      He and drink−inf / drinking / drunkenness!
      ‘Him drink / drinking / drunkenness!’

    b. On i pić / picie / pijaństwo!
      He and drink−inf / drinking / drunkenness!
      ‘Him drink / drinking / drunkenness!’

Similarly, the oblique argument in the subject position in the English
IRC is not as bizarre as it is portrayed. Quirk et al. (1985) explain that
“the objective pronoun is the unmarked case form, used in the absence of
positive reasons for using the subjective form” (p. 338) and the positive
reasons include a finite predicate. It is a rather obvious fact that “whether
or not a clause is finite in turn determines the kind of subject it can have, in
that finite clauses can have a nominative pronoun like he as their subject,
but nonfinite clauses cannot.” (Radford, 2009, p. 10) When the predicate is nonfinite (22a) or has been elided (22b-e), the subject pronoun appears in oblique form.

(22) a. Even with *them* shouting, I still couldn’t hear anything.
    b. It’s either *us* or *them*.
    c. Let’s take turns. / *Me* first. (cf. *I* go first)
    d. Who’s there? / *Me*! (cf. *I* am.)
    e. I like her. / *Me* too. (cf. So do *I*.)

Interestingly, English is not the only language with a default accusative. In Danish too an oblique subject is required in the absence of a finite predicate, so in the Danish IRC, the oblique pronoun is used (23):

(23) *Hende/*Hun? Drikke sig fuld?  
 *Her/*She? Drink REFL drunk?  
 ‘Her? Get drunk?’

And obviously languages that do not apply the accusative to subjects without tensed predicates do not do so in the IRC either. So at least as far as the oblique subject is concerned, it is a consequence of more general rules of the English syntax. Contrary to Michaelis’ claims, the construction owes more than just “little or nothing to the ordinary English syntax or predication and subordination.” (Michaelis, 2010, p. 169)

**III. Conjunction**

In some languages, the construction features an element that may outwardly appear even more aberrant than the oblique subject and the tenseless predicate. In some Germanic languages (24a-b), some Slavic languages (24c-e) and a handful of others, the construction includes the conjunction ‘and’ between the subject and the predicate. As in the case of the features discussed above, here too, the conjunction makes more sense if viewed as an iconic analogue of the sense of iconic separation between the information conveyed by the subject and the predicate. Below, the use of the conjunction is illustrated by examples from five languages:
The claim that a conjunction may serve to signal separation may seem counterintuitive. After all, *and* normally serves to conjoin, not disjoin, but this is true under normal circumstances, where it appears between two elements of the same status (e.g. noun with noun, predicate with predicate, etc.). In the IRC, the conjunction is evidently “out of place”, probably its only such distribution where it is regularly found between two asymmetric constituents. Taken iconically, when two discrepant elements are conjoined, treated as if they were on a par, the effect is that of juxtaposition highlighting stark contrast.

In some languages, the irregular conjunction can be emphasized through additional means. For example, in Georgian, Polish, Russian, and Turkish the conjoined subject and predicate can each be preceded by the pronoun ‘where’, as in examples (25a-d). The use of the pronoun creates an impression of spatial separation, as if the two juxtaposed ideas were situated in two different locations. Additionally, in Russian, where the conjunction is optional, the iconic separation of the subject and predicate can be further
supported by the subjunctive (Ksenia Shagal, p.c.), as is the case in (25e).

(25) a. Sad eg da sad tsignis tsera?  
     Where he and where book write?  
     ‘Him, write a book?’  

b. Gdzie ja i gdzie gotowanie!  
   Where I and where cooking!  
   ‘Me, cook!’

c. Gde ya i gde gotovka!  
   Where I and where cooking!  
   ‘Me, cook!’

d. Wen ana w wen ttabh?  
   Where I and where cooking?  
   ‘Me? Cook?’

e. Čtoby ya (i) yezdil piyanym!  
   That I (and) drive-*SUBJUNCTIVE* drunk!  
   ‘Me, drink and drive!’

**IV. Inversion**

Finally, the sense of partition conveyed by the features discussed above can also be achieved by means of inversion, a possibility available in probably all languages where the IRC is attested. The point here is that elements can only be inverted around a pivot-like divide. Here, this option is illustrated in the following examples:

(26) a. What, cook lunch, her?  

   What? Read? He?  
   ‘What? Read? Him?’

c. Čto! Yezdit’ piyanym! Ya!?  
   What! Drive drunk! I!?  
   ‘What! Drink and drive! Me!?’

d. Mentir? Yo?  
   Lie? I?  
   ‘Lie? Me?’
4. Pragmatic Strengthening

One could go on reviewing grammatical constructions in this fashion and show each one to have less contentful semantics than is claimed in the literature. This, however, would be to dismiss only known cases, with the theoretical possibility being that there may exist yet undiscovered examples of constructions whose meanings may in fact contravene familiar kinds of semantic content found in closed-class forms. While it may never be possible to rule out such potential cases of semantically rich constructions, it is necessary to at least attempt to demonstrate that there are no mechanisms capable of endowing closed-class items with such meanings.

The only apparent possibility for richer meanings to actually occur in grammatical forms is to suppose that while some colorful meanings start out as conversational implicatures, they may eventually turn into entailments. Such developments have been known to occur through what is termed pragmatic strengthening (Traugott, 1988). Pragmatic strengthening, which can be viewed as the opposite of desemanticization, is a process whereby “a conversational implicature, that is, an implicature arising in context and hence cancelable and nondetachable ... becomes ‘semanticized’ ... that is, assimilated as part of the conventional meaning of the word.” (Brinton, 1996, p. 56) This pervasive process is observed in countless examples of forms whose meanings evolved from conversational implicatures to conventional implicatures. For example, the adverb *hwilum* ‘at times’ became the temporal connective *while*, which subsequently acquired the concessive function (Traugott 1988: 407). This was possible when the
connective *while* was used to juxtapose two events standing in some logical opposition to each other. Because pragmatic strengthening seems to provide an open door to the theoretically impossible meanings becoming in fact possible at some future point, any claim that rules out excessive semantic capabilities in schematic constructions should contend with this challenge.

However, there are reasons to believe that pragmatic strengthening does not represent a problem for the present account. Studies focusing on pragmatic strengthening report only two kinds of meanings that can emerge as a result of pragmatic strengthening. First, an item can acquire meanings that are otherwise familiar examples of grammatical meanings, such as tense reference. It has been pointed out that volitional verbs tend to take on future tense meanings. This is the case of the English *willan* (‘want/wish’) becoming the future tense auxiliary *will* (Bybee, et al., 1994) or the Serbian and Croatian *hteti/htjeti* (‘want’) becoming the future tense marker (Corbett & Browne, 2009), as in the following example, where the verb clearly expresses future rather than intention.

(27) *Hoću* li *dugo* čekati?
*Want*$_{1SG}$ if long wait?
‘Will I wait a long time?’

Second, an item may acquire non-truth-conditional functions involved in construal operations, as is the case of the concessive *while* (Traugott, 1988), causal *since* (Molenc, 2007), concessive *albeit* (Sorva, 2007), or the scalar *even* expressing a ‘reversal of expectations’ (Traugott 1988). These are markers that convey the speaker’s attitude or perception of the proposition. Traugott sums up the tendency by observing that “[m]eanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief-state/attitude toward the situation”. They can include “the speaker belief in the truth or probability of the proposition” or “some surprise factor on the speaker’s part” (1988: 410).

These two kinds of meanings are precisely those that are commonly found in grammatical forms. In other words, the effects of pragmatic strengthening are hardly surprising. They represent meanings that can be predicted based on what we already know about the semantic content of
grams. The sense of predictability is further enhanced by the cross-linguistic recurrence of the same pragmatic-strengthening motifs, whose range is by no means unlimited. As Bybee (2010, p. 171) notes, “inferences that are preferred in context are often very similar across cultures”. For example, the evolution of future tense forms mentioned above is found to have occurred in other non-related languages too. Future tense originating from lexical items with volitional meanings has also evolved in Syrian Arabic, where the verbal noun bi-wuddi (‘I want/desire’) has developed into the b-prefix marking the future (Jarad, 2013).

One example of non-truth conditional content that may theoretically become conventionalized is what is referred to as ‘expressive meanings’. “Expressed meaning most characteristically conveys some sort of emotion or attitude—doubt, certainty, hope, expectation, surprise, contempt, disappointment, admiration, flippancy, seriousness, and so on.” (Cruse, 1986, p. 274). These are viewed in opposition to propositional meanings. Perhaps the most obvious difference between expressed and propositional meanings is that the former meanings are underspecified, relying heavily on context, intonation, and facial expression for precise interpretation. Cruse illustrates this point by means of the following examples.

(28)  a. Hasn’t he arrived yet?
     b. Has he arrived already?
     c. Is he still here? (examples 26-28 in (Cruse, 1986, p. 274))

He explains that “[i]n appropriate contexts, still, yet and already can express emotion: [they] would most likely express surprise.” (Cruse, 1986, p. 274) However, the key words here are “in appropriate contexts” and “most likely”— examples (28a-c) can also be imagined as being uttered by a speaker expressing anger, hope, relief, and indeed a considerable array of conceivable emotions, each depending on a range of paralinguistic features to disambiguate the communicative intention. It would be absurd to propose that the adverbs yet, still, and already are dedicated to only one of these emotions. Similarly in the case of the Incredulity Response Construction, while a range of expressive meanings can be conveyed, some of which are listed in example (19), it is certainly not the case that any single one of
them is the meaning of the construction. All these conceivable expressive meanings that the construction can trigger will probably forever remain in the area of implicature underspecified and vague enough to accommodate a wealth of expressive reactions.

What the studies on pragmatic strengthening do not report are rich truth-conditional (non-construal) meanings like the ‘difficulty’ reading proposed for the way construction or the ‘manipulation/mental coercion’ reading ascribed to the into-gerund construction (Jocelyn sweet-talked Kevin into buying her a chihuahua.), much less their cross-linguistic attestations. Indeed, authors who champion pragmatic strengthening confine its scope to grammatical meanings. For example, Brinton and Traugott (2005, p. 68) state that “content is not enriched, but is ‘bleached’ (it gradually becomes backgrounded as grammatical meanings are enriched).” Thus, if pragmatic strengthening is incapable of infusing grammatical forms with richer meanings, there do not seem to exist any theoretical reasons to suppose that such meanings are in fact possible. In other words, pragmatic strengthening does not provide a means for endowing syntactic constructions with overly expansive meanings.

5. Conclusion

One could place a bold wager that no rich semantic or pragmatic effects proposed in constructionist analyses are true contributions of schematic grammatical constructions. As closed-class forms, schematic constructions are simply unable to convey more than what constructions have been traditionally known to convey. Although the Construction Grammar framework deserves the credit for drawing attention to the semantics of constructions, numerous semantic characterizations proposed within the framework are rather beyond belief, precisely because they are at odds with the implications of the lexicon-syntax distinction. The distinction, which has been de facto consigned to history, may still be very relevant to constructionist analyses.

In this study, I have attempted to demonstrate that contrary to recent descriptions of rich semantic content of some constructions, the meanings of closed-class forms are subject to fairly severe restrictions. There are
limits on the kinds of meanings closed-class forms can convey, and certain exotic meanings pointed out in various analyses of constructions are implausibly untypical of closed-class forms. Specifically, closed-class forms tend to convey non-truth conditional meanings rather than elements of propositions. As Talmy puts it,

Together, the grammatical elements of a sentence determine the majority of the structure of the CR (cognitive representation), while the lexical elements together contribute the majority of its content. The grammatical specifications in a sentence, thus, provide a conceptual framework or, imagistically, a skeletal structure or scaffolding for the conceptual material that is lexically specified. (Talmy, 2000, p. 21)

The above should be treated as a hypothesis and above all, a very tentative approximation. Of course, there are elements of truth-conditional content conveyed by closed-class forms. However, purely truth-conditional meanings like ‘difficulty’, ‘obstacle’ or ‘bodily harm’ are saliently too graphic to be plausible meanings of closed-class forms.

When meanings observed in some constructions do seem to contribute more contentful meanings, these can be accounted for in terms of either lexical material embedded in a construction or its formal properties. Lexical inclusions found in constructions and their formal aspects act as auxiliary extensions that can diversify the range of meanings available to grammatical forms.

Such lexical-style meanings would be unexpected semantic contributions of closed-class forms. Even if they started out as conversational implicatures, they would be unlikely to become lexicalized as entailments through pragmatic strengthening.

References


Pragmatic Strengthening Is Not Strong Enough


