Just because it's new doesn't mean people will notice it

MARTIN HILPERT

The idiosyncratic properties of a recent usage

LANGUAGE changes all the time. Speakers produce innovations that are novel at first, but become conventionalized as they are used more and more. Some get a fair amount of press. The rise of 'singular *they*' (*Has everyone got their handout?*) has provoked a heated debate about proper usage (cf. Balhorn 2004). However, not all innovations have such a polarizing effect, as some enter the language below the radar of prescriptivism. As a case in point, the construction *just because…doesn't mean…* (as in the title of this article) is a fairly recent expression that has developed its own syntactic and semantic properties, but is not perceived as particularly deviant. This article discusses the idiosyncratic properties of this construction, draws a brief sketch of its history, and offers some thoughts on why it could establish itself without attracting much notice.

Introduction

The grammatical construction under consideration here has only quite recently emerged. It appears however in a variety of forms, some of which are illustrated in the following examples:

1 Just because the data satisfy expectations does not mean they are correct.
2 Just because it's difficult is a poor reason not to try.
3 Simply because it's conservative doesn't mean it's wrong.

In this article, the construction will be referred to as *just because…doesn't mean*, even though example 2 shows that neither *just because* nor *doesn't mean* have to be present in each example. We can initially define the construction in terms of its major parts: The first is a clause that starts with a pre-modifying instance of *because* (commonly *just because*), the second part expressing a negative proposition, or, as in 2, a proposition that carries the meaning of negative polarity: *a poor reason* is easily understood as *not a good reason*. For now, however, let us call these parts the *'just because' clause* and the *'doesn't mean' clause*.

The remainder of this article aims to develop a more refined definition of *just because… doesn't mean* that better captures the form and meaning of the construction. It will become apparent that the construction deviates in several respects from established patterns of English grammar. Its idiosyncrasies suggest that speakers who use it must have learned it as a partially specified idiom: that is, a syntactically and semantically unusual structure into which different lexical elements can be inserted (cf. Kay & Fillmore 1999). These expressions contrast with fixed idioms such as *long time no see* or *par for the course*, which occur in a single fully specified form. Examples 4 and 5 illustrate two other partially specified idioms that are found in English:

4 The more you get, the more you want. (*The Xer… the Yer…*)

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DOI: 10.1017/S0266078407003070
English Today 91/92, Vol. 23, Nos. 3&4 (July/Oct 2007). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2007 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407003070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5 What's that fly doing in my soup? (*What's X doing Y*?)

Like *just because…doesn't mean*, these constructions contain non-canonical syntactic structures and carry idiomatic meaning: *The Xer the Yer* expresses a conditional statement without an overt marker of conditionality, while *What's X doing Y*? has the form of a question but expresses disapproval. Despite their idiomaticity, these constructions are productively used with a wide variety of lexical elements.

The idiomatic nature of *just because… doesn't mean* presents us with a puzzle. If the construction differs syntactically and semantically from common rules and has to be learned as a new item, why is it not perceived as the grammatical outlaw that it is? The following two sections discuss the syntactic and semantic properties of *just because… doesn't mean*. After that, we will briefly consider the historical development of the construction. The final part of the article seeks to answer the question why prescriptivists have not taken issue with the construction in question.

Syntactic properties

Our initial definition of *just because…doesn't mean* was deliberately vague with respect to the syntactic relations that hold between the two parts of the construction. Previous accounts analyse the syntactic structure of the construction in different ways: Hirose (1991) views the *just because* clause as a nominal structure, suggesting that sentences like example 1, repeated here as 6a, consist of a clausal subject and a verb phrase. As there are several types of subject clauses in English (cf. Quirk *et al* 1985:1047), this analysis is intuitively appealing. Example 6b demonstrates that a subject *that*-clause can function in very much the same way as a *just because*-clause.

6a [Just because the data satisfy expectations] SUBJ does not mean they are correct.
6b [That the data satisfy expectations]SUBJ does not mean they are correct.

Bender & Kathol (forthcoming) oppose this analysis because of examples like 6c, below, in which the *doesn't mean*-clause has a pronominal subject like *it* or *that*:

6c Just because the data satisfy expectations it does not mean they are correct.

Two questions arise from examples such as 6c. First, is it justified to analyse the *just because*-clause as a unit that is sometimes a subject, as in 6a and 6b, and sometimes simply an adjunct, as in 6c? Second, does it make sense to analogize *just because… doesn't mean* to other types of subject clauses in English if these types disallow the insertion of a pronominal subject? Whereas 6a and 6b appear to have similar structures, the insertion of *it* is not possible after a *that*-clause, rendering example 6d ungrammatical:

6d That the data satisfy expectations it does not mean they are correct.

Quirk *et al* (1985:1048) discuss six types of subject clause, none of which, in this respect, behave like *just because… doesn't mean*. Bender & Kathol therefore argue that both questions have to be answered in the negative. They propose that *just because… doesn't mean* contains an unexpressed subject in the absence of a pronoun like *it* or *that*, and that the *just because*-clause is always an adjunct. Regardless of whether we adopt Hirose's analysis or the view expressed by Bender and Kathol, the *just because…doesn't mean* construction appears to have exceptional syntactic properties that do not fall out of independently existing principles of English syntax (Hilferty 2003:121).

Semantic properties

Previous accounts have described the primary function of examples like *Just because he's wrong doesn't mean you're right* as the denial of a possible inference (Hirose 1991, Bender & Kathol (forthcoming). Speakers concede that the *just because*-clause is true, but urge their hearers not to conclude that the proposition in the *doesn't mean*-clause follows as a matter of course. The relation of *because* to the notion of inference goes back at least to Jespersen (1940, vol. 5:399), who discusses inferential uses of *because*. To illustrate, example 7a describes an inference rather than a causal relation:

7a John is in his office because the lights are on.

In example 7a, the observation that the lights in John's office are on leads the speaker to infer that John must be there. In sentences with *just because*, precisely this inference is cancelled, as can be seen in 7b:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407003070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7b Just because the lights are on doesn't mean that John is in his office.

Collocational evidence lends further support to the idea that *just because… doesn't mean* typically conveys inference denial. The British National Corpus (Leech 1993) contains 234 instances of the construction. A concordance of all examples in which a *just because*-clause is followed by a negated proposition shows that many of the negated verbs are semantically related to inferencing. Table 1 lists the ten most frequent verb types in the construction.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the table shows the high entrenchment of the collocation *just because… doesn't mean*, which accounts for about 70% of the data. Other verbs that explicitly refer to the process of inferencing are *assume*, *follow*, *think*, *expect*, and *imagine*. The most frequent verbs after *mean* are *be* and *make*, as below:

8 But now I think, just because I've been to prison there's nothing wrong with me.
9 Just because they are small does not make them less precious.

While the data corroborate the importance of inference denial in *just because…doesn't mean*, Hilpert (2005:72) argues that some cases do in fact convey the more general meaning of concessivity. The following pair of examples illustrates this point:

10a Just because a client is the customer doesn't mean he is always right.
10b Now, simply because it's desirable doesn't mean it's doable.

Like previously discussed examples, example 10a denies an inference that can be drawn from the *just because*-clause. The *just because*-clause asserts that someone is *the customer*, evoking the cliché *the customer is always right*. The *doesn't mean*-clause rejects this, much as previous accounts of *just because… doesn't mean* would predict. Example 10b functions in a very different way. The *just because*-clause in 10b states that something is desirable, which does not in itself trigger the inference that it can be done. The *doesn't mean*-clause of 10b therefore does not deny any inference. Rather, it gives the example the concessive interpretation 'although we might want to do X, it is not certain that we actually can'. Examples 11 and 12 give further evidence that *just because … doesn't mean* is not just used to deny inferences.

TABLE 1: Negated verbs in *just because… doesn't mean*

Verb	Tokens	Verb	Tokens
mean	160	follow	3
be	19	think	3
make	11	expect	2
assume	8	have to	2
give	4	imagine	2

11 Just because your seat has a number doesn't mean you should be treated like one.
12 Just because nobody complains doesn't mean all parachutes are perfect.

Both examples derive their humorous effect precisely from the fact that the *doesn't mean*-clause expresses something that was *not* a prior assumption on the part of the hearer. While inference denial is still an important function of *just because… doesn't mean*, we can nonetheless conclude that it has developed into a general marker of concessivity in modern usage. Crucially, this meaning has to be viewed as non-compositional; it does not derive from the meanings of the component parts of the construction. Instead, the concessive meaning is a semantic idiosyncrasy that underscores the idiomatic character of *just because… doesn't mean*.

The history of *just because … doesn't mean*

It was stated earlier in this article that the emergence of *just because…doesn't mean* is a fairly recent development. Hilpert (2005) uses corpus data from four historical periods of English to study constructions with *just because* as they have developed over time, finding that the development of *just because… doesn't mean* started in the nineteenth century. Example 13 is from 1854.

13 Just because I said you were the prettiest girl in town, and the wittiest – that's not flattery.

The example semantically resembles modern instances of the construction in its denial of an inference: it is denied that a compliment reflects the ulterior motive of flattering someone. Syntactically, the example consists of a

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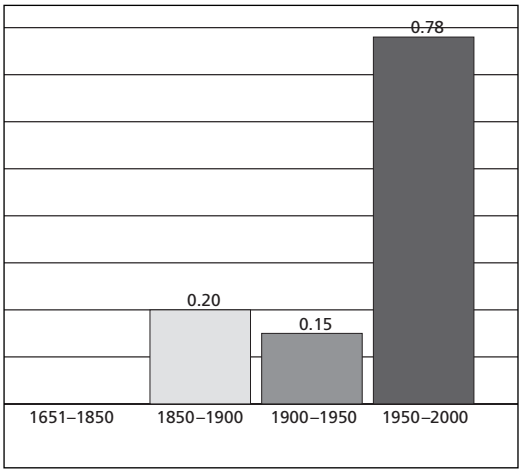


Fig 1: Negative propositions after *just because* over four periods of English

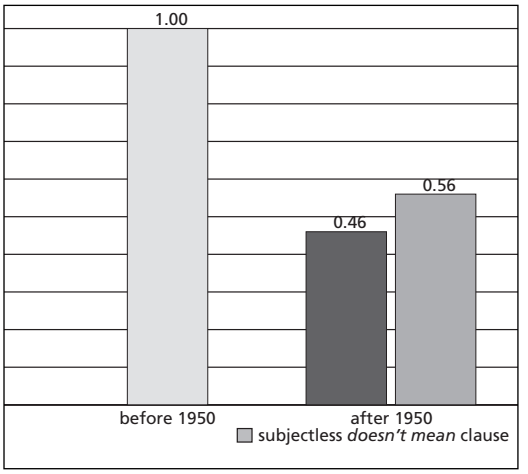


Fig 2: Full and subjectless *doesn't mean*-clauses, before and after 1950

negative main clause with a pre-posed *because* clause. As further analysis reveals, all examples from this stage of English have a *doesn't mean* clause with a subject of its own. This suggests that the source of *just because… doesn't mean* in modern usage was a regular hypotactic (subordinate) construction – a preposed *because* clause followed by a negative main clause.

This construction type has gained in relative frequency over time (Hilpert 2005: 77). Figure 1 shows that sentences beginning with *just because* have become more likely to be completed with a negative proposition, rather than a positive one. While no instances of this pattern are found before 1850, in modern usage *just because* has a 78% chance to be followed by a negative statement.

Another frequency change that merits reporting concerns the presence of separate subjects in the *doesn't mean*-clause. In modern usage, examples like 14a co-exist with examples such as 14b:

14a Just because you know the subject matter it doesn't mean you can teach it.
14b Just because you know the subject matter doesn't mean you can teach it.

Examples such as 14b, in which the *doesn't mean*-clause does not have a separate subject, are only found after 1950, which makes them a fairly recent innovation. The corpus data suggest, however, that *doesn't mean*-clauses with no subjects are in fact more frequent in modern usage than their equivalents with separate subjects (Hilpert 2005:76). Figure 2 shows the development of the two types in terms of relative frequency.

The increased relative frequency of subjectless *doesn't mean*-clauses is partly due to the popularity of the specific collocations *just because… doesn't mean*, but the construction type is by no means limited to this coinage, as illustrated by examples 15 and 16:

15 Just because he is a professor of medicine at Cambridge does not make his findings unquestionable.
16 Just because a thing appears to us at present to be illogical does not, of necessity, disprove its validity.

Where were the gatekeepers?

Considering all the syntactic and semantic idiosyncrasies of *just because… doesn't mean*, why is it not perceived as going against the grain of English grammar? Why does it fail to produce the groans that meet split infinitives and instances of singular *they*? To explain why something goes unnoticed is arguably harder than to explain why something catches our attention, but the findings reported in this article suggest a preliminary answer.

Diachronic data indicate that the construction gradually evolved out of a canonical syntactic structure. There is no rule in the grammar of English that prohibits the use of a preposed *because*-clause with a negated main clause, so that the syntactic form of the construction was already a permissible pattern. Through repeated usage, this pattern came to be used exclusively with the inferential sense

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of *because*. This sense was no innovation either, as it had long been established in English usage.

The real questions then are these: Why did speakers increasingly choose to produce *doesn't mean*-clauses without a separate subject and why did hearers not perceive these tokens as deviant from common usage?

In examples such as 14a, the subject of the *doesn't mean*-clause is an anaphoric pronoun that has little semantic import of its own, but only refers back to the *just because*-clause. In a natural pronunciation of 14a, the pronoun will be unstressed, so that it easily blends into the alveolar onset of the following *doesn't*. The low functional load of the subject pronoun and its phonetic similarity to the following word thus work in favour of a reduced pronunciation. This effect is likely to increase in proportion to the rise in text frequency that *just because… doesn't mean* has undergone recently, since routinization commonly leads to phonetic and phonological reduction (cf. Bybee 2001). As a result, hearers may fail to perceive a subject pronoun that is only vaguely articulated.

A further reason why hearers would be prone to miss a subject pronoun is that even examples like 14b instantiate a pre-existing pattern of English syntax, namely a main clause with a sentential subject. A hearer who has been exposed to utterances like 17a and 17b may conclude that 17c follows the same syntactic pattern.

17a That John is rich doesn't mean that he is happy.
17b John's being rich doesn't mean that he is happy.
17c Just because John is rich doesn't mean that he is happy.

The fact that hearers can parse examples like 17c into a licit syntactic schema distinguishes the case of *just because… doesn't mean* from constructions such as singular *they* or the split infinitive. The latter two stand out as deviant because they cannot be analysed in terms of some other grammatical structure.

To return to our two questions; speakers are at first not likely to simply leave out the subject pronoun. They are quite likely, however, to produce it in a reduced fashion. Hearers are then likely to parse the construction in a way that was not originally intended by the speaker, but which appears fully grammatical to them. If the same hearers start using the construction without a subject pronoun, the new form can establish itself and become more frequent over time.

Conclusion

Cases like *just because… doesn't mean* suggest that not all language changes are created equal. Some are highly noticeable while others are not perceived as the innovations they actually are. This article proposes that innovations can go unnoticed if they are understood to instantiate established grammatical forms. Such a proposal allows us to explain why *some* innovations split a community of speakers into opposing camps, both of which embrace other new structures as if they had grown up using them. ■

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407003070 Published online by Cambridge University Press