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Performative Subordinate Clauses

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In traditional grammar, a grammatical construction was a syntactic configuration (often a complex configuration), paired with conditions on meaning and use. In classical transformational grammar, transformations were intended to capture the syntactic aspects of constructions. For example, the passive transformation was to account for sentences displaying what had been called passive constructions; the question transformation was to account for question constructions; and so on. Of course, transformational grammar ignored the semantic and pragmatic aspects of constructions. Generative semantics, in part, tried to reconstruct the traditional concept of the construction by including semantic and pragmatic conditions on individual transformations.

Within recent formal theories of grammar, the concept of the construction has almost completely disappeared. Generalized phrase-structure grammar has a degenerative form of construction in which simple phrase-structure rules are paired with constraints on truth-conditional semantics. But the complex construction -- including constraints on pragmatics -- has virtually disappeared from the literature on formal syntax and semantics. Grammatical constructions are at best considered an epiphenomenon, to be accounted for by other, more general, principles; at worst, they are ignored.

One purpose of this paper is to point out an area of English grammar that requires grammatical constructions in their full form -- syntactic configurations paired with semantic and pragmatic conditions. A second purpose of this paper is to revive a rich tradition of grammatical analysis that has waned in recent years -- the tradition of semantically-based syntax. I will attempt to do this by taking a very traditional kind of question in syntax: what kinds of syntactic configurations can occur in what kinds of subordinate clauses? It is a syntactic question of the most basic kind. I will then try to show that a general answer to this question cannot be given in syntactic terms alone, and moreover that it can be given only within a theory that contains grammatical constructions that include semantic and pragmatic constraints.

The phenomenon I'll be discussing can be seen in the sentences:

- I'm leaving, because here comes my bus.
- *I'm leaving, if here comes my bus.

If-clauses and because-clauses are both adverbial clauses. It is usually assumed that whatever can occur in one kind of adverbial clause can occur in another.

These examples indicate that that simply isn't true. Because-clauses permit constructions that if-clauses forbid.

What is of particular interest in these examples is that the construction that differentiates them, as exemplified by *Here comes my bus*, is usually assumed to be a main-clause construction -- a construction that occurs only in main clauses. What is a main-clause construction doing in a subordinate clause at all? And why does it occur in because-clauses but not in if-clauses? Do other main-clause constructions act in the same way? And if so, which ones do, and why?

A quick look at other constructions that are supposed to occur only in main clauses shows that *Here comes my bus* is not alone. Take, for example, a negative question like *Isn't it a beautiful day?!* It shows exactly the same behavior:

- We should go on a picnic, because isn't it a beautiful day!
- *We should go on a picnic, if isn't it a beautiful day!

This shows that whatever is going on, it is not restricted to individual constructions. It must involve some general property of a class of constructions that usually occur only in main clauses. Exactly what property is it?

Before going on to try to answer these questions, one more peculiarity of this phenomenon should be pointed out. Main-clause constructions occur in because-clauses only when they are in final position. Preposed because-clauses do not permit them:

- *Because isn't it a beautiful day, we should go on a picnic.
- *If isn't it a beautiful day, we should go on a picnic.
- *Because here comes the bus, I'm leaving.
- *If here comes the bus, I'm leaving.

Any adequate account of this phenomenon must explain why this is so.

Some Speech Act Constructions

I would like to suggest, as a first approximation, that what unites the constructions in question is that they are all speech act constructions, that is, constructions that are restricted in their use to expressing certain illocutionary forces that are specified as part of the grammar of English. Let us consider a number of such constructions, together with their illocutionary force constraints.

Deictic *there*-constructions: These direct the hearer's attention to something

present.

-There goes Harry!

Negative questions: These convey positive hedged assertions.

-Didn't Harry leave?

Inverted exclamations: These express exclamations.

Boy! Is he ever tall!

WH-exclamations: These express exclamations.

-What a good time I had!

Rhetorical questions: These convey negative statements.

-Who on earth can stop Bernard?

Tags: These convey hedged assertions.

-He's coming, isn't he?

All of the above occur in final because-clauses:

-I'm gonna have breakfast now, because am I ever hungry!

-*I'm gonna have breakfast now, if am I ever hungry!

-We should have another party, because what a good time everyone had at the last one!

-*We should have another party, if what a good time everyone had at the last one!

-The Knicks are going to win, because who on earth can stop Bernard?

-*The Knicks are going to win, if who on earth can stop Bernard?

-I guess we should call off the picnic because it's raining, isn't it?

-*I guess we should call off the picnic if it's raining, isn't it?

However, not all speech act constructions occur in final because-clauses. In particular, true questions and imperatives do not.

- *I'm staying because go home!
- *I'm leaving because which girl pinched me?

Why should rhetorical questions like *Who can stop Bernard?* occur in because-clauses, while true questions like *Which girl pinched me?* cannot? The difference is that rhetorical questions convey statements (e.g. *No one can stop Bernard*) while true questions are requests for information. This suggests the following hypothesis:

Only speech act constructions that (directly or indirectly) convey statements can occur in performative subordinate clauses.

This hypothesis predicts that certain overt performatives but not others should be able to occur in because-clauses. The prediction is borne out, since only statements occur:

- I'm going to vote for Snurdley because I maintain that he's the only honest candidate.
- *I'm staying because I order you to leave.
- *I'm leaving because I ask you which girl pinched me.

The hypothesis also accounts for the range of speech act constructions that do occur. All of the cases cited above happen to convey statements.

- Here comes the bus!* conveys *The bus is coming.*
- Isn't it a beautiful day?* conveys *It's a beautiful day.*
- Am I ever hungry!* conveys *I'm hungry.*
- What a good time everyone had!* conveys *Everyone had a good time.*
- Who on earth can stop Bernard?* conveys *No one can stop Bernard.*
- It's raining, isn't it?* conveys *It's raining.*

Thus we can account in a straightforward way for the relationship between the speech act constructions and the semantics of the because-clauses:

When speech act constructions occur in because-clauses, the content of the statement conveyed by the speech act construction equals the content of the because-clause.

Thus, in a sentence like

-I'm gonna have breakfast now, because am I ever hungry!

the exclamation *Am I ever hungry!* conveys the statement *I'm hungry*. Thus, the reason given in this sentence is the same as the reason given in

-I'm gonna have breakfast, because I'm hungry.

Thus performative subordinate clauses perform two functions at once. They perform a speech act that conventionally conveys a statement. And they give the content of that statement as a reason for the first statement.

This general principle covers all the cases given above, and excludes nonoccurring cases, like pure questions and orders. It allows rhetorical questions that convey statements. And it predicts that if an imperative construction were to conventionally convey a statement, it could occur in these clauses. As it happens, there is such an imperative. Compare the pure imperative

-Find out which girl pinched me.

with a sentence of the same syntactic form

-Consider which girl pinched me.

The first is simply an order. The second, however, assumes that the hearer already knows the answer. It directs the hearer to think about the answer, and assumes that if the hearer does so, he will reach a specific conclusion that the speaker already has in mind. It is a roundabout, but nonetheless conventionalized way of conveying a statement which is never overtly mentioned. As predicted, the difference between these two imperatives is reflected in their ability to occur in because-clauses. The second can occur, while the first cannot.

-*I'm staying because find out which girl pinched me.

-I'm staying because consider which girl pinched me.

Thus, we see that it is not the imperative construction per se that is ruled out. Most imperatives cannot occur in such clauses simply because they do not conventionally convey statements. Imperatives that do conventionally convey statements do occur in these because-clauses.

Initial Clauses

We are now in a position to explain why speech act constructions can occur in because-clauses in final position, but not in initial position. Because-clauses in

sentence-initial position are presupposed, while those in sentence-final position are not. Consider the sentence:

-I'm going to vote for Hart instead of Mondale, because Hart can beat Reagan.

In this sentence the speaker is asserting that Hart can beat Reagan. However, in the following sentence, the speaker is taking it as a foregone conclusion that Hart can beat Reagan.

-Because Hart can beat Reagan, I'm going to vote for him instead of Mondale.

This can be seen even more clearly in the following examples.

-Do you think that John left early because he was tired?

-Do you think that, because he was tired, John left early?

-I doubt that John left early because he was tired.

-I doubt that, because he was tired, John left early.

In the first sentence of each pair, it is not necessarily taken for granted that John was tired, whereas in the second sentence of each pair it is.

Given the presuppositional character of initial because-clauses, we can explain why speech act constructions cannot occur in such clauses. In order for speech act constructions to occur in because-clauses at all, they must convey statements. However, it is impossible to both state and presuppose something simultaneously. It is for this reason that speech act constructions cannot occur inside initial because-clauses.

Further evidence for this explanation has been brought to my attention by James D. McCawley. McCawley observes that in certain situations preposed because-clauses do not have to be presupposed. Thus, in sentences like

-My boss wants me to vote for Mondale, but because Hart can beat Reagan, I'm going to vote for Hart.

In this case, the speaker can be asserting, not presupposing, that Hart can beat Reagan. McCawley observes that in such cases speech act constructions *can* occur in preposed because-clauses.

-I want to stay, but because here comes my bus, I'd better leave.

This shows that the constraint on the occurrence of speech act constructions is pragmatic rather than syntactic. That is, it is not the preposed position of the because-clauses that rules out speech act constructions; rather, it is the presuppositional character of the position that rules out the speech act constructions. When that presuppositional character is removed, then speech act constructions can occur in preposed because-clauses.

The Range of Clauses

Let us now turn to the question of what kind of clauses speech act constructions can occur in. We have seen that they occur in because-clauses. They also occur in clauses that begin with *although*, *except*, *since* and *but*.

Although

-I'm not going to vote for Snurdley, although I maintain that he's the best candidate.

-I've decided to stay, although here comes Harry -- and you know what I think of HIM!

-I'm going to stay on my diet, although could I ever go for a deem sum brunch!

Except

-I'd stay a little longer, except here comes my bus!

-We really shouldn't go on a picnic, except it is a nice day, isn't it?

-I'd go swimming with you, except am I ever tired!

Since

-I'd better leave, since here comes my bus!

-I'm going to cheat on my taxes, since who will ever find out?

-No one's going to be there, since it's going to be boring, isn't it?

(It should be noted, incidentally, that *since* is formal and many of these constructions are mainly used in informal speech. This can lead to register incompatibility, as in *?He must be a great player, since what a shot he hit!* This incompatibility is irrelevant to the present discussion.)

But

-I really should stay, but here comes my bus.

-I'm on a diet, but am I ever hungry!

In addition to *if* clauses, all other adverbial subordinate clauses exclude these speech act constructions, e.g., *where*, *when*, *while*, *as*, etc.

- *There's Bill where isn't John sitting.
- *Harry left when did he ever get hungry!
- *John was sitting in his favorite chair reading while was Harry ever sneaking up on him!
- *John left as didn't Bill come in?

Speech act constructions occur in two classes of adverbials: reason adverbials (*because, since*) and concessives (*although, except, but*). Actually, these two classes form a single more general class for the following reason: In sentences of the form "A although B" and "A but B", B is a reason for NOT A. For example, in a sentence like *John stayed up although he was tired*, being tired would be a reason for *not* staying up. In short, concessive clauses give reasons for the opposite of the main clause. The generalization seems to be that speech act constructions occur in clauses expressing reasons of either sort.

What we have arrived at is a single general principle:

Clauses expressing a reason allow speech act constructions that convey statements, and the content of the statement equals the reason expressed.

The observant reader will have noticed that not all of the examples given have been subordinate clauses. But-clauses are coordinate. Yet with respect to this phenomenon they work the same way as other clauses expressing reasons. In fact the general rule does not mention subordinate clauses at all. It only mentions "clauses expressing a reason". Such clauses may be subordinate, and marked with subordinators like *because, although*, etc. They may be coordinate and marked with *but*. In addition, coordinate clauses marked with *and* and *or* may also take such constructions when one coordinate clause is expressing a reason for another.

-Here comes my bus and so I'd better leave.

Here, the arrival of the bus is a reason for leaving. Incidentally, the reason is given first here. This is required by the reason-interpretation of conjunction, according to which reasons come first (by an iconic principle).

Conclusions

The problem we began with was a conventional syntactic problem: What kinds of constructions can occur in what kinds of subordinate clauses? The solution to the problem requires constructions to be paired in the grammar with the illocutionary forces they express (both directly and indirectly). Once this is done, a general rule can be stated in purely semantic terms. In other words, a complex syntactic problem can be solved by a simple semantic principle -- provided we have the means in the grammar to pair constructions with the meanings they

convey.

This phenomenon therefore provides support for the theory of grammatical constructions, as proposed in Lakoff (1984) and Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (in preparation). According to that theory, grammatical constructions are holistic structures that allow for a direct pairing of form and content -- pairing of syntactic and phonological information with semantic and pragmatic information. In grammatical construction theory, it is possible to find such semantic-pragmatic solutions to syntactic problems.

Of course, grammatical construction theory is not the only contemporary theory that permits the direct pairing of syntactic and semantic information. However, it is the only theory I am aware of that permits the pairing of complex syntactic configurations with the appropriate pragmatics -- in this case, conveyed illocutionary force. Grammatical construction theory permits such pragmatic factors to enter directly into the composition of sentences. Generative theories with an autonomous syntax cannot do this. For example, they have no way of generating speech act constructions in exactly the right subordinate clauses while not generating them in the wrong subordinate clauses -- and still stating the fully general principles governing their occurrence.

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