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I didn't write this talk because syntax

A syntactic analysis of '*because* NOUN'

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European Dialect Syntax IX, University of Glasgow, 23 March 2019

Introduction

The novel construction *because X* is illustrated in (1), where *because* appears with a bare noun complement.

- (1) I wore my skeleton leggings because Hallowe'en.

Introduction

The dialect in question was originally 'internetese' (McCulloch forthcoming), but the construction is gaining wider acceptance:

Facebook, 18 Mar 2019

(2) (context describing how a man emailed with irrelevant information in response to a job advert)

OP: Why would you do that?

Commenter: **Because man...**

This talk is about a specific unexpected characteristic of this construction: lack of ambiguity under negation.

Negation scope ambiguity

A because-adverbial normally provides the possibility of ambiguity about the scope of the negation (as noted many years ago by e.g. Lakoff (1970) and Linebarger (1987):

- (3) I didn't wear my skeleton leggings because of Hallowe'en.
= because > Neg
= I didn't wear my skeleton leggings, and the reason was Hallowe'en (I'm saving them to wear on Thursday, when it is Hallowe'en).
- (4) I didn't wear my skeleton leggings because of Hallowe'en.
= Neg > because
= I wore my skeleton leggings, but the reason was not Hallowe'en (it's just that they were the only clean thing I had to wear that day).

Ambiguity explained (4 ways)

operator scope CAUSE is an operator like NEG; both undergo QR
CAUSE [he loves her] NOT [George starves his cat]
(Linebarger 1987: 333)

adjunction site The *because* clause is adjoined to TP or VP (Johnston 1994)

negative focus Negated *because* clauses are negated focal constructions and +neg is associated with Foc or Neg (Kawamura 2008)

NEG-raising NEG raises from the *because* clause to the main clause
George NEG_i starves his cat [NEG_i because he loves her]
(following Collins & Postal 2014)

Resolving the ambiguity

The ambiguity can be resolved with prosody (Hirschberg & Avesani 1998), and it vanishes with positive tags, *but because*, and NPIs in the *because* clause (Linebarger 1987: 335):

Negation has wide scope over *because*

- (5) George doesn't starve his cat because he loves her, does he?
- (6) George doesn't starve his cat because he hates her, but because she weighs more than the microprocessor
- (7) George doesn't starve his cat because he has any love for her
= George starves his cat, and the reason is not that he loves her
* George doesn't starve his cat, and the reason is that he loves her

Resolving the ambiguity

Ambiguity also vanishes when the *because X* construction is used, but in the other direction:

Negation has narrow scope

(8) George doesn't starve his cat because ethics

= George doesn't starve his cat, and the reason is ethics

* George starves his cat, and the reason is not ethics

Outline

1 The experiment

2 Discussion

The experiment

Pairs of sentences with either standard CP/*of*-PP complement, or *because* X complement, randomised, presented to respondents (Google Forms, 18 sentences, 74 responses).

- (9) a. Kamal isn't coming because he wants to watch Netflix
b. Kamal isn't coming because Netflix

- (10) a. The pizza doesn't taste good because of the mushrooms
b. The pizza doesn't taste good because mushrooms

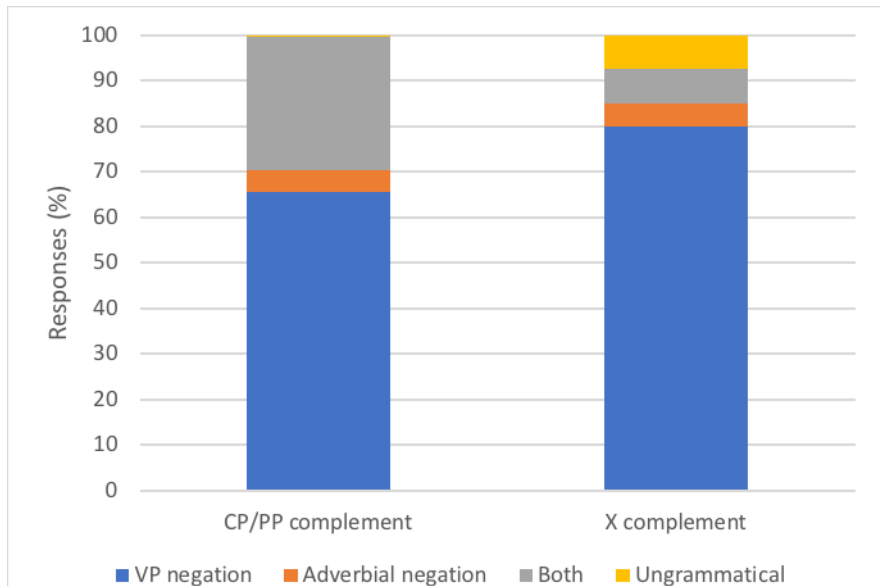
The study

Respondents were presented with the two interpretations and asked to select as many as applied (as well as 'other'/'neither'):

- (11) a. The reason Kamal is coming is not that he wants to watch Netflix
- b. The reason Kamal is not coming is that he wants to watch Netflix

For each sentence, therefore, respondents could select Neg>because, because>Neg, both, or neither (usually because they judged the sentence ungrammatical).

Results



Results

Key findings

- 1 The default interpretation of *because*-adverbials is *because*>neg
- 2 The usual ambiguity of *because*-adverbials is not available with *because X*
- 3 The only available interpretation is the default *because*>neg

Outline

1 The experiment

2 Discussion

Questions arising

Key findings

- ① The default interpretation of *because*-adverbials is *because*>neg
- ② The usual ambiguity of *because*-adverbials is not available with *because X*
- ③ The only available interpretation is the default *because*>neg

Implications and questions

- ① *because X* is not the same construction as other *because*-adverbials
- ② Why does the ambiguity vanish?
- ③ Why does the (default) *because*>neg reading remain, whereas tag Qs force the opposite reading?
- ④ OR Why can't *because X* be negated?

Does George actually love his cat?

because > Neg (the default and *because* X reading) presupposes both propositions A & B and asserts the relation A because B, with negation interpreted in main clause:

A: George doesn't starve his cat

B: George loves his cat

Neg > *because* (the secondary reading and the one forced by tag Qs and an NPI in the *because*-clause) presupposes the un-negation of the main clause proposition A, makes no claim about the *because* proposition B, and asserts the negation of the causal relation:

A: George starves his cat

B: George loves his cat

Negation is interpreted in the *because*-clause.

Preposing *because*

Preposed *because X* is impossible (because meme?) but preposed *because of* clauses more readily have the same reading than final ones:

- (12) I didn't get to ask my question at the conference because men.
= because of the typical behaviour of men #NotAllMen
- (13) * Because men, I didn't get to ask my question at the conference.
- (14) I didn't get to ask my question at the conference because of men.
= because some men burst in and kidnapped the speaker
= because of the typical behaviour of men
- (15) Because of men, I didn't get to ask my question at the conference.
= because of the typical behaviour of men
= because some men burst in and kidnapped the speaker

Interjections

@EwaSR on Twitter, 20 Mar 2019

I mean, this is the man who wrote poetry about how he hit his girlfriend and felt bad, and then later made fun of her for ruining her hair, and it's all packaged as his 'erotic poetry' **because, well, Romans, I guess?**

Non-sentential elements

In previous work I said these were non-sentential elements (Progovac 2006). But some such elements are totally unacceptable:

(16) * Charlie won't come out because in a strop

(17) * Charlie won't come out because a massive hangover

I suggest that, in the converse of the 'complete phase' that Fortin (2007) suggests nonsententials to be, these are necessarily incomplete (because internet): bare Ns without Case, non-finite Vs, adjectives.

They're 'too small' to be negated. They're not integrated into the sentence proper and so outside the scope of negation.

The new rules

Deliberately ungrammatical to convey the 'well, Romans' idea: an interjection, a side thought, pulling up sharp, because internet.

It has to follow the main clause because meme.

It's an optional variant because dialect.

It conveys a whole concept and its connotations (in context):

- (18) We just finished our show and now we're visiting a Home Goods store #BecauseMen

Finnish has cases and internetese

(19) ...mutta en voi koska huomenna on koulua
 ...but NEG.1SG can because tomorrow be.3SG school.PART
 ‘...but I can’t because there is school tomorrow’

(20) ...mutta en voi koska koulu
 ...but NEG.1SG can because school
 ‘...but I can’t because school’

(Mervi de Heer, p.c.)

Conclusion

idk bc internet i guess

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