

A Note on the Because X Construction: With Special Reference to the X-Element

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A Note on the *Because* X Construction: With Special Reference to the X-Element*

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1. Introduction

This article is concerned with what I call the *because* X construction (e.g. (1)), focusing particularly on the elements that frequently appear in the X-slot.

- (1) I cannot go out with you today because homework.

The construction is notably anomalous in syntactic form. Canonically, the lexeme *because* is followed by a finite clause (*because I have a lot of homework*) or a prepositional phrase headed by *of* (*because of a lot of homework*). In (1), the bare noun *homework* appears right after the lexeme. Not only nouns but also words of other syntactic categories appear in the X-slot. At the same time, however, not every kind of word can appear in the slot. Schnoebelen (2014) counts tweets involving the target construction and summarizes the kind of part of speech slotted in X as in (2):

(2)

Part of speech	Word counts \geq 50
Noun (<i>people, spoilers</i>)	32.02%
Compressed clause (<i>ilysm</i>)	21.78%
Adjective (<i>ugly, tired</i>)	16.04%
Interjection (<i>swag, omg</i>)	14.71%
Agreement (<i>yeah, no</i>)	12.97%
Pronoun (<i>you, me</i>)	2.45%

(Schnoebelen 2014)

The table in (2) indicates that nouns are used most frequently, followed by compressed clauses, adjectives, interjections, and so on.¹ A question arises here: why are they used frequently in the construction? Notice also that pronouns are used far less than the

other categories. Another question to ask is therefore why pronouns are rarely used.² These two questions may be integrated as follows: why is *because* in this construction (with its categorial status left unspecified) so selective about words that follow? The present paper answers this question based on a unified concept. More specifically, by claiming that the word in the X-slot functions as a private expression in the sense of Hirose (2000), I will explain the reasons for the question raised above.

This article is organized as follows. After establishing the central claim that the X element serves as a private expression in section 2, section 3 accounts for why nouns and adjectives appear frequently while pronouns do not appear in the X -slot. Sections 4 and 5, respectively, account for the frequent distributions of interjections and agreement words. Section 6 wraps up the argument.

2. The X-element as a Subpart of a Clause and as an Embedded Private Expression

This section reveals that the word in the X-slot serves as a private expression in Hirose's (2000) terms. Before that in section 2.1, I review my earlier analysis on the relationship between the *because* X construction and the canonical *because*-clause construction.

2.1. Kanetani (2015): Relations of *Because* X with Its Clausal Counterparts

Positing inheritance links (cf. Goldberg 1995), Kanetani (2015) describes the relationship between the *because* X construction (e.g. (1)) and the canonical causal *because*-clause construction (e.g. *I cannot go out with you today because I have a lot of homework*) as in (3):³

- (3) *because* X construction
 instance link ↓ ↑subpart link
 causal *because*-clause construction

An instance link is posited “when a particular construction is a special case of another construction” (Goldberg 1995:79), and a subpart link is posited “when one construction is a proper subpart of another construction” (ibid.:78). Crucially, “an instance link

always entails an inverse subpart link” (ibid.:81). That is, the causal *because*-clause construction is a special case of the *because X* construction in that causal *because*-clauses elaborate what *because X* is intended to convey. The *because X* construction in turn is a proper subpart of the causal *because*-clause construction. Take the following pair of constructs for example:

- (4) a. I cannot go out with you today because homework. (= (1))
b. I cannot go out with you today because I have a lot of homework.

Sentences (4a, b) are instances of the *because X* construction and the causal *because*-clause construction, respectively. The clause *I have a lot of homework* in (4b) is an instance of the actual use of the word *homework* in (4a), or one of concrete elaborations of the word. The clause *I have a lot of homework* in (4b), on the other hand, subsumes the word *homework* as its subpart. In short, nouns and adjectives are slotted in the X, metonymically representing the meaning of a clause containing them.

These relations are straightforward when it is a content word, such as a noun or adjective, that follows *because*. However, when an interjection or agreement word — another type of element that also frequently appears in the construction — comes to the X-slot, it is not so easy to observe such relations. Consider (5), for example:

- (5) Admittedly, not in the UK yet, *because aargh!* (twitter)

It is difficult to elaborate specific clauses that contain the interjection *aargh*. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* gives the following definition to the word *aargh*: “used to express fear, anger, or other strong emotion” (OALD⁸). Based on this lexical meaning, we may construe the meaning of sentence (5) as follows:

- (6) Admittedly, I am not in the UK yet, because something extremely bad has happened.

This paraphrase does not explicitly include the word *aargh*, but this word can evoke the propositional content conveyed by the clause in (6). Kanetani (2015) therefore claims that as far as the element in the X-slot can evoke a propositional content such

as that conveyed by a clause, *because X* can be considered as a (semantically) proper subpart of the corresponding *because*-clause. Thus, sentence (5) subsumes the meaning of sentence (6); the former metonymically represents the meaning of the latter.

In sum, whether or not *because* is followed by a content word like *homework* in (1), metonymy plays an important role in understanding what the utterance means. We should note that it is the hearer that reconstructs and understands the message, or the propositional content, from the word in the X-slot. What then does the speaker do by simply saying, for example, *homework* (in (1)), *aargh* (in (5)), etc.? In the following subsection, I will give an answer to this question.

2.2. X as a Private Expression

To provide an answer for the question raised in the last subsection, and to give an integrated account of the elements that can and cannot occur in the X-slot, I assume that a word in the X-slot functions as a private expression in Hirose's (2000) terms.

Hirose distinguishes private expression acts from public expression acts. The former is "an act of linguistic expression with no intention of communication (Hirose 2000:1625)" while the latter is "an act of linguistic expression with the intention of communication" (ibid.). Due to the lack of the speaker's intention of communication, private expressions correspond to "the non-communicative, thought-expressing, function of language" (ibid.:1624). As an illustration, observe the following examples cited from Konno (2012):

- (7) Hearing from Tom that Bronsky went to the party in a tuxedo,
 a. Mary said "Him wear a tuxedo?!"
 b. ?? Mary told him "Him wear a tuxedo?!"

(Konno 2012:28)

Konno (2012, 2015) observes that "the Mad Magazine utterance *Him wear a tuxedo?!* can function as a direct speech complement to *say*, but not to *tell*" (Konno 2015:146), and this contrast shows that "the Mad Magazine construction functions exclusively as a private expression" (ibid.). Private expressions are thus used to express, rather than communicate, the speaker's thoughts.

With this distinction in mind, we can give an answer to the question as to what

the speaker does when he/she uses the *because X* construction. The speaker embeds a private expression in a public expression. More specifically, the word in the X-slot is a private expression, while the construction as a whole may be a public expression, as illustrated in (8):

$$(8) \quad [_{\text{Pub}} \textit{because} <_{\text{Priv}} X>]^4$$

Crucially, just because the expression in the X-slot is a private expression does not mean that the whole construction that contains it is not necessarily a public expression. Schnoebelen (2014) reports that 36% of the tweets involving the *because X* construction are intended to interact with one or more other users, suggesting that “the construction skews towards ‘interpersonal’”.⁵ That is, the speaker of the *because X* construction can have an addressee in mind, even though the word in the X-slot is a private expression, i.e. one with no addressee intended. In what follows, I will argue the relationship between the element in the X-slot being a private expression and the syntactic categories that appear in that slot.

3. Nouns and Adjectives

As discussed in section 2.1, a word in the X-slot is a proper subpart of a sentence as an elaboration of the word. Given that, the reason that nouns and adjectives appear frequently in the X-slot can be accounted as follows. Since the element slotted in X is a private expression, the speaker chooses the most salient word from the proposition that s/he would like to convey. What is “salient” may be determined subjectively by the speaker at the time of utterance. According to Cruse (2011:267f.), the primary function of open-set items such as nouns and adjectives is “to carry the meaning of a sentence”, whereas the principal function of closed-set items such as prepositions and determiners is “to articulate the grammatical structure of sentences”, and hence, words in the former group “typically carry the burden of the semantic content of utterances”. Indeed, as we observed in section 2.1, nouns and adjectives constitute a clause that conveys a proposition. Therefore, the hearer can reconstruct a proposition containing these words as its part; the PART FOR ALL (i.e. WORD FOR CLAUSE) metonymy is at work on the part of the hearer in reconstructing the proposition.

3.1. Restrictions on Nominals

It is noteworthy that there are some restrictions to the nominal category that appears in the X-slot (cf. McCulloch 2012). McCulloch (2012) observes that the *because* X construction “really must consist of a bare noun, not a noun with a determiner or an adjective”, so she considers the following examples ruled out:

- (9) * I can't come out tonight because essay/my essay/an essay/this essay.⁶
(McCulloch 2012)

This fact is related to another restriction on the nominal category in the X-slot. As shown in the table in (2) above, pronouns rarely appear in the construction. In her more recent observation, McCulloch (2014) observes that *because* cannot be followed by a pronoun, as shown in (10):

- (10) ?? I can't go to the party because you. (McCulloch 2014)

That is, pronouns are not (cf. McCulloch 2014), or at most rarely (cf. Schnoebelen 2014), used in the construction.⁷

These two restrictions on the nominals follow from the fact that the element in the X-slot is a private expression. Let us first consider why determiners are not compatible with the construction. According to Quirk et al. (1985:253), “when used in discourse, noun phrases refer to the linguistic or situational context. The kind of reference a particular noun phrase has depends on its determinative element, i.e. the item which ‘determines’ it”. The nominal that appears in the X-slot is a private expression, which has no intention of communication. Therefore, as long as its intended reference is known to the speaker, it does not need the determination in the sense of Quirk et al.

Next, why are pronouns incompatible with the construction? In terms of Hirose's (2000) dichotomy between private and public expressions, (English) personal pronouns are primarily defined as public expressions, which may be diverted to represent the private self (cf. Hirose 2000, 2015). It is worthwhile quoting Benveniste (1971:224f.), who says, “consciousness of self is only possible when it is experienced by contrast. I use I when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies that recipro-

cally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*" (underline mine). In short, only relatively to the others can the personal pronoun be defined and used. This makes personal pronouns not suitable to the X-slot, the slot that requires a private expression.

Let us observe some supporting arguments for the view of personal pronouns as private expressions. Cappelle (2014) investigates "Jeromese", the language use of Jerome, a character in the Flemish comic book *Suske en Wiske*. Jerome speaks in a shorthand with his eyes closed and does not use first and second person pronouns. Cappelle considers Jeromese as "a collection of for the largest part private utterances", and analyzes it as follows:

Those closed eyes seem to fit his language use, which is actually strangest of all at the level of pragmatics, that is, as regards language in interaction. If there's anything that Jerom doesn't master, it's the ability to see himself as an I in relation to an addressee, a *you*. Just as he often [objectivizes] himself as Jeromy, he usually talks to another in the third person, so not '*You gotta look behind you, Bik*' but '*Bik look behind him*'. (Cappelle 2014; translation also Cappelle's)

In short, a person like Jerome, who has no addressee in mind when speaking, fails to use personal pronouns appropriately, because such a person cannot relativize him/herself in relation to others.

Likewise, autistic children cannot use personal pronouns appropriately. Jordan (1989) reports that autistic children use proper names for self-reference. Those with autism are known to have difficulties in social interaction and communication, and especially children with autism, according to NICE (2013), frequently experience a range of cognitive and language problems, including difficulty in understanding other people.

In sum, a bare noun, which is a constituent of a clause, appears in the X-slot as a private expression, but nominals considered public expressions, i.e. noun phrases with a determiner and pronouns, are not used in the construction.

4. Interjections

This section explores the reason why interjections appear frequently in the construction. As we saw in the introductory section, interjections appear the third most

frequently after nouns and adjectives (except compressed clauses) in the X-slot (see (2)). Let us first observe how interjections are characterized in some reference grammar books:

- (11) Interjections are:
- a. “purely emotive words” (Quirk et al. 1985:853)
 - b. “serve to express emotion” (Trask 1993:144)
 - c. “have expressive rather than propositional meaning”
(Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1361)

Based on the descriptions in (11a-c), we can characterize interjections as words that merely express the speaker’s emotion rather than convey propositional meanings, and in this sense they function as private expressions. The answer to the question as to why interjections are used frequently is thus as follows: being private expressions, interjections fit the frame of the *because X* construction.

Given that interjections are elements outside the proposition that a clause may express, they do not constitute a clause in the way that nouns and adjectives do. Then, the next question to ask is how the hearer can reconstruct the message from the utterance as in (5), repeated here as in (12):

- (12) Admittedly, not in the UK yet, *because aargh!* (= (5))

As seen in section 2.1, Kanetani (2015) argues that based on the lexical meaning of the interjection *aargh*, the meaning of *because aargh* is understood as something like *because something extremely bad has happened*. In this relation, Padilla Cruz (2009) investigates cases where speakers replace a clause in a subordinate clause by interjections and argues that “the hearer could recover the missing clause using contextual and/or encyclopedic information” (ibid.:190-191). For instance, if one hears sentence (13) uttered, one will understand the meaning of the sentence as something like (14a-c) according to the context where the sentence is uttered, or the knowledge about when people generally use *oh*.

- (13) She is so beautiful that ... oh!

- (14) a. She is so beautiful that I like/love her.
b. She is so beautiful that I have fallen in love with her.
c. She is so beautiful that I would very much like to marry her.

(Padilla Cruz 2009:190)

Recall that the dictionary definition of the word *aargh* quoted in section 2.1 starts with *used to express...*, i.e., the definition tells us when the interjection is used. Thus, Kanetani's (2015) claim is essentially the same as Padilla Cruz's (2009) in that they both consider the meaning of an interjection as understood along with the general knowledge of when the interjection is used. My earlier analysis, however, fails to distinguish the roles of speaker and hearer. As Padilla Cruz says, it is hearers who understand the utterance in question based on such knowledge. Speakers do not consider such a thing; they only express their emotion.

Thus, using an interjection, speakers simply express their emotion to be slotted in X. This is compatible with the constructional characteristic that the word in the X-slot is a private expression. The utterance may be reconstructed on the part of hearers with aid of contextual and/or encyclopedic information.

5. Agreement Words

So far, I have accounted for the distributions of nouns, adjectives and interjections. The last category that appears at a relatively high frequency is the agreement words, e.g. *yeah*, *no*. Behind these words lie certain propositions. Agreement words such as *yes* or *yeah* endorse their being true, while disagreement words such as *no* asserts their being false. With these words, only the truth value of a propositional content is expressed with other details underspecified.

To maintain this claim, let us consider Nakau's (1994) hierarchical semantic model and observe the internal structure of a proposition. Nakau describes the structure of a proposition as follows:⁸

- (15) [PROP₄ POL [PROP₃ TNS [PROP₂ ASP [PROP₁ PRED (ARG₁, ARG₂, ..., ARG_n)]]]]]

(adapted from Nakau 1994:15)

As shown in (15), according to Nakau, there are four strata of propositions (i.e. PROP1-PROP4). The most basic level (i.e. PROP1), which Nakau calls “the core proposition,” consists only of the combination of the predicate and its argument(s), over which propositional operators such as aspect, tense, and polarity, are added, yielding more complex, composite propositions (i.e. PROP2-PROP4). This model lays out at the outermost stratum the polarity operator, which defines the truth value of the proposition. Thus, a proposition with the truth value entails the existence of the rest of the structure, since the polarity operates over PROP3, which is the composition of the core proposition and the propositional operators in the lower strata.

The word in the X-slot is a subjective, thought-expressing expression, so much so that the details of the proposition can be left unspecified as long as they are known to the speaker. With the help of the contextual information, for example, the hearer can reconstruct the underspecified proposition. In this sense, the mechanism that works between the speaker’s expressing and the hearer’s construing the utterance is essentially similar to the one observed in section 4.

6. Conclusion

In this article I have investigated the *because X* construction, focusing particularly on the characteristic of the element in the X-slot as a private expression. As I noted in section 2.2, however, the whole construction may be a public expression (cf. Schnoebelen 2014), and hence, the structure of the construction in terms of public vs. private expression may be described as follows:

$$(16) \quad [_{\text{Pub}} \textit{because} <_{\text{Priv}} X>] \quad (= (8))$$

As shown in (16), the word or phrase in the X-slot is taken as an expression of the speaker’s thought or emotion. Content words such as nouns and adjectives are parts of a clausal proposition. Interjections simply express the speaker’s emotion. Agreement words only designate the truth value of a certain proposition that the speaker has in mind. Such private expressions embedded in the construction are delivered to the hearer, as the construction itself may be used as a public expression. The hearer reconstructs the message via the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy (in the case of nouns and

adjectives) or contextual and/or encyclopedic information (in the cases of interjections and agreement words). As for pronouns like *you*, they serve as public expressions, which makes them difficult to be embedded in the X-slot; this is why many native speakers of English take a sentence like *I can't go to the party because you* (= (10)) as unacceptable.

While I have put forward the nature of the X-element as a private expression embedded in a public expression, I did not consider what it means or what its (interpersonal) function can be, leaving it for future research. Another question that remains unsolved is whether contextual and/or encyclopedic information used to reconstruct the message from interjections and agreement words can be treated in the framework of metonymy.

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Notes

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- 1 I will eliminate compressed clauses from my analysis, since they are in essence clauses used in the computer mediated communication. For example, if you tweet *because ilysm*, you are saying *because I love you so much*.
 - 2 McCulloch (2014) observes that “*because* is weird with a pronoun”, and considers the following sentence unacceptable:

(i) ??I can’t go to the party because you. (McCulloch 2014)

 The low frequency in the table in (2) and McCulloch’s intuition seem interrelated. I will treat this issue later in section 3.1.
 - 3 Kanetani (2008) proposes two schematic constructions where *because* is used: the causal *because*-clause construction and the reasoning *because*-clause construction. Roughly speaking, the former expresses Sweetser’s (1990) content causal relation, while the meaning of the latter construction is epistemic and speech-act causal relations. As argued in Kanetani (2015), *because* X expressions are skewed towards the content causal meaning; the reasoning *because*-clause construction is not taken into consideration here.

- 4 I use Hirose's (2000) notations of private expression represented in angle brackets with the subscript 'Priv' <_{Priv}...> and public expression represented in square brackets with the subscript 'Pub' [_{Pub}...].
- 5 Specifically, Schnoebelen considers those tweets involving @-signs "interpersonal", because this symbol is used when the tweet is aimed at a specific person or persons as a reply to them.
- 6 McCulloch's (2012) example contains the bare noun *essay*, which is, presumably, mistakenly included; otherwise she has misplaced *. What is important is that she does comment as I quote above.
- 7 Schnoebelen (2014) observes that pronouns do appear in the X-slot. For example, he counts 167 tokens of *because you* out of 23583 tweets (ca. 0.7%). Since the pronoun is a closed class category with a few members, the total number of occurrence may well be small. However, the category's closed status cannot solely account for the low frequency in the use of pronouns in the X-slot. The agreement word (e.g. *yeah, no*; see section 5) is also a closed class with a few members, but words of this category appear far more frequently than the pronoun.
- 8 The abbreviations used below are as follows: PROP1-4 = propositions1-4; POL = polarity; TNS = tense; ASP = aspect; PRED = predicate; ARG_{1-n} = arguments selected by PRED.