

Cognitive Linguistics in the Making

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On constructivization – a few remarks on the role of metonymy in grammar¹

Abstract The paper explores the role of conceptual and constructional metonymy in the origins of language. It is argued that the first stage in the development of language, i.e. the stage of Proto-Language was a form of one- and two-word communication relying crucially on the ability to form associations between different participants and relations between them which could be accessed by means of designating single participants or relations alone. I will try to show that that such “non-sentential” forms of communication are also common in modern languages, like Polish and English. Moreover, some relics of those early forms of communication have become parts of entrenched grammatical constructions. There are two basic variants of this general process. In the first variant one or more participants of a relation are ellipsed and accessed metonymically by means of an expression designating either the relation alone or the relation and some of its other participants. In the other variant of this non-sentential communication, it is the constituents designating only single participants of the whole event which metonymically stand for the whole proposition. Finally, it is shown that the same basically metonymic mechanism is instrumental in the formation of dependent monoclausal constructions, which designate complex relations between more than one proposition, such as monoclausal *if-only* constructions.

Keywords grammatical constructions, proto-language, metonymy, proposition, communication

1. From proto-language to language as we know it

I first hinted at the role of conceptual and constructional metonymy in the origins of language in Bierwiaczonek (2013a). I argued that the first stage in the development of language, i.e. the stage of Proto-Language, as described by

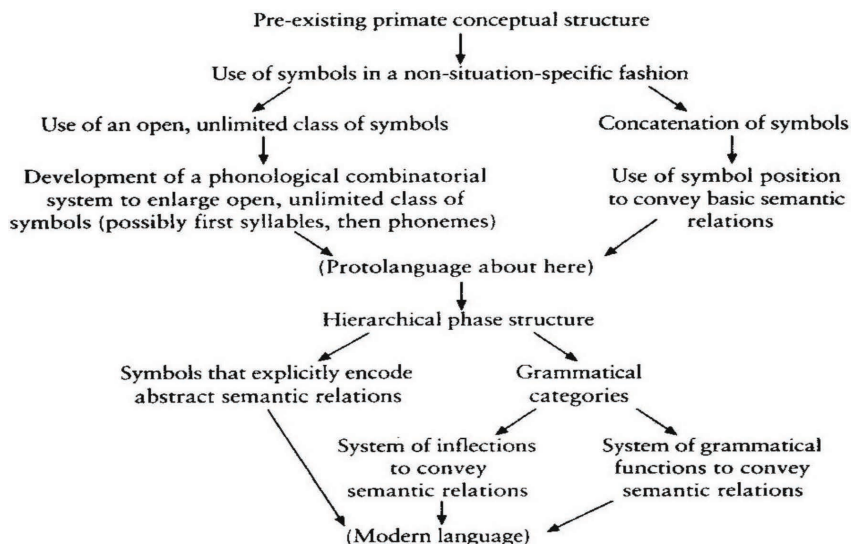
1 Proofread by Susan Stacy Johnson.

Bickerton (1990), was a form of one- and two-word communication relying crucially on the ability to form associations between different participants and relations between them which could be accessed by means of designating single participants or relations alone. The process was essentially metonymic in the sense that parts of the communicated messages were used for whole messages. Of course one or two-word (non-syntactic) communication might have worked well in clear contexts; however, the more language was "displaced", the more it was necessary to fill the missing contextual information with linguistic information. Thus, more and more words were concatenated; since there was no syntax, however, they were probably arranged according to the general communicative (or processing?) principles, such as

- Agent First
- Focus Last
- Grouping (cf. Jackendoff, 2002)

It was probably these first structured complex symbols that in time gave rise to grammatical categories, structural patterns, inflections and grammatical functions paired with conceptual structures of varying degrees of complexity; in short – modern language. According to Jackendoff, the process might have proceeded as follows:

Figure 1: Jackendoff's theory of origins of language (scanned from Jackendoff 2002:238)



What adds plausibility to the view of the evolution of language as suggested by Bickerton and Jackendoff is that the same basically metonymic mechanism that enabled our ancestors to communicate in Proto-Language is still used in contexts that are sufficiently rich and, furthermore, that it has crucially contributed to the rise of at least two categories of grammatical constructions: those motivated by conceptual metonymy and those motivated by constructional metonymy. In the following section we shall briefly discuss the traces of those original pre-syntactic communicative behaviours in modern English. In the two other sections we will consider the metonymic sources of a number of much more complex modern grammatical constructions.

2. Communication based on single words and nonsyntactic concatenation

Communication based on single words and non-syntactic concatenation is still a common occurrence. Such communication uses the same original conceptual metonymic mechanism, whereby **one (named) part of a conceptual structure stands for a whole complex conceptual structure**. It is important that such one-word or two-word combinations should not be confused with holophrases: they designate specific elements of complex conceptual structures which serve as vehicles activate the whole structure (cf. Bickerton, 2003).

Thus, in sufficiently rich contexts complex conceptual structures are often communicated in linguistically short, syntactically functionally unmarked forms.² For instance, a single proper name, as in (1) below, modulated phonologically can mean [STOP DOING IT, MARK], or [MARK, YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF], or [I CAN'T BELIEVE IT WAS MARK WHO DID IT]. The two infinitives in (2) and (3) in Polish may have full propositional meanings: (2) may well mean [I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME SOMETHING TO DRINK], while (3), with the rising intonation, would be most likely taken as request for advice, i.e. roughly, [DO YOU THINK I SHOULD GO OR NOT?].

2 These one-word utterances should not be equated with so-called “fragments” in the sense of Culicover and Jackendoff (2005, p. 234f) whose “interpretation depends on their relation to the antecedent clause in the discourse”, e.g.

A: What did Pat buy?

B: A motorcycle

However, in Bierwiazzonek (2013a) I argue that such fragments are also meaningful through their metonymic link with the conceptual and syntactic structure activated by the question.

In the exchange in (4) the whole story about the weekend can be reduced to elementary concatenation of *just* and *telly*, while in the joke in (5), the final *puppies* effectively and amusingly conveys the whole complex causative conceptual structure.

- 1) Mark!
- 2) Pić! (I want you to give me something to drink)
- 3) Jechać?
- 4) A: How did you spend the weekend?
B: Just telly
- 5) Three women were at the doctor's office for their second trimester check-ups. The first woman, a brunette, said that she was sure that she would have a girl because when she made love to her husband, she was on top! The second affirmed with certainty that she would have a boy, because she was on bottom. The blonde grabbed her head between her hands.
"Oh, crap! Puppies."

Essentially the same mechanism operates in newspaper and Internet headlines, where single more or less simple concepts stand for often long and complex narratives or reports. Of course the conceptual target of headlines is not exactly known until the story is read, nevertheless, this is the way they are often formed. Here is a sample:

- 6) BBC Internet headlines:
 - Teen exorcists
 - Human touch
 - Revving up
 - Survivors' Tales
 - Fighter, stronger
 - White death
 - Stigma and searches
 - Pushing the frontiers

In Bierwiazonek (2013a) I suggested that this tendency to reduce linguistic form, which Grice included in his Maxim of Manner in the injunction: *Be brief*, has firm cognitive foundations in our ability to access large conceptual structures by means of their small linguistically designated parts. This Principle of Verbal Economy, as I called it, sounds as follows:

Be brief. Don't repeat what your addressee(s) already know from their experience and context and make maximal use of their ability to form conceptual associations and construct relevant meaning on the basis of the words they hear, their perception of context, and their knowledge of the world. (Bierwiazonek 2013a, p. 18)

Interestingly, PVE has acquired an almost grammatical status in the language of commercial slogans, which are usually accompanied by pictures of their merchandize. A sample of various car makers' slogans is given below:

7) Slogans:

- *Grace...space...pace* (Jaguar)
- *Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet*
- *An American Revolution* (Chevrolet)
- *American Luxury* (Lincoln)
- *Life, Liberty, and The Pursuit* (Cadillac)
- *The power of Dreams* (Honda)
- *The Spirit of American Style* (Buick)
- *Fuel for the Soul* (Pontiac)
- *Unlike any other* (Mercedes Benz)
- *For Life* (Volvo)
- *Passion for the road* (Mazda)

All these expressions are syntactically incomplete, yet in the visual context they successfully communicate complex propositional structures.

3. Conceptual metonymy constructivized

Constructivization of conceptual metonymy is a process whereby a non-sentential structure which designates fragments of the propositional conceptual structure which stands for the whole propositional conceptual structure becomes an entrenched construction of a language.³ Thus, the results of constructivization of conceptual metonymy are various “non-sentential utterance types” (Culicover and Jackendoff, 2005, Ch. 7) or, as I prefer to call them, non-sentential constructions.⁴ Since a good deal of those constructions are systematically used with the same illocutionary force, they constitute an important subset of what I will refer to as “illocutionary constructions”. Let us discuss a few examples.

3 Defined in this way, constructivization is quite different from metonymic extensions or elaborations of already existing constructions, as for instance, in the use of questions about ability used for requests, as in *Can you pass me the salt*, i.e. in illocutionary metonymies which use part of the Request Scenario for the whole scenario couched in the form of an ordinary Yes-No interrogative construction (cf. Panther and Thornburg, 2003, Bierwiazzonek, 2013a, Ch. 4).

4 Culicover and Jackendoff (2005, p. 236) give a list of such nonsentential constructions consisting of ten items. I understand this is just a small sample of a much larger set. Two of the constructions from the list will be discussed here: *How about* NP/Gerundive VP and *One more X and* Clause (as a special case of a more general construction NP *and* S)

3.1 *What a N!* Construction

The construction *What a N!*, illustrated by the examples below, is an illocutionary construction, systematically used with the illocutionary force of EXPRESSIVE:

- 8) What a flower!
- 9) What a ring!
- 10) What a shot!
- 11) What a jump!

In the first two examples the common nouns *flower* and *ring* activate a whole evaluative proposition, which in an appropriate context amounts to [I SEE THIS FLOWER/RING AND I THINK IT IS EXTRAORDINARY], so the noun in the construction designates the THEME of the whole proposition. The latter two examples are quite different in that the action nouns designate the dynamic PREDICATE of the proposition, which in turn activates the whole propositional structure whose meaning amounts to [I SAW THIS EVENT AND I THINK THIS X SHOT/JUMPED IN AN EXTRAORDINARY WAY].

Notice that the above construction is idiomatic in that there is no independent productive pattern in English that could be proposed as a regular schema for this construction. The construction represents an interesting case of a non-sentential construction having a “sentential”, propositional meaning.

3.2 *How/What about X* Construction

Another illocutionary construction which has similar properties to the *What a N* Construction with an action noun is a subtype of *How/What about X* Construction with the gerundive VP in the X position, which is often used with the illocutionary force of SUGGESTION (but see Carter and McCarthy, 2006, p. 703f, for other functions as well), illustrated by the BNC examples below:

- 12) How about bringing him in on Thursday?
- 13) How about dressing now, Jenny, and coming down-stairs?
- 14) What about taking me on sometime?
- 15) What about putting some in the middle?
- 16) I'm going to have lunch,' Victor continued, 'so, as Simon's otherwise engaged, how about joining me?'

Again, a non-sentential structure designating only the ungrounded (tenseless) Verb Phrase conveys the meaning of the whole proposition.⁵

5 Of course the most common case of a propositional construction reduced to its Verb Phrase is the imperative construction in English.

The *How/What about* X Construction is also conceptually metonymic in its other discourse function, namely “to invite someone to speak or comment or to reciprocate a speaking turn” (Carter and McCarty, 2006, p. 704), as in the following exchange borrowed from Carter and McCarthy:

17) A: It was very interesting doing it

B: It was all right was it. Yeah. Yeah. How did everybody else feel? Lucy, how about you?

C: Er, well, the same really. (ibid.)

Whatever B’s question is, it certainly is not about the Addressee’s (Lucy’s) identity but rather about a complex propositional structure concerning her feelings and opinion.

3.3 *Why not* VinfP Construction

Another non-sentential constructivized way of making tentative SUGGESTIONS is the construction *Why not* VinfP (cf. Carter and McCarty, 2006, p. 705f), illustrated by the following BNC examples:

18) Why not cut all four at one go?

19) Why not make your visit to the theatre extra special, and spend a night at one of Scarborough’s best hotels?

20) Why not try the opposite setting to the one you’ve just used and see how the needles move (or don’t) in each direction?

Again, the whole propositional content is accessed by the tenseless Verb Phrase.

3.4 *One more* NP and Clause Construction

Not only predicates but also other constituents and participants or roles they designate may be used to convey full propositional content. For instance, in the *One more* NP and Clause Construction, as in *One more beer and I’m off*, the entity designated by X is usually the PATIENT of the whole proposition, construed as a condition or reason for Y, roughly [IF YOU DRINK ONE MORE BEER]. Again, this is an illocutionary construction, with a relatively fixed illocutionary force of THREAT or WARNING (cf. Taylor, 2002, p. 571f). Consider two other BNC examples:

21) One more such blow, I thought, face down in the sand, and I am gone.

22) One more weekend and the security screen could be lifted.

3.5 *If it weren't for* NP, CLAUSE Construction

Another semantically conditional construction motivated by conceptual metonymy, where a single Noun Phrase stands for the whole proposition is *If it weren't for* NP, Clause Construction, as in the BNC examples below:

- 23) If it were not for Section 8 of the Contempt of Court Act, we might be able to make reforms more rationally on the basis of, at least, a minimal sample of the recorded deliberations of informed and unidentified jurors.
- 24) Ironically, the Great War would not have been the war that it was if it were not for the machine.
- 25) He also remarked, significantly: If it were not for the Union, I venture to think that women would be all over the London trade.
- 26) Housewife Rita Davis, of Ilford, Essex, said: 'We would never have known what our taxes are going on if it was not for The Mirror.'
- 27) The most popular British cult object, however, has no wheels and would not have moved at all if it was not for British Telecom.
- 28) If it was not for her, this Council would have had more opportunity of addressing some of the deep problems the Tories either created or left behind.
- 29) The mammoth catalogue raisonn   of Magritte's work would almost certainly not have come into existence if it were not for John (d. 1973) and Dominique de Menil.

Clearly, the underlined NP-s stand for larger conceptual wholes conveying propositions in which they feature as primary AGENTS or CAUSES responsible for the developments described in the main clause. This conjecture is reinforced by the fact that the construction has also its non-metonymic variety, whereby the whole propositional conceptual structure is conveyed by different kinds of clausal constituents, from full-fledged finite clauses (often introduced by *the fact*), through relative clauses and gerundive clauses to nominalizations. Consider the following BNC examples:

- 30) If it were not for the fact that he was one of the favourites you'd have been delighted but as a Gold Cup winner I had to feel a bit disappointed.
- 31) This would be a useful feature if it were not for the fact that a certain amount of vaginal discharge is perfectly normal and natural for a woman in her reproductive years.
- 32) If it were not for an old professor who made me read the classics I would have been stymied.

- 33) From what has been said above, it will be clear that the Oxford English Dictionary Department would not be what it is, if it were not for the Supplement project lying at the heart of its work.
- 34) At the western outskirts of the town is the Bliss Valley Tweed Mill, an imposing stone-built factory which, if it were not for its chimney rising from a domed tower, would look like a great country mansion.
- 35) If it were not for my concern for my grandmother, I would — I would put you out of the car right now, I would let you wait beside the road until someone took pity on you and offered to drive you back to Milano.

Given the relatively high frequencies of the two varieties of the *If it weren't for* NP, Clause Construction, it may be suggested that in fact there are two kinds of this construction: one in which the condition is activated metonymically through its CAUSATIVE participant, indicated by ">>", and the other, in which the condition (EVENT1) is spelled out in its full clausal form (of whatever kind). The reason why the metonymically motivated version of the construction is taken as basic is that the crucial constituent of the construction is the *for*-NP Prepositional Phrase which is prototypically complemented by common or proper nouns. Hence, it seems that the clausal extension of the NP serves to make sure that the otherwise metonymically accessed proposition is clearly understood. In other words, with the exception of *the fact* -headed NPs, the clause spells out exactly what the CAUSER's contribution to the conditional EVENT1 is or was.

The two constructions may be represented as follows:⁶

Figure 2: Conceptually metonymically motivated *If it weren't for* NP, Clause Construction

Syn	<i>If</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>were not</i>	<i>for</i> NP	Clause
Sem	Condition		STATE	CAUSER [>> EVENT ₁]	EVENT₂(-fact)

Figure 3: Expanded *If it weren't for* NP, Clause Construction

Syn	<i>If</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>were not</i>	<i>for</i> NP	Clause
Sem	Condition		STATE	(CAUSER) EVENT ₁	EVENT₂(-fact)

6 "Syn" stands for "Syntax" or "Syntactic layer of construction", "Sem" stands "Semantics" or "Semantic layer of construction", the bold boxes indicate the head (i.e. main) clause of the complex sentence, the subscript [-fact] indicates counterfactuality.

It is worth pointing out that the Polish equivalent of the English *If it weren't for* NP, Clause Construction is even more constructionally idiomatic in that the first conditional part of the whole complex sentence is reduced to the conjunction *gdyby*, followed by the negative particle *nie*, followed by the NP. There is no verb so the condition is not even designated by a sentential structure and relies entirely on the conceptual metonymy linking the CAUSATIVE participant and EVENT 1. Here are the Polish translations of the conditional clauses of the first three sentences of the corpus sentences given above:

- 36) If it were not for Section 8 of the Contempt of Court Act, we might be able to make reforms more rationally on the basis of, at least, a minimal sample of the recorded deliberations of informed and unidentified jurors.
Gdyby nie Dział 8 Ustawy o Obrazie Sądu, ...
- 37) Ironically, the Great War would not have been the war that it was if it were not for the machine.
.... gdyby nie ta maszyna.
- 38) He also remarked, significantly: If it were not for the Union, I venture to think that women would be all over the London trade.
... Gdyby nie związek zawodowy, ...

Summary

We have discussed briefly a number of constructions which are unique and idiomatic on account of their considerably reduced syntactic structure and which convey full propositional contents by means of selected parts of those contents designated by various constituents: predicates or one of their participants

4. Constructional metonymy constructivized

In Bierwiazzonek (2007, 2013a) it was suggested that there is a subcategory of PART-FOR-WHOLE metonymy, called “formal metonymy”, whereby part of a linguistic form is used to access the whole linguistic form. Essentially the same process was described by Barcelona (2005) as SALIENT PART OF FORM FOR WHOLE FORM metonymy, e.g. the prefix *sub* may denote the concept of SUBMARINE by virtue of being part of the whole form of the word *submarine* or the word *chair* may denote the concept of ARMCHAIR by virtue of being part of the whole compound *armchair*, etc. Furthermore, I also showed that formal metonymy is operative in syntax, resulting in what is often regarded as different forms of phrasal or clausal ellipsis. Since phrases, clauses and sentences in cognitive syntax can be viewed as constructions, i.e. pairings of syntactic form and its