English Language and Linguistics (2025), **29:** 252–271
doi:10.1017/S1360674325000188

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Extravagant much? Syntactic creativity because Wayne's World

Alexander Bergs and Meike Pentrel

Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Osnabrück University, Neuer Graben 40, 49069 Osnabrück, Germany
Corresponding author: Alexander Bergs; Email: abergs@uos.de

(Received 16 September 2024; revised 14 March 2025; accepted 17 March 2025)

Abstract

This article is a theoretically oriented discussion of noticeable creative syntactic innovations. On the basis of three case studies (the 'X-*much*' construction (*racist much?*), the 'extrasentential *not*' construction (*I like this movie. Not.*) and the '*because* X' construction (*Can't come to the party, because headache.*)), we explore the idea that language users may deliberately create novel syntactic constructions by recycling and creatively blending existing constructions. At least two of the constructions discussed here (X *much* and extrasentential *not*) are probably not products of informal, natural daily language use, but may have originated (or at least have been propagated) in well-crafted, scripted media language geared towards younger audiences, who in turn have spread these constructions in their communities and beyond. *Because* X seems to have taken a slightly different route. The main motivations for these three rather noticeable creative innovations may be the Maxim of Extravagance and the Maxim of Wittiness, in Keller's (1994) sense. We suspect that *because* X is perhaps less noticeable, or deviant, and pragmatically more complex than the other two constructions, which provides their speakers with more 'syntactic fireworks'.

Keywords: creativity; Construction Grammar; extravagance; syntactic innovations; media language

1. Introduction

Creativity in language may be seen as a continuum between what Sampson (2016) characterized as F-Creativity (Fixed Creativity) and E-Creativity (Extending Creativity). F-Creativity takes existing rules and applies them in such a way that novel (linguistic) output is produced. If there is a rule that says that a sentence can be built with a subject noun phrase plus a verb phrase that comprises a transitive verb and an object noun phrase, speakers can form an endless number of sentences, simply by appropriately filling the individual slots: *John ate the pizza*; *Mary kicked the ball*; *Peter saw a ghost* etc. Similarly, relative clauses in English can be used recursively, i.e. a relative clause may contain a relative clause, which may contain another relative clause, and so on. This, at least in theory, allows language users to build an infinite number of sentences (cf. Adger 2019: 168). Sampson (2016) characterizes this notion of creativity as Fixed Creativity, as it is 'merely' the

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

productive application of rules. For Sampson, this resembles simple maths, where the same sort of rules that tells us that 3×4 equals 12 allows us to calculate 2356×784 (...it's 1,847,104) even when we've never done that before. Sampson wonders whether we really want to call this 'creativity' in the original sense.

A little bit further down the cline we find a somewhat different but related kind of 'creative' language use, when language users apply existing rules in contexts where they typically should not be applied. For example, in (1) we see an intransitive verb, *smile*, in a transitive context (*smile her way*).

(1) Manuel watched her wave and **smile her way out the door** (1995. COCA, Lit Rev)

Even though examples like (1) feel relatively conventional today, at some point in the history of English the combination must have been new and norm-violating as the intransitive verb *smile* occurs in a context in which it typically does not occur, namely in a complex transitive pattern with *her way* as direct object and a directional prepositional phrase *out the door.* It seems like this kind of creativity is somewhat more creative in the traditional sense (and hence less F-creative) than the first examples from syntax. On a cline, it comes closer to what Sampson termed E-(extending or expanding) creativity, which enlarges the range of possible products for a given activity.

Even further down the cline we may find creative innovations such as (2) to (4).

(2) Aria: Okay, he's not your friend.
Mike: **Jealous much**?
Aria: **Stupid much**? I'm serious, Mike.
Mike: Aria, it was nothing. (2011; COCA; Pretty Little Liars)
(3) Oooh, I am so scared. **Not.** Ha! (2017; COCA, Surf's up 2: WaveMania)
(4) It would be great fun, but **because school**. (2012: COCA, unclutterer.com)

In (2) we see what could be called the ADJ-*much* construction, i.e., an adjective followed by the indefinite quantifier *much*, rather than the conventional combination of indefinite quantifier and mass noun: *much money*, *much beer*, or the combination of noun plus *much* in particular kinds of phrases such as *home much*, which may be an elliptical form of *home much of the time* (cf. Hilpert & Bourgeois 2020).

In (3) we find extrasentential *not*, i.e. the negator *not* outside a sentence, as the sole element in the utterance, rather than inside a verb phrase, semi-attached or in combination with an auxiliary or modal: *I do not / don't like bean soup* (cf. Pullum & Huddleston 2002: 812).

Example (4) shows the *because* X construction, where *because* is not complemented by a full clause or an *of*-prepositional phrase (*because I can't read that*; *because of the snow*), but by a simple noun, adjective, interjection and the like (cf. Bergs 2018).

It would be difficult to argue that these constructions simply result from applying any particular rules like recursive relative clauses, or by violating specific constraints in applying certain rules as in *smile your way.* And neither should they be seen as mistakes in language use, or glitches in performance. Innovations such as these may not be part of daily language use, but they are not extremely infrequent either. Using the search queries 'ADJ.ALL much ?', '. Not .' and 'because NOUN.ALL .' we find about 80 occurrences of ADJ-*much*, about 130 occurrences of extrasentential *not* and several dozen occurrences of *because* X in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* with approximately 1 billion words. *Because science* now even has its own YouTube channel (@becausescience) and website: https://becausesciencedc.com. We suspect that these three phenomena are deliberate and creative innovations in language that go beyond applying or misapplying rules. It may be debatable whether these actually qualify as instances of E-Creativity as such (cf. Bergs & Kompa

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

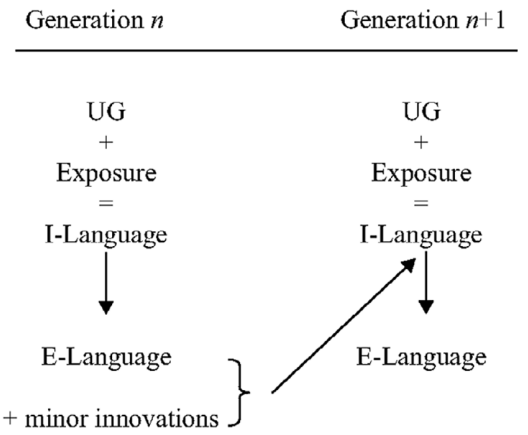


Figure 1. Language acquisition and language change, generative models (based on Andersen 1973; van Gelderen 2016)

2020), but they certainly qualify as the most creative and innovative linguistic behavior out of the three types discussed so far.

This mostly theoretically oriented and hypothesis-generating article focuses on the conceptual problem of syntactic creativity, with phenomena (2)–(4), i.e., the ADJ-*much* construction, extrasentential *not*, and the *because* X construction as illustrations. How do these innovations come about? From a mostly qualitative point of view, this article discusses the mechanisms and contexts that motivate 'unusual' syntactic innovations such as (2)–(4) and the kind of communicative behavior that characterizes their innovators and propagators.

2. Syntactic creativity

Syntactic creativity and innovation are traditionally seen in the context of rule-based grammars (cf. Adger 2018; Yang 2016). According to generative approaches, for example, syntactic innovation typically happens when children in first language acquisition reanalyze the input they perceive and, through abduction, arrive at a different grammar than that of the previous generation (King 1969; Lightfoot 1999; Andersen 1973; van Gelderen 2016). This may certainly be one of the major sources of grammatical change. So, for example, in figure 1 generation *n* has its universal grammar and is exposed to a certain linguistic input. This together forms the basis for the I-language of speakers from generation *n*, which in turn is the basis for their E-language.[1] This E-language, together with some 'minor innovations', forms the input (exposure) for generation *n*+1, which runs through the same cycle again, producing the input for generation *n*+2, and so on. The 'minor innovations' in this model could be, for instance, the wear and tear that we see on inflectional suffixes (Old English *stan-e* 'stone' (dative singular) > Present-day English *stone-ø*), or the coalescence of certain elements (like *want to* > *wanna, have to* > *hafta*). Most of these innovations are fairly regular and perfectly explicable with general principles of language change. With their exposure to the E-Language of previous generations and UG, children build their own I-Language. In doing so, they may not perfectly replicate the

[1] According to Chomsky, I- (Internal, Individual, Intensional) language is the internalized, individual mental grammar of speakers, very roughly corresponding to linguistic competence or *langue* in Saussure's sense. E- (external) language is the concrete language used by populations, e.g. English (cf. Hornstein 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grammar that produced the output they were exposed to. If they did, we would find only very little change happening. The two major mechanisms that may influence their grammar in the making are reanalysis and abduction.

Reanalysis, in a nutshell, is the new analysis (rebracketing) of a possibly ambiguous structure. We can find this on the level of morphology, e.g. Middle English *a napperon* 'apron' > Present-day English *an apron*, and also on the level of syntax, e.g. *let us* ('let us go') > *let's* ('let's go') > *lets* ('lets you and I go'). Abduction, in a nutshell again, is the hearer's (re-) construction of a grammar that may have produced the perceived output. So, if hearers of generation II in (first) language acquisition, out of sheer statistical coincidence, only encounter simple SVX structures when talking to speakers of generation I, they may be led to assume that the underlying grammatical system that produced these utterances is essentially verb second (V2), like modern German. This becomes part of their new grammar. It is only when they accidentally hear something like *Yesterday they bought a Porsche* (AdvSVO) that they may come to the conclusion that the underlying system is not verb second, but actually (X)SV, like modern English.

The problem is that neither reanalysis nor abduction, nor the minor innovations described above can easily explain the novel structures in (2)–(4), as we will show in the following sections. *Much* in Present-day English usually only occurs in pre-adjectival position, so that rebracketing is not an option. There are certain bridging contexts, i.e. contexts in which *much* appears in sentence final position (e.g. *They appreciate it much*), which may motivate the new construction, but it has been argued that, e.g. operator ellipses and reanalysis may not be the source for the novel structure (see section 3 below for details). Similarly, *not* should never, or at least not frequently, occur outside a full sentence, so that simple rebracketing and reanalysis are again out of the question, even though – just like with ADJ-*much* – we find certain bridging contexts and similar syntactic phenomena with items like *always* or *never*, which may also occur independently (see section 4 below). *Because* X may be the result of some ellipses and concomitant reanalysis, however, this is also fairly unlikely (see section 5 below). Moreover, and this is important, from what we can tell, these structures hardly if ever occur in child speech, i.e. during or right after first language acquisition, which is when we would expect reanalysis or abduction to take place. Rather, they appear to be typical for language professionals, such as scriptwriters and stand-up comedians, as well as teenagers and young adults, who are past their first language acquisition phase.

So how do these structures come into being? This article argues that what all these new structures have in common is that they are based on the complex interplay of pragmatic, semantic and syntactic factors. Their innovation and propagation seems to be motivated by Gestalt-like gestures that recycle and blend existing, similar constructions in novel contexts and functions while the basic semantics remain intact. ADJ-*much* is still about a high degree of something; *not* still signifies negation; and *because* X is linked to causation in the widest sense. Yet all three constructions appear to be loaded with very special pragmatic meaning and functions, and this is possibly where we find their origin. Out of pragmatic considerations, speakers may manipulate syntactic material in such a way that the core semantics remain intact while syntactic constraints are violated – perhaps as a Gricean marker calling for attention and reinterpretation – and a special layer of pragmatics can thus be added. The following sections will look at this from the perspective of the three constructions in question. The analyses will be couched in usage-based Construction Grammar terms (see, e.g., Hoffmann 2022) as constructions, by definition, incorporate syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information without prioritizing any of these (Hoffmann 2022: 41f; 238–43). It thus becomes possible to model processes such as the adding of pragmatic extra information, and the conventionalization of extra pragmatic meaning as constructional information (cf. Lehmann & Bergs 2021).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. The X-*much* construction

Evaluative or expressive usages of ADJ-*much?* combinations as in (2) above have received some attention from various perspectives (e.g. Adams 2003; Armstrong *et al.* 2011; Gutzmann & Henderson 2015, 2019; Hilpert & Bourgeois 2020; Ronan 2019). They all agree that this is a highly colloquial construction, mainly found in informal language use and dialogues. Its main function is to 'convey a critical or sarcastic meaning, often in response to an utterance by another' (Hilpert & Bourgeois 2020: 97). As the X-slot does not have to be filled by adjectives only, but can also contain other phrases, as in (5), or even entire clauses, we will henceforth refer to the construction in this article as the X-*much?* construction.[2] X-*much?* utterances imply a 'critical evaluation' (cf. Armstrong *et al.* 2011), which is conventionalized and non-compositional and thus posing a construction in a Construction Grammar (CxG) sense (cf. Armstrong *et al.* 2011; Hilpert & Bourgeois 2020). Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 108) point out that X-*much?* utterances are 'neither questions nor assertions, but expressive utterances, akin to slurs or interjections', despite their interrogative speech contour.

(5) Obama is AOK on that being so – go figure. Propaganda much? **Abuse of truth and reality much?** (2012, COCA, Blog, No Parity Between Violence by Israel and Violence by Hamas)

The meaning of *much* in such constructions is that of 'often' or 'a lot'. Other functions of quantifier *much* include modifying NPs or PPs as well as functioning as a comparative modifier (for a more detailed overview see Gutzmann & Henderson 2019: 110). Hilpert & Bourgeois (2020: 101) argue that in X-*much?* constructions '[the canonical] meaning [of 'a lot'] is coerced into 'excessively', and a negative judgement is attached to it'.

Examples such as (5) suggest that the construction as such is fairly productive, i.e. available to speakers for the creation of novel combinations. Note, however, that many combinations have semantically 'negative' adjectives as their head (*racist*, *jealous*, *paranoid* etc.), an observation also supported by Ronan's corpus study of *X-much?* (2019). This seems to be in line with the overall pragmatic undertone of the construction, which is one of reproach and bewilderment, roughly speaking

Regarding the syntactic development of the construction, it has been suggested that it may be related to VP-*much* utterances, as in *they don't argue much*, where *much* appears in post-predicate position (Gutzmann & Henderson 2019: 108) and thus could be the result of operator ellipsis. However, Gutzmann & Henderson's analysis provides syntactic and semantic arguments, showing that while we can give the *much* that appears in the X-*much* construction a familiar scale-based lexical semantics (e.g. Rett 2014; Solt 2015), the X-*much* construction is novel and cannot be reduced to other familiar constructions which *much*, including VP-*much* (Gutzmann & Henderson 2019: 108).

So while X-*much?* is probably not a simple case of reanalysis, it still may be motivated by particular, regular structures such as VP-*much* (*drink much*) or VP NP-*much* as (6).

[2] Examples used in this article are taken from several corpora including the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies 2008–), *The Movie Corpus* (Movie Corpus; Davies 2019), *The TV Corpus* (TV Corpus; Davies 2019), *Corpus of American Soap Operas* (SOAP; Davies 2011–) and *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA; Davies 2010) (see www.english-corpora.org). We used the search strings 'ADJ.all much ?' and 'ADJ.all much .' as well as 'NOUN.all much ?' and 'NOUN.all much .' and 'VERB.all much ?' and 'VERB.all much .' We manually excluded full, grammatical uses such as 'What makes you think you know so goddam much?' (1998, And Justice for all), 'I didn't get hurt much.' (2008, True Blood) or 'Does that mean much?' (2000, CNN_LiveSat). The COCA currently comprises 1 billion words from eight genres: 'spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages'. There are about 25 million words per year from 1990–2019. Note that some, but not all spoken texts in COCA are scripted. However, many spoken texts in COCA do not completely resemble natural conversation, but still may come close in many respects (see www.english-corpora.org/coca-spoken.asp).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(6) I suppose you wouldn't **enjoy boot-blacking much**? (1871; COHA; Fiction, Paul Peddler Fortunes)

Structures such as VP-*much* or *enjoy/like/love/hate* NP-*much* are not particularly rare, and they show in terms of priming that *much* can occur sentence finally. Priming in this case non-technically describes the fact that speakers may experience *much* in sentence-final position, which in turn may prime (or motivate) them to use it in the same position in other, novel constructions as well, such as *racist much?* If we assume that the semantics of *much* is kept constant, speakers may also be motivated to deliberately use that construction in a post-adjectival position to essentially signify something like *Are you jealous a lot?* or *Are you very jealous?* with a new and pragmatically interesting twist. This new structure may thus be blending and recycling other constructions on the basis of the synonymy of *much* and *a lot* plus the regularly occurring VP *much* and *enjoy/like/love/hate* NP *much* patterns. Hilpert & Bourgeois (2020: 108) also discuss the link between questions and X-*much*? in more detail, postulating a continuum with expressions like *Enjoying your police state much?*, which are easily expandible to a full question, to occurrences such as *Stupid much?*, at the other end of the continuum, which do not have a proper question counterpart.

Potentially, the link to the emotional verbs addressed above and semantically negative adjectives is underscored by the fact that in all corpora investigated here X-*much?* is often preceded by exclamative interjections, such as *woah*, *wow*, *jeez*, *gee*, *ah*, *oh*, *god*, *oh my*, *oh dear* or *lol* (see examples (7) and (8)). This indicates that X-*much?* expresses an attitude of, for example, surprise, annoyance or doubt. Ronan (2019) also notes that the adjectives which most strongly collocated with *much* were all expressing a mental state and suggests that this semantic type of adjective, expressing mental state, formed a linguistic prototype from which the construction then extended towards other collocations.

(7) Lisa: Have I told you how grateful I am that you stopped me from an irrevocable act, that you gave me a second chance at my life? And this is a new day. I have perspective. I regained my equilibrium. Robin seems a little shaky, though. **I mean, wow. Paranoid much?** She's lying. I never drugged and kidnapped her. (2010; SOAP; General Hospital)

(8) Ford: Get off me! Stop touching me! Hey! Get the hell off me! I'm sick of you touching me. Viki: Brody! Good Lord, what's going on? # **Tess: Whoa! Angry much?** Good aim. But you should know by now I'm not in the mirror. I'm in you. So you can throw a bomb at me. (2011; SOAP; One Life to Live)

Interestingly, whereas most uses of X-*much?*, especially the expressive ones, do not function as a question requesting information (Gutzmann & Henderson 2019: 108), there are instances which allow for the addressee to respond, though this is probably not intended by the speaker, as in (9). Hilpert & Bourgeois (2020: 107) also discuss 'examples that illustrate bridging contexts between ordinary requests for information and sarcastic commentary', such as *Procrastinate much?* in a headline.

(9) Robin: This is gonna be fun. A little mini vacation, just the three of us. Patrick: Yes. Robin: Laughs Patrick: It's gonna be fantastic – and especially for you. Robin: What? Why not for you? Patrick: Because this the perfect time for you to, you know, take me up on that bet. **Robin: Paranoid much? Patrick: A lit – a little bit, because I don't know what I'm supposed to do.** Robin: What do you mean? (2011; SOAP, General Hospital)

In (9) X-*much?* is probably not intended as a question by the speaker, but the hearer's reaction shows that they feel the possibility and perhaps the need to answer. This might also be a reanalysis on the interlocutors' (actually scriptwriter's) part. Especially when X-*much?* is directed at a person present, a response seems acceptable, in contrast to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

commenting function on an individual or object not present, which is the primary construction observable in Gutzmann & Henderson's (2015) examples from comic books and social media. So it stands to reason that these constructions – elliptical questions with meaning or function ambiguous between request for information and simple commentary – may have formed the bridging contexts that helped in the development of the new X-*much?* construction, which now appears to be a new construction, more or less independent from this source construction.

Hilpert & Bourgeois (2020: 113) also observe that the new construction seems to be expanding further in function from confrontation-seeking to one that 'is seeking solidarity and alignment of the addressee'.

More importantly for the argument of the present article than the exact constructionalization process is that the use and spread of X-*much?* involves at least some conscious endeavor by language users as an instance of syntactic creativity. This hypothesis might be supported by the fact that the origin and spread of X-*much*, at least in the corpora used here, is typically associated with media language, and the language of TV-shows in particular.

It has been suggested before that X-*much?* spread into colloquial English via TV-shows (Adams 2003: 75). According to Adams ADJ-*much* was first used in *Heathers* in 1989 (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) there is an even earlier occurrence)[3] and is then frequently found in in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (film 1992, series 1997–2003), Adams' area of expertise. Adams claims that

> it has become a signature feature of slayer slang: 'Morbid much?'; 'Insane much?' ... are all mildly outrageous sentences. Neither parents nor teachers gave anyone permission to speak this way; such innovations, as Whitman said, are the poetry of the moment, and because poetry deliberately sees and says things different from the quotidian way, it always taunts convention, even as it exploits it. (Adams 2003: 75)

Slayer slang (the language used in *Buffy*) also features NOUN-*much* constructions. Examples such as *God, tuna much?* do not relate to the quantity of tuna on someone's sandwich, but 'it challenges the very state of affairs, that someone would bring a tuna sandwich to the high school cafeteria at all' (Adams 2003: 76). VERB-*much* is another construction the Buffy screenwriters also already experimented with (Adams 2003: 90). In 2000 the first NOUN-*much* combination was aired on Buffy; however, there were other instances of NOUN-*much* constructions outside the Buffyverse before that. Which is why Adams concludes that '[t]he development of much had come full circle: the show, originally the imitator, became the imitated, but ended up imitating forms that had imitated it' (2003: 93).

A rough overview of corpora occurrences of ADJ-*much?* confirms that the construction still appears a lot more frequently in corpora that reflect media language (and TV in particular). Table 1 shows the distribution of the construction in the different corpora investigated here (see fn. 2 above).

This impression is again confirmed when we look at the individual subcorpora of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English.* Here we find 49 tokens (.383 pmw) of ADJ-*much?* in the TV/movies section, 41 (.326 pmw) in the blogs section, 14 (.117) in the fiction section, and none in the spoken language component, even though ADJ-*much?* certainly is a (conceptually) spoken and informal phenomenon. The distribution, however, suggests that it may rather be a marker of recent North American media language, e.g. TV, movies, blogs, but also comic books and social media (cf. Gutzmann & Henderson 2015).

[3] The first occurrence may date from 1978, used in *Saturday Night Life* by Bill Murry uttering 'Underdeveloped much?' (*OED*, s.v. *much*).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. ADJ-*much*? in five different corpora

	Total	pmw
COCA (1b words), American 1990–2019	135	.135
TV Corpus (325m words), 6 countries, 1950–2018	167	.513
SOAP (100m words) American, 2001–12	48	.480
Movie Corpus (200m words), 4 regions, 1930–2018	43	.215
1970s	1	.1
1980s	2	.14
1990	2	.08
2000	9	0.18
2010	21	.46
US/CA	41	.27
UK/IE	1	0.03
AU/NZ	1	.3
Misc	0	0
British National Corpus (100m words), British, 1980s–93 (Davies 2004)	0	0

Although the construction seems to have long left the TV-series shelf and has spread into colloquial (but often still computer-mediated) language, the association with its origin seems to prevail at least for some speakers. Example (10) alludes to the fact that the construction is (still) closely linked to conversations in TV-shows:

(10) She put me down outside Bradley's back door and I barged in. [...] He looked up at me with the ire of a man interrupted mid-marquetry and uncharacteristically let me have it, both barrels. **"Knock much?" Normally, I find that particular TV-dialog-meme annoying, but today my attention was elsewhere.** "Brad, you're in danger! Run out your front door and keep running. Hurry!" (2010; COCA; FIC: Analog Science Fiction & Fact)

That the construction involves bending syntactic rules in a creative manner and that it needs some familiarity with it to process its meaning correctly, is supported by Gutzmann & Henderson's (2019: 107) observation that 'it is possible to find English speakers who do not control the construction [even though] it is not particularly new'.

Ultimately, we can only speculate about the true reasons for creating novel linguistic expressions for the sake of a TV show. Apart from attention grabbing, as the viewers must reevaluate the expression in a Gricean sense, the creators also contribute to the branding of the series. Adams assumes that the scripwriter of the 1992 *Buffy* film, was probably aware of the use of *much* in *Heathers*, as he experimented with VERB-*much* in the *Buffy* film in 1992, but in the second episode of the series '[he] had smoothed out his approach to *much* and arrived at the adjective collocation' (2003: 90). Subsequent scriptwriters either still imitated *Heathers* or the first uses of *much* in Buffy, but they did not stop at imitation, 'writers hadn't given up the notion that something innovative could be accomplished with VERB+much' (Adams 2003:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Syntactic form:	*Are you Adj much?*	→	*Adj much?*
Phonetic form:	rising intonation	=	rising intonation
Pragmatic meaning:	information seeking	→	comment on situation, the speaker shows surprise regarding the quality expressed by the Adj (often with a negative evaluation)

Figure 2. Developing an X-*much?* construction

90). Being a successful expression in a successful (and long-running) TV-show, it is not surprising that ADJ-*much?* in particular spread into other shows and media usages and was at least to some extent/in some contexts even adopted by 'real' speakers.

In the conscious creation of ADJ-*much?* the scriptwriters had to not only actively manipulate syntactic rules and established patterns, but also make sure that the pragmatic meaning side of the construction changed from a genuine question to that of a comment that expresses surprise and often a negative evaluation of a behavior. Figure 2 illustrates these changes:

Bending syntactic patterns and expectations seems to be especially conducive for creating a particular, noticeable (TV-)slang. Targeting a specific audience in the creation of novel expressions might help to establish the constructions and facilitate their spread into speech communities: viewers will use the novel constructions to (indirectly) refer to the show, possibly in acts of identity or as language use in communities of practice. This may be particularly important if the show is regarded as 'cool' and has an adolescent audience, as adolescent speakers tend to pick up non-standard/novel usages more readily. As Bednarek notes: 'some TV series are lauded for invention, creativity, and play, and series with young adults who are close friends will include a high degree of linguistic innovation' (2018: 61).

4. Extrasentential *not*

Extrasentential *not* occurs independently, outside a sentence. It does not, for instance, interrupt other phrases as in **Don't step on NOT my blue suede shoes.* Pullum & Huddleston (2002: 812) already noticed the phenomenon and call it 'unintegrated final not'. They comment:

> This construction is found mainly in younger generation speech (popularized and perhaps originated by characters in an American television comedy sketch) but is occasionally echoed in recent journalistic writing. As a humorous way to signal irony or insincerity, a final emphatic *not* is added following a clause, retracting the assertion made. (Pullum & Huddleston 2002: 812)

In COCA, we find about 130 occurrences of extrasentential *not.*[4] Extrasentential *not* negates a preceding positive (or neutral) statement. Repetitive, reinforcing *not* as in (11) is not included here.

[4] We used the search query '. Not . ' (375 hits) and manually checked the results to eliminate false positives such as *Little-kid indignation. "That's. Not. How. It. Goes!"* (2019; COCA; Southern Review)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(11) We're not doing that story. Not. (2015; COCA; NBC Today, Spoken)

In contrast, extrasentential *not* typically occurs after short, syntactically positive statements as in (12) and (13).

(12) No! Oops! Sorry! Good one. Not. (laughing) (groaning) (1997; COCA; Power Rangers Turbo)
(13) And he gets less revenue as more JOBS! are lost Brilliant. Not. (2012; COCA; blog pjmedia)

But extrasentential *not* can also be found following longer structures, as in (14) and (15).

(14) These people are the best of the best of the best. Not. (2012; COCA; abcnews.com)
(15) Because every small town in southern Indiana needs an observatory. Not. (2006; COCA; How be popular)

In extrasentential *not*, the semantics of *not* as a negator is kept intact, but it is no longer embedded in a sentence. Rather, as an independent element, it negates or retracts the preceding statement, for example, single items or phrases as in (12) and (13), or more complex utterances as in (14) and (15). Typically, extrasentential *not* would also be a phonetically very noticeable, stressed and often phonetically elongated element. This means that both syntactically and phonetically, as a standalone element, it attracts special attention and gains some peculiar weight and pragmatic function. The previous statement first suggests some good or positive message, which is then suddenly and surprisingly negated and retracted by extrasentential *not.* This creates an effect or surprise and also a certain level of irony or sarcasm. Compare the minimal pair in (16) and (17).

(16) These people are the best of the best of the best. They are not.
(17) These people are the best of the best of the best. Not.

Both (16) and (17) begin with the same, seemingly positive, if somewhat exaggerated message: *These people are the best of the best of the best.* In (16) the following perfectly grammatical utterance *They are not* then negates the previous statement. Pragmatically speaking, it is decidedly odd to cancel a previous statement like this; the result sounds almost nonsensical and would require some very special clues in pronunciation or facial expression and gesture to make this contextually acceptable. Example (17), on the other hand, also has the negation following the previous positive statement. But this time this is 'ungrammatical' extrasentential *not.* As this has the special pragmatic undertone of being particularly ironic or sarcastic, for example, it makes the whole sequence of utterances much more acceptable and plausible. It is almost as if the positive statement were a quote, or at least an evaluation, from a third party, which is then negated and ridiculed by the speaker.

It is very difficult to determine how exactly this structure came into being. One plausible scenario could be this. Speakers have isolated *not* as a construction at their disposal to signal negation. This, for instance, is used readily and frequently in reinforcing, repetitive contexts, for the sake of emphasis, as in (11), repeated here as (18), and in (19)–(20).

(18) We're not doing that story. Not. (2015; COCA; NBC Today, Spoken)
(19) I cannot open the door. Not. (1990; COCA; The Suckling)
(20) I am not getting involved. Not. God damn it. (2015; COCA; Bad Johnson)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In (18)–(20), speakers apparently isolate *not* in the first full sentence as the carrier of negative polarity. We may posit a resulting construction as in (21)

(21) FORM *not* [nɒt//nɑt] <-> Negation MEANING

This construction, isolated *not*, is then used to emphasize the negation in the preceding utterance, much like multiple negatives emphasize negation. This is further supported by the availability of *not* as a fully grammatical, but prosodically and syntactically isolated/emphasized negator, and non-verbal negator, as in (22)–(24).

(22) That's. Not. How. It. Goes. (2019; COCA; Fic Southern review)
(23) No, not a chance. (2016; COCA; Sleepy Hollow)
(24) Not all of them could sit at the same time (2018; COCA; The literary review)

Examples such as (18)–(24) may again serve as Gestalt-like exemplars or bridging contexts for creative speakers that enable them to develop a novel, and yet interpretable structure. The creative innovation is the combination of a positive first statement with isolated, negative *not.* This new combination creates an effect of surprisal and unexpectedness. At the same time, retracting a previous positive statement is, pragmatically speaking, dispreferred and awkward, which leads to the ironic, humorous and sometimes also slightly aggressive undertone. In any case, it creates a highly noticeable new structure.

Like with X-*much* and in line with what Pullum & Huddleston (2002) already suspected, we find the first (and most) occurrences of extrasentential *not* in the media language sections of our corpora, particularly in the wildly popular movie *Wayne's World* (1992), as well as the equally successful TV series *The Simpsons* and *Beverly Hills 90210.* The urban legend that the construction actually originated from the infamous *Wayne's World* is probably not true, as an earlier occurrence can be found in *The Simpsons* (1989). Nevertheless, *Wayne's World* certainly was a major promoter of the construction.

(25) I'm gonna miss you too. Not (1989; The Simpsons, Dancin Homer S02 E05)
(26) What a totally amazing, excellent discovery – not! (1992; Wayne's World)
(27) Don't worry. I'm just kidding. Not. (1991; COHA; Madonna, Truth or Dare)
(28) So you two are lovers. Not. (1991; COHA; Beverly Hills 90210)
(29) So Brenda and Dylan go to concerts so they can make out to music. Not (1991; Beverly Hills 90210)
(30) This means you. Understand? I understand. Not. (1992; COCA; Full House)
(31) Yeah, and Mel just loved them Not. (1991; COHA 1991; NYT news)
(32) Carvey is serenely confident. NOT. (1992; COCA; USA Today, News)

Interestingly, Mike Myers, actor and scriptwriter for the *Wayne's World* movie, commented on the use of extrasentential *not* in an 25th anniversary interview in 2017 (www.vulture.com/2017/02/mike-myers-talks-waynes-world-not-joke-snl-trump.html). Asked by the interviewer whether he wrote 'that joke' or observed it first, Myers says that he first observed and used that as an adolescent in Ontario. In other words, he denies actively having 'engineered' that structure. Moreover, Myers also points out in the interview that the structure is an expression of 1990s sarcasm: 'I'm going to comply with you, but I am not really complying with you. That would be the mathematics of it.' The interviewer finally points out that 'it's a really simple construction that can turn *anyone* into a comedian, so long as they follow the formular. You lead someone down – a path and – ' 'There is the final negation. Yeah, I do love when things have a home version', Myers answers.

In sum, we may suspect that the use of extrasentential *not*, just like X-*much*, follows Keller's idea of extravagance: 'Talk in such a way that you are noticed' (Keller 1994; cf. Haspelmath 1999: 1055) or at least his maxim of wittiness 'Talk in an amusing, funny,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

etc. way' (for more details, see section 6 below). Media language, i.e. the language we find on TV shows, movies, blogs and the internet, is particularly liable to be extravagant, as being noticed is one of the prime maxims in these media: being noticed, rather than just being part of the group is valuable here. The TV shows in which we find most occurrences of extrasentential *not* are geared towards teenagers and young adults. For this particular age group, breaking rules, being funny, witty and extravagant carries a particular value, as outlined by Myers. The shows and the characters on those shows are portrayed as being witty, ironic rule breakers, worth imitating. So on the basis of these media, we see early adopters that take the innovation into the different communities and attach a certain value to it.[5] Those who use these novel constructions, X-*much* and extrasentential *not*, are the innovators, witty and clever, the cool kids, leaders of the pack. And from here on we witness the spread of these constructions into the different communities, as markers of extravagance and humor, but also of solidarity and as in-group codes for communities of practice. We also witness occurrences in news coverage and in journalistic writing, see (31) and (32) above, as Pullum & Huddleston mention. Here, they serve the function of being subjective, ironic, amusing and noteworthy. The journalists using these forms probably do so deliberately in an attempt at being amusing, noteworthy, witty and fashionable in their manner of speaking – not unlike Myers in *Wayne's World.*

5. *Because* X

Because X shows a more or less regular syntactic pattern and 'only' lacks *of*, syntactically speaking. *Because* in this case may be followed by various material: NPs, AdjPs, compressed clauses (e.g. *yolo*) and interjections of all kinds (e.g. *duh*); cf. Schnoebelen (2014). For reasons of simplicity, we will focus on NPs and AdjPs in this article, the most common (and oldest) slot fillers in this construction (cf. Bergs 2018). Even though *because* X at first sight looks like an elliptical structure, it clearly is not, as the internet meme (33) discussed in Bailey (2020) shows.

(33) Why can't your Prius do this? Because race car



(www.pinterest.de/pin/347340189988207667/)

[5] We are grateful for a methodological caveat, suggested by an anonymous reviewer. Even though the spoken section on COCA is mostly unscripted, it is perhaps not fully natural: www.english-corpora.org/coca-spoken.asp. However, there are no other comparable corpora of natural spoken language available so far. In other words, we lack the baseline that enables us to conclude that extrasentential *not*, like X-*much*, actually originated in the new media rather than in informal spoken language. However, we still believe that media language was at least very instrumental here as a motor of diffusion. Hence, we'd like to put forward our idea that these constructions are typical for media language as a hypothesis for future research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

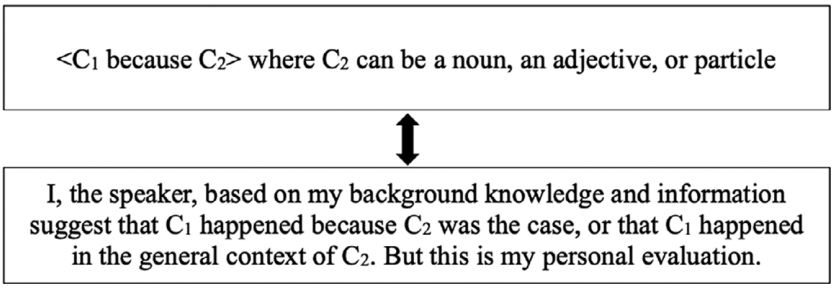
The intended meaning in (33) is something like 'Why can't your Prius do this?' – 'Because this [in the picture] is a race car' or 'Because it [the Prius] is not a race car [like the one in the picture].' The corresponding grammatical, non-elliptical structures for (33) – **because of (a) race car* and **because it is a race car* – are not acceptable or don't make sense in this particular case.

In the same way that *much* in X-*much* still carries some quantificational reading, and *not* in extrasentential *not* still signifies negation, *because* in both constructions still signals some sort of causative link, broadly construed (cf. Sweetser 1990: 77). But, just like the two constructions discussed above, *because* X has additional pragmatic overtones and is not synonymous with *because of* X, as can be seen in (34) and (35).

(34) I went home because of a headache.
(35) I went home because headache.

Bergs (2018) argues that *because* X adds extra pragmatic meaning to the utterance, such as subjectivity or even sarcasm. *Because headache* in (35) presents not only the reason for going home itself (as (34) does), but also the fact that this is the speaker's personal and subjective evaluation of the situation (cf. Keller 1995). In line with Bolinger's (1968: 127) and Goldberg's (1995: 67) principle of no synonymy ('[i]f two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct' (Goldberg 1995: 67)), *because of* and *because* X in (34) and (35) do not appear to be synonymous. Example (35) presents a more subjective viewpoint of the events than (34). The resulting construction is shown in (36).

(36) **The *because* X construction**



Some more recent examples of *because* X seem to suggest some extra meaning that goes beyond subjectivity. In (37) and (38) we find two examples where there is not only subjectivity as in (33), but also a certain amount of verbal aggression towards the hearer. The meaning is expanded in the sense of 'this is the reason, and this is obvious, and you, the addressee, should have known'. This may also be underscored by intonation and possibly facial expressions like raised eyebrows. The extra verbal element *duh* in (38) also has a similar effect.

(37) Hillary Clinton says victory is in sight. Said it last night, and for the first time after her big win here in New York **because math**. (Fox News, 20 April 2016, 12:00pm–1:01 pm, Shepard Smith reporting)
(38) So an obvious option for a vineyard wedding cake is to go for a cheese wheel tower instead of (or as well as) a traditional sweet cake. It may no longer be a new idea, but it's always a crowd-pleaser! **Because cheese, duh.** (https://southboundbride.com/how-to-cheese-wheel-wedding-cakes/)

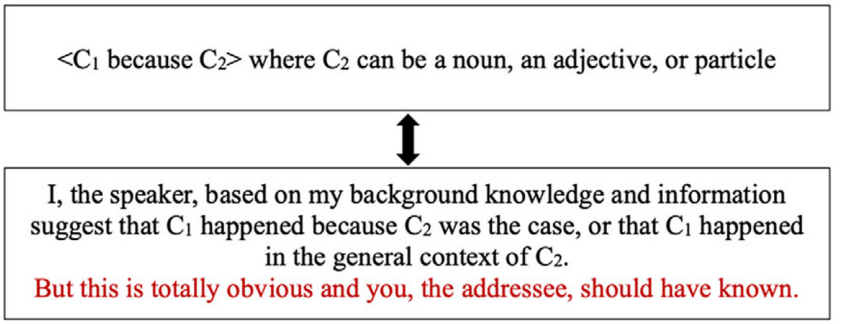
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This new reading includes the perspective of the addressee, and so moves from subjectivity to intersubjectivity: intersubjectivity is

> the explicit expression of the SP/W's [speaker/writer's] attention to the 'self' of addressee/reader in both an epistemic sense (paying attention to the content of what is said) and in a more social sense (paying attention to their 'face' or 'image needs' associated with social stance an identity. (Traugott 2003: 128)

The verbal aggression expressed here is directed towards and threatening the addressee's face. Similarly, Traugott (2010) mentions the intersubjective use of certain emphatics for aggression: 'being "in" rather than "saving" Addressee's face' (Traugott 2010: 52). The resulting construction can be found in (39).

(39) The *because* X construction



Interestingly, this sort of intersubjective verbal aggression may also be directed at third parties. By adding this extra (inter)subjectivity, speakers and hearers may also build some common perspective, some rapport, which cannot be achieved with regular *because* (cf. Kanetani & Cappelle 2024; Kanetani 2024; Traugott p.c.). Here, as in (40) and (41), the speakers' and the addressees' points of view appear to be fused and aligned, in an act of camaraderie or solidarity.[6]

(40) [The context is that of a much-loved round church with a kids' play area that has after several years of litigation been razed to the ground and there is a huge pile of dirt behind a fence now. The blogger is dismayed at the sight and loss to children] but now this child's delight is locked behind fences **because, you know, liability**.
(Traugott p.c.)

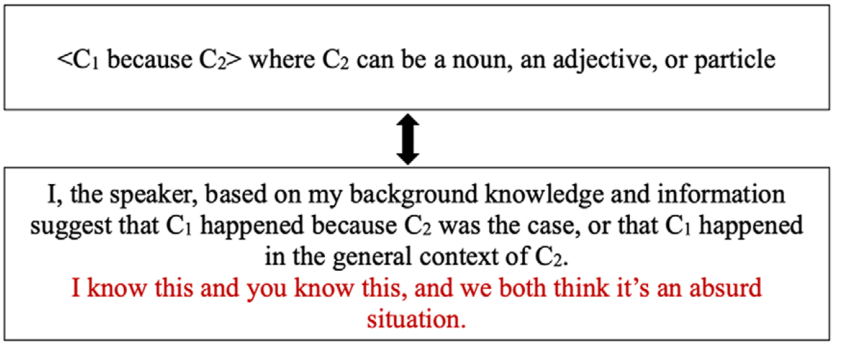
(41) [A blog entry on reddit. The story is about a lifeguard who saved a man from drowning but then got fired because of potential liability for his actions. One blogger comments:]
Fuck companies like this! Whoever made the decision to fire that lifeguard better pray he/she is not faced with a similar situation where a lifeguard refuses to save their loved one **because you know, liability**. (www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/8gouw7/lifegaurd_fired_for_saving_a_mans_life/?rdt=40172)

[6] We are immensely grateful to Elizabeth Traugott for bringing these examples to our attention.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In both (40) and (41) the speakers on the one hand express their personal, subjective view, while at the same time joining ranks with the addressee in their frustration about these absurd decisions. 'Liability' functions like a quote from a third party (that put up the fence and fired the lifeguard... 'because liability'), whose face is being threatened here. The construction, once more, is represented in (42).

(42) The *because* X construction



While the actual *because* X construction may be traced back several centuries (see Bergs 2018), the first modern and productive occurrences can be found in our corpora from the early 2000s onwards. This may also be the reason for the American Dialect Society making it their *Word of the Year* 2013:

> [t]his past year, the very old word because exploded with new grammatical possibilities in informal online use, ... No longer does because have to be followed by of or a full clause. Now one often sees tersely worded rationales like 'because science' or 'because reasons'. You might not go to a party 'because tired'. As one supporter put it, because should be Word of the Year 'because useful!' (Flood 2014, *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/08/us-word-of-year-2013-because-dialect)

Actually, on the basis of corpus data from COCA and GloWbE,[7] we would suspect that the internet meme *because science*, also the name of a popular YouTube Channel founded in 2015, was first used around the year 2012 and is still the most common collocation in this construction.

In contrast to X-*much* and extrasentential *not*, however, modern *because* X may have first been geared towards a younger audience, but apparently it has never caught on in this age group in the same way. In our corpora at least, it has never been really popular on TV or in movies, but can be found quite often in internet language, on blogs, and also in news broadcasts and even in political debates. The reason for this is not quite clear, though. We suspect that teenagers and young adults in their conversational routines are maybe less concerned with reasoning, complex subordinate syntactic patterns, and subtle pragmatics (cf. Nippold *et al.* 2017; Verhoeven *et al.* 2002). We thus would venture the hypothesis that the pragmatic effect of *because* X is probably too subtle to be interesting for a young usership that is primarily interested in syntactic fireworks to satisfy the need for extravagance and

[7] *Corpus of Global Web-based English* (GloWbE, Davies 2013) with approx. 1.9 billion words from more than 20 countries between 2012 and 2013. For all our searches the query was 'because Noun.all . ', 'because verb.all . ' and 'because adjective.all . '

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wittiness. This is also in line with what van den Stock *et al.* (2024) suspect, albeit only tentatively, with regard to the age-grading they find in innovative uses of two syntactic constructions in Dutch (the *krijgen*-passive and the *weg*-construction). While their older participants rate the conventional uses of the *weg*-construction higher and like the productive uses of the (more formal) *krjjgen*-passive better, 'younger participants seem to be more drawn to the unconventional/imaginative/vivid nature of creative instantiations of the *weg*-pattern' (Van den Stock *et al.* 2024: 27). We believe this question warrants some further investigation in future research.

The fact that *because* X is still popular in online media, such as blogs, may have to do with the fact that materially written but conceptually spoken discourse (cf. Koch & Österreicher 1985) often lacks efficient means to communicate subtle pragmatic messages like jokes, irony or sarcasm – one of the reasons for the introduction of the smiley in online discourse ('I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers: :-) '; Fahlmann 1982, www.cs.cmu.edu/~sef/Orig-Smiley.htm). *Because* X allows for the effective expression of subjective and intersubjective meanings even in materially written discourse. But it doesn't make for great effects when used on TV shows.

6. On breaking rules

All three constructions discussed here thus deviate noticeably from standard syntactic patterns. Yet they still seem to follow certain basic principles of grammar (such as proximity of modifier and head). This is not Jabberwocky or Dada poetry. They also show remnants of their original semantic meaning, i.e. quantificational semantics in *much*, negation in *not*, and causal considerations with *because.* However, in contrast to their regular, grammatical counterparts, they are motivated by pragmatic considerations, as they carry extra pragmatic meaning. X-*much* can express special surprise or indignation (*Racist much? Overreacting much? Hypocrisy much?*). Extrasentential *not* emphasizes the negation and also expresses some sort of indignant or surprising, sarcastic speaker perspective, a pun played on the addressee: *I liked the movie. Not.* = 'You think that I liked the movie, but I obviously didn't.' *Because X* offers a special (inter)subjective perspective, sometimes also in association with sarcasm or verbal aggression towards the addressee (*because math, (duh)!* = 'This is so obvious you should have known this!') or even third parties (*because, you know, liability*). In a word, the innovation and successful use of these novel constructions depends on what we described as a complex interplay of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors.

One central motivation for language users to (sometimes drastically) deviate from syntactic rules may be pragmatic, i.e. the conveying of subtle, non-semantic and speaker-oriented meaning. A second motivation is partly pragmatic, but also based on principles of communication and cognition. Language processing is usually an automated, subconscious process, aimed at communicative efficiency (see Hartsuiker & Moors 2017). But there may be various 'tasks' that need to be balanced. Keller (1994) lists eight maxims that form the basis for successful communication, which in turn is subject to the hypermaxim of linguistic interaction: 'Talk in such a way that you are most likely to reach the goals that you set yourself in your communicative enterprise.' These maxims include:

> Maxim 1: Talk in such a way that you are understood.
> Maxim 2: Talk in such a way that you are noticed.
> Maxim 3: Talk in such a way that you are not recognizable as a member of the group.
> Maxim 4: Talk in an amusing, funny, etc. way.
> Maxim 5: Talk in an especially polite, flattering, charming, etc. way.
> Maxim 6: Talk in such a way that you do not expend superfluous energy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Maxim 7: Talk like the others talk.
Maxim 8: Talk in such a way that you are recognized as a member of the group.

As already mentioned above, the maxims of particular interest for the present article are the maxim of extravagance (Maxim 2), as Haspelmath (1999) termed it, and the maxim of wittiness (Maxim 4), our term. Sometimes, in order to achieve their communicative goals, speakers need to express themselves in a particularly extravagant, i.e. noticeable, or a particularly witty, funny way. Note that the two are not necessarily interchangeable. You can be very extravagant, and noticeable, without being amusing or funny, for example by using obscene and inappropriate swear words. On the other hand, you can also be very amusing and funny without being particularly extravagant, for instance by using paradoxes: 'I can resist everything but temptation', as Oscar Wilde so famously put it. Or by telling jokes: 'Did you hear about the two people who stole the calendar? They each got six months.' And yet, both of these maxims may motivate syntactic innovation of the kind discussed here. While extravagance has received a considerable amount of attention in the literature (see, e.g., Haspelmath 1999; Petré 2017; Ungerer & Hartmann 2020; Eitelmann & Haumann 2022), Maxim 4, wittiness or funniness, has been mostly ignored. The data and ideas presented here, with a particular focus on verbal humor in TV shows and movies geared towards younger audiences, show that it probably deserves more attention in the future.

One way of being particularly noticeable or clever, or amusing and funny, is to be creative, to break with conventions, to deviate from what can be expected. This can be seen, for example, in the language of advertising and business where new and unusual terms attract attention. Haspelmath (1999) also discusses the maxim of extravagance (or 'expressivity') in the context of grammaticalization and suggests that speakers 'sometimes ... want their utterance to be imaginative and vivid – they want to be little "extravagant poets" in order to be noticed, at least occasionally' (1999: 1057). Similarly, the three constructions discussed here also attract attention by deviating from expectations, and thus serve the maxim of extravagance and also, in some cases, the maxim of wittiness. They are not only noticeable, they can also be pretty funny and amusing. Extrasentential *not* probably sticks out in particular in terms of wittiness and fun, as can be seen in its distribution across media: it is a stock element of harmless comedy, as witnessed by Mike Myers' interview. X-*much* initially took a similar path, but turned out to be more extravagant than funny or witty. It is a noticeable and extravagant expression of incredulity and reprisal: *racist much?. Because* X may be noticeable because of the syntactic violation, but it is probably less extravagant and less funny than the other two constructions discussed here. It thus also seems to be the one of the three constructions that can also be found quite often in mainstream news or political speeches, for example, rather than in TV comedy. And yet it seems to serve its purpose: it is noticeable (and gets copied at least by certain groups) and as such effectively gets its extra, pragmatic message across: subjective evaluation or verbal aggression.

Note that the constructions discussed here are usually context-dependent and also get support from intonation and facial expressions, which may also be stored as part of the conventionalized constructional information. *Because* X in particular, with its subtle differences in meaning often can only be disambiguated on the basis of audio-visual data from the speaker. Similarly, X-*much* can be interpreted as a simple question or an act of accusation. Here, the context and the reaction of the addressee become important to evaluate the actual speech act associated with that particular construction. What we do seem to witness, though, is a gradual development and diversification of these constructions. From simple interrogatives and negatives and causalities to reproaches, rebuttal and verbal aggression.

Nevertheless, for all three constructions discussed here we find that modern media such as TV, movies or the internet probably played a substantial role in their innovation and spread. The constructions served as markers of extravagance, wittiness, cleverness for their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

media characters and thus encouraged spreading and copying, first by early adopters, and then by the more general public. It seems like easier patterns such as extrasentential *not* fared a bit better in that respect, while X-*much* took a middle ground and *because* X remained somewhat rare with its rather delicate pragmatics (cf. Van den Stock *et al.* 2024).

7. Summary and conclusion

This article has looked at the possible origin and use of three particularly noticeable, creative syntactic constructions in Present-day English: X-*much*, extrasentential *not* and *because* X. It was argued that these are special and closer to what Sampson called E-creativity than many other syntactic innovations. We hypothesized that their innovation must be part of deliberate linguistic behavior in adulthood, motivated by pragmatic factors on the one hand, and socio-communicative maxims such as extravagance and wittiness on the other. Their innovation and spread are first and foremost documented in the TV, movie and internet sections of the corpora investigated. We suspect that in this context they were deliberate innovations to attract attention or to create humorous effects, in particular for teenage and young adult audiences. In the case of extrasentential *not* we see a rather quick and easy adoption of the construction, probably due to its simplicity, noticeability, and strong pragmatic and socio-communicative effect. X-*much* also caught on, but remained to some extent a media phenomenon, partly because of its rather negative pragmatic associations. Finally, *because* X also found its way into general use, albeit with a different social group. It appears to be less common among teenagers now, but rather characterizes news broadcasts, political debates and blogs, where it not only conveys increased subjectivity, but may also serve as a marker of verbal aggression in the widest sense.

We identified two questions as potential topics for future research. First, the role of media language may warrant some further discussion. Given the lack of large corpora of natural, unscripted, informal, conversational spoken language this article could not actually show empirically that the constructions originated in the language of TV shows and movies. The data from our corpora certainly points in this general direction, but more data, and especially an empirical investigation of spoken language from the 1990s and early 2000s might be instructive. Second, in relation to media language, we hypothesized that the language use of teenagers and young adults may be different from that of older speakers in that younger speakers are more likely to use more creative, noticeable (deviant) linguistic structures. While this 'adolescent peak' (Van den Stock *et al.* 2024: 27) is fairly well documented for lexical innovations (e.g. Palacios Martínez 2018), we still do not know about a lot about the links between age, extravagance and more complex constructions. The present study, like Van den Stock *et al.* (2024), brought some phenomena into the light that indicate some connex, but this will require further investigation.

References

Adams, Michael. 2003. *Slayer slang: A Buffy the vampire slayer lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Adger, David. 2019. *Language unlimited: The science behind our most creative power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Andersen, Henning. 1973. Abductive and deductive change. *Language* 49(4), 765–93.
Armstrong, Meghan, Katie Carmichael & Scott Schwenter. 2011. *X much?* constructions and the contextual licensing of scale inversions. Paper presented at the LSA Meeting 2011, PA, January 2011.
Bailey, Laura. 2020. https://x.com/linguistlaura/status/1335143470684663810?lang=de
Bednarek, Monika. 2018. *Language and television series: A linguistics approach to TV dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bergs, Alexander. 2018. Because science! Notes on a variable conjunction. In Elena Seoane, Carlos Acuna-Farina & Ignacios Palacios Martínez (eds.), *Subordination in English: Diachronic and synchronic perspectives*, 43–60. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Bergs, Alexander & Nikola Kompa. 2020. Creativity within and outside the linguistic system. *Cognitive Semiotics* 13(1), 2020–5.
Bolinger, Dwight. 1968. *Aspects of language*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
Davies, Mark. 2004. *British National Corpus* (from Oxford University Press). www.english-corpora.org/bnc/ (accessed 09/12/2024).
Davies, Mark. 2008–. *The Corpus of Contemporary American English.* www.english-corpora.org/coca/ (accessed 09/12/2024)
Davies, Mark. 2011–. *Corpus of American Soap Operas.* www.english-corpora.org/soap/ (accessed 09/12/2024).
Davies, Mark. 2013. *Corpus of Global Web-Based English.* www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/ (accessed 09/12/2024).
Davies, Mark. 2019. *The TV Corpus.* www.english-corpora.org/tv/ (accessed 09/12/2024).
Davies, Mark. 2019. *The Movie Corpus.* www.english-corpora.org/movies/ (accessed 09/12/2024).
Davies, Mark. 2010. *The Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA). Available online at www.english-corpora.org/coha/
Eitelmann, Matthias & Dagmar Haumann (eds.). 2022. *Extravagant morphology: Studies in rule-bending, pattern-extending and theory-challenging morphology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Goldberg, Adele E. 1995. *Constructions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Gutzmann, Daniel & Robert Henderson. 2015. Expressive much? *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*, 19, 286–303.
Gutzmann, Daniel & Robert Henderson. 2019. Expressive updates, much? *Language* 95(1), 107–35.
Hartsuiker, Robert & Agnes Moors. 2017. On the automaticity of language processing. In Hans-Jörg Schmid (ed.), *Entrenchment and the psychology of language learning*, 201–26. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
Haspelmath, Martin. 1999. Why is grammaticalization irreversible? *Linguistics* 37(6), 1043–68.
Hilpert, Martin & Samuel Bourgeois. 2020. Intersubjectification in constructional change. From confrontation to solidarity in the *sarcastic much?* construction. *Constructions and Frames* 12(1), 96–120.
Hoffmann, Thomas. 2022. *Construction Grammar: The structure of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hornstein, Norbert. 2017. Chomsky, Noam. 1928–. *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*. London: Routledge.
Kanetani, Masaru. 2024. *Because you know:* A discourse-functional analysis of *you know* in the *because X construction*. *Journal of English Grammar and Usage* 31, 105–21.
Kanetani, Masaru & Bert Cappelle. 2024. Two strategies for compressing and familiarizing information: It-sounds-familiar-because-compressed constructions. Paper presented at DGKL10, Osnabrück, September 2024.
Keller, Rudi. 1994. *On language change: The invisible hand in language*. London: Routledge.
Keller, Rudi. 1995. The epistemic *weil*. In Dieter Stein & Susan Wright (eds.), *Subjectivity and subjectivisation*, 16–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
King, Robert. 1969. *Historical linguistics and Generative Grammar*. New York: Prentice Hall.
Lehmann, Claudia & Alexander Bergs. 2021. As if irony was in stock. The case of constructional ironies. *Constructions & Frames* 13(2), 309–39.
Lightfoot, David. 1999. *The development of language: Acquisition, change, and evolution*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Koch, Peter & Wulf Österreicher. 1985. Sprache der Nähe – Sprache der Distanz. Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im Spannungsfeld von Sprachtheorie und Sprachgeschichte. *Romanistisches Jahrbuch*, 15–43. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Nippold, Marilyn, Megan Frantz-Kaspar & Laura Vigeland. 2017. Spoken language production in young adults: Examining syntactic complexity. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 60(5), 1339–47.
Palacios Martínez, Ignacio. 2018. Lexical innovation in the language of teenagers. In Arne Ziegler (ed.), *Jugendsprachen / Youth Languages: Aktuelle Perspektiven internationaler Forschung / Current Perspectives of International Research*, 363–90. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
Petré, Peter. 2017 The extravagant progressive: An experimental corpus study on the history of emphatic [be Ving]. *English Language and Linguistics* 21(2), 227–50.
Pullum, Geoffrey & Rodney Huddleston. 2002. Negation. In Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey Pullum *et al.*, *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*, 785–850. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rett, Jessica. 2014. The polysemy of measurement. *Lingua* 143, 242–66.
Ronan, Patricia. 2019. Silly much? Tracing the spread of a new expressive marker in recent corpora. In Hanna Parviainen, Mark Kaunisto & Päivi Pahta (eds.), *Corpus approaches into World Englishes and language contrasts* (Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English 20). Helsinki: VARIENG.
Sampson, Geoffrey. 2016. Two ideas of creativity. In Martin Hinton (ed.), *Evidence, experiment, and argument in linguistics and philosophy of language*, 15–26. Bern: Peter Lang.
Schnoebelen, Tyler. 2014. 'Innovating because innovation'. https://corplinguistics.wordpress.com/2014/01/15/innovating-because-innovation/

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Solt, Stephanie. 2015. Q-adjectives and the semantics of quantity. *Journal of Semantics* 32(2), 221–73.
Sweetser, Eve. 1990. *From etymology to pragmatics: Metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2003. From subjectification to intersubjectification. In Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Motives for language change*, 124–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2010. (Inter)subjectivity and (inter)subjectification: A reassessment. In Kristin Davidse, Lieven Vandelanotte & Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *Subjectification, intersubjectification and grammaticalization*, 29–71. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Ungerer, Tobias & Stefan Hartmann. 2020. Delineating extravagance: Assessing speakers' perceptions of imaginative constructional patterns. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 34(1), 345–56.
Van den Stock, Anouk, Anne-Sophie Ghyselen, Peter Lauwers, Dirk Speelman & Timothy Colleman. 2024. Individual differences in productivity: Intra- and extralinguistic determinants in evaluations of 'creative' use of grammatical patterns. *Constructions* 24.
Van Gelderen, Elly. 2016. Generative frameworks and approaches. In Merja Kytö & Päivi Pahta (eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of English historical linguistics*, 79–94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Verhoeven, Ludo, Melina Aparici, Dalia Cahana-Amitay, Janet van Hell, Sarah Kriz & Anne Viguié-Simon. 2002. Clause packaging in writing and speech: A cross-linguistic developmental analysis. *Written Language and Literacy* 5(2), 135–61.
Yang, Charles. 2016. *The price of linguistic productivity. How children learn to break the rules of language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cite this article: Bergs, Alexander and Pentrel, Meike. 2025. Extravagant much? Syntactic creativity because Wayne's World. *English Language and Linguistics* 29, no. 2: 252–271. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674325000188 Published online by Cambridge University Press