What? Me, lie?[1]

The Form and Reading of the Incredulity Response Construction

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Abstract

In the present study, we focus on the formal properties of the Incredulity Response Construction (IRC) and attempt to point out that they provide clues to help establish the interpretation of this closed-class form. While many previous studies stressed the construction's idiosyncratic properties which have been held up as arguments in favor of its special construction status, we wish to argue that although the IRC is a construction with a clear meaning, its form and function are not as idiosyncratic, irregular, or unpredictable as they are portrayed in the literature. Indeed, the formal and functional properties of the IRC fit well within traditional characterizations of items located on the syntactic side of the lexicon-syntax continuum. We will attempt to demonstrate that the form of the construction is an iconic representation of its reading. Additionally, we question the reading itself, arguing that the incredulity that gave rise to the construction's very name is not its semantic contribution. Instead, we propose a more general meaning of incongruousness or "cognitive dissonance".

1. Introduction

Among many hallmarks of Construction Grammar is the fairly bold idea that every learned language form belongs to the constructicon – an all-inclusive lexicon comprising single lexical items, multi-word expressions, partly filled constructions, as well as fully formulaic syntactic patterns. This approach represents an alternative to the modular composition of language with syntax and the lexicon representing two extremes. With the help of numerous studies on the properties of idiomatic expressions, partially filled phrases, and other "non-core" phenomena, it became evident that lexical items and distinctly syntactic patterns cannot be clearly separated and assigned to either end of the divide. Langacker dismisses the simplistic binary view of the lexicon and syntax in the following terms,

> [s]yntax was thought of as the domain of generality and regularity, of productive rules with fully predictable outputs; anything falling short of these standards was relegated to the purgatory of lexicon – the domain of irregularity, idiosyncrasy, and lists. But this deeply ingrained, almost archetypal conception of syntax has very little empirical foundation. I am aware of no a priori or factual grounds for believing that grammatical constructions divide neatly into two groups on the basis of generality, or that the regular aspects of

language structure can be segregated in any meaningful way from the irregular ones. (Langacker 1987: 26)

The traditional division was thus replaced with a continuum view, under which the lexicon transitions smoothly into syntax. Between the purely lexical and syntactic extremes there is an intermediate area where language forms have properties that reflect their dual membership. One such property has to do with the semantics of constructions. Quite simply, a form classified as being partly closed-class may still convey meaning.

This recasting of the lexicon-syntax divide has implications for how we view the semantics of not only transitional, but all language forms in general. Specifically, it was acknowledged that no language form can be deprived of its potential to carry meaning. According to this notion, formally known as the Symbolic Thesis, grammar "consists in the conventional symbolization of semantic structure" (Langacker 1987: 76). The across-the-board semanticization of language forms can be traced to the denial of a qualitative difference between closed- and open-class forms. That is, if certain language forms have been recognized as transitional, displaying both semantic and syntactic properties, the ability to carry meaning cannot be regarded as exclusive to lexical items.

But while the recognition of semantic capabilities in transitional forms is rather unsurprising, conferring substantive semantic powers on all language forms is another matter. Although semantic effects can be all but guaranteed to occur in the middle of the continuum, one would expect them to fade away toward the syntactic extreme. Yet many studies in the framework of Construction Grammar follow the thesis that closed-class forms may have any kinds of meaning, even such meanings that would be more typical of open-class forms. This is either a tacit operating premise or a manifest declaration, as in Kay and Michaelis (2012: 2278), who propose that "[p]robably any kind of meaning that occurs can be the semantic contribution of a construction." Similarly, Goldberg (2006) argues that "the detailed semantics and distribution of particular words, grammatical morphemes, and cross-linguistically unusual phrasal

patterns … readily extends to more general, simple, or regular patterns." (Goldberg 2006: 5) As a result, it has recently become customary to ascribe meanings even to those constructions located at the syntactic extreme: closed-class forms, which once used to be assumed to "have grammatical functions rather than rich meanings" (Murphy 2010: 15). And no visible effort is being made to qualify the semantic capacities of constructions according to their location along the continuum. We are not aware of any proponents of the Symbolic Thesis conceding that constructions located toward the syntactic end may be constrained by virtue of their closed-class nature, admitting that "the meanings of closed-class words tend to be less detailed and less referential than open-class words." (Murphy 2010: 15)

In this study we would like to contest this extreme interpretation of the Symbolic Thesis. Regardless of how the lexical-syntax division is presented, the fact remains that closed- and open-class forms do differ. That is, the more syntactic a given form is, the more likely it is to have a typically syntactic meaning, i.e. spare, general, and formulaic, properties to be analysed in section 2. Put another way, the fact that meanings can be found across the continuum does not automatically entail that the meanings near the syntax end have unlimited potential. This point was made in Szcześniak (2013) in the following words,

> [t]he mistake consists in drawing unwarranted conclusions from the inability to locate the invisible boundary. It is one thing to establish the fuzziness of the boundary, and quite another to conclude that it means the absence of that boundary. To take this tack is to commit the continuum fallacy, which argues that if two extremes are connected by small intermediate differences and if at no point a decisive difference can be discerned, then the extremes are the same. For example, the inability to specify at what temperature cold turns to hot should not lead to the conclusion that cold is really the same as hot. (Szcześniak 2013: 167)

The continuum view has affected not only the way linguists perceive the meanings of constructions, but also the nature of their form. Specifically, research has been characterized by a similar drive to regard all language forms together, stressing their inherent arbitrariness. This development is motivated by the recognition that "[o]ne of the central concepts of linguistics is the Saussurean notion of the linguistic sign as an arbitrary and conventional pairing of form." (Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013: 1) As Hoffmann and Trousdale go on to point out, in recent decades much research has been guided by the idea that "arbitrary form-meaning pairings might not only be a useful concept for describing words or morphemes but that perhaps all levels of grammatical description involve such conventionalized form-meaning pairings." (2013: 1)

It seems natural then to expect all language forms to exhibit some degree of arbitrariness and idiosyncrasy, a prediction stated explicitly by Traugott and Trousdale who observe that "[s]ince the arbitrariness of the sign entails idiosyncrasy, idiosyncrasy is present in a construction by default." (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 11) Indeed, the idea of idiosyncrasy is a defining property of constructions if they are understood as stored conventionalized "form-meaning pairings". As Goldberg explains, "[i]t is clear that knowledge about language must be learned and stored as such whenever it is not predictable from other facts." (Goldberg 2006: 64)

It should be pointed out, however, that while all idiosyncratic forms must be stored, not all stored forms are idiosyncratic. That is, although idiosyncrasy requires storage (or learning, conventionalization, entrenchment, to name a few terms referring to roughly the same requirement of establishing arbitrary pairings), conventionalization is not always a sign of idiosyncrasy. Goldberg herself observes that "patterns are also stored if they are sufficiently frequent, even when they are fully regular instances of other constructions and thus predictable." (64) Taylor gives the example of *Have a nice day*, which is highly entrenched despite not being very idiomatic. Similarly, it is likely that for most speakers, the video gaming expression *game over* is entrenched, even though its form does not go beyond regular patterns of English. In other words, conventionalization is not the same as idiosyncrasy; although correlated, they are two separate properties.

Further hedging the ramifications of her view of constructions as learned idiosyncratic forms, Goldberg (1995) points out that language cannot be fully arbitrary, with much of its content being motivated. It follows then that constructions can to some degree be motivated by sharing properties with other constructions, an insight she accommodates in what she calls *The Principle of Maximized Motivation:*

> If construction A is related to construction B syntactically, then the system of construction A is *motivated* to the degree that it is related to construction B semantically. (Goldberg 1995: 67)

She enumerates research findings suggesting that "the idea of a strict dichotomy between predictability and arbitrariness" is untenable (70), which should be taken to mean that there is "no sharp division between obligatory rules and probabilistic tendencies" (70). In practice, however, the gradual relationship between motivation and unpredictability is rarely taken into account, and the motivated aspects of a construction are often ignored. Instead, many constructions are automatically, though sometimes mistakenly, assumed to be highly idiosyncratic, with relations between an allegedly unpredictable form and other constructions being either overlooked or dismissed. A conventionalized form gives reason enough to anticipate idiosyncrasy and to focus one's research

so as to corroborate that anticipation. This attitude, which we would like to refer to as "fetishizing idiosyncrasy", is common in Construction Grammar studies focusing on many constructions, including the Incredulity Response Construction (IRC, *What? Her sing arias?*), our main focus here. We are not arguing that the IRC is completely regular or predictable, but at the same time we think it is not as idiosyncratic as it is portrayed in the literature. In this study, we will attempt to demonstrate that most properties considered so far to be unpredictable and arbitrary can in fact be explained by reference to more general rules of English grammar.

2. The meanings of lexical and grammatical words

2.1 Specificity vs. generality

Unlike grammatical words, lexical meanings often contain rich details of an encyclopaedic nature. Jackendoff (2012: 18) notes that words may have a number of perspectives. For example, in *sunset*, apart from the ordinary understanding, there is the astronomical perspective ("the earth turns and sunlight ceases to fall where we are"). There is also the physical perspective ("there are just photons striking or failing to strike certain molecules in retinal cells and so on"). These are details that often go beyond the strictly linguistic knowledge. Jackendoff adds that some words (like *puddle*) only have the ordinary perspective, but even these can trigger associations with personal experience, beliefs, emotional reactions, etc. and it is not easy to establish a sharp distinction between lexical meanings and non-linguistic knowledge (see for example discussion in Langacker 2008: 38-39).

Grammatical meanings lack this capacity. Even when they refer to visual information (as in the case of spatial prepositions), their nature – too abstract and general – does not allow them to trigger vivid associations with any specific situation, because as Langacker noted, grammatical meanings "are nothing more than cognitive abilities applicable to any content." (2008: 539) Cruse explains that the meanings of grammatical elements must exhibit flexibility great enough to be coupled with semantically diverse lexical items. Their meanings are therefore of a very general sort. Cruse gives the example of the notion of past tense, which can "combine without anomaly with virtually any conceivable verbal notion." (1986: 5) As a result, the meanings of closed-class forms can be expected to be minimal and highly schematic meanings. For example, following Talmy (2000), Evans (2011) contrasts open- and closed-class forms and shows that the former convey "rich semantic content" while the latter encode "schematic semantic content" (88). This is not to say that the meanings of grammatical forms can never go beyond the absolute generality, but as various studies suggest (e.g. Talmy (1978), Morrow (1986), Croft (1990)) when they do exhibit a degree of specialization, it is usually in typically

grammatical semantic fields (such as causation, spatial or temporal relations) or in non-truth-conditional kinds of meanings, which we will address below.

2.2 Conceptual representations vs. procedures

Another way in which grammatical and lexical words differ is the openness of meanings to conscious report. The meanings of words like *but* and the utterance initial *well* are rather hard to define. As Blakemore put it, "[a]sk a native speaker what these mean, and you are much more likely to receive a description or illustration of their use than a straightforward paraphrase." (2002: 83) Meanings of lexical words, on the other hand, can be reflected upon, compared, and outlined by language users with relative accuracy and ease.

Wilson and Sperber (1993) argue that the intangibility of grammatical elements springs from a more fundamental characteristic of the meanings they communicate. While lexical words serve to express various notions, grammatical meanings provide instructions on how to read the concepts they accompany. In their words,

> Conceptual representations can be brought to consciousness; procedures cannot. We have direct access neither to grammatical computations nor to the inferential computations used in comprehension. A procedural analysis would explain our lack of direct access to the information they encode. (1993: 16)

This is also the kind of meaning exhibited by the Incredulity Response Construction analysed in section 3.

2.3 Construal, non-truth-conditionality

Related to the conceptual-procedural distinction mentioned above is the question of construal. Briefly, grammatical meanings tend to deal with different non-truth-conditional ways to frame a situation. For example, the members of each pair (1) may be descriptions of the same video footage, but the grammatical elements focus on different details in each case. For example, in (1a), coffee is viewed as either being quantified (a cup of coffee) or as mass (focus on the liquid). Even if the mass in question is normally served in a cup, the unit is backgrounded, and thus the contrast remains non-truth-conditional.

(1) a. I had another coffee vs. I had more coffee.

    b. Ursa Major is above the Pole Star
       vs. The Pole Star is below Ursa Major.

    c. I sent a letter to Chloe
       vs. I sent Chloe a letter.

    d. I read a book vs. I have read a book.

2.4 Subjectification

One important kind of the realization of non-truth-conditional semantic content which is relevant to the present study is subjectification or subjectivity, referred to variously as the expression of the speaker's perspective or "the speaker's imprint", defined by Lyons in the following words,

> [t]he term subjectivity refers to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent's expressions of himself and of his own attitudes and beliefs. (Lyons 1982: 102)

Subjectification thus includes the speaker's point of view regarding a situation, degree of certainty, emotional attitude toward a proposition being conveyed, and the like.

   A typical and perhaps the most familiar kind of grammatically driven subjectification is the temporal construal of events. How an event is framed depends on its objective properties (like the exact time when an event takes place) as well as on its subjective perception. In the following example, the first three options (2a-c) could be uttered in the same situation, and the difference in the choice of the grammatical construction only reflects the speaker's tentative tone and a wish to focus on the time of dialling (2a), an unfolding development (2b), or part of an ongoing effort (2c). Of course, temporal construal is to some extent contingent on objective factors. The contrast between (2d) and (2e) depends on the circumstances of the external world and is therefore purely truth-conditional.

(2)   a. I just called to say I love you.

       b. I am calling ...

       c. I have been calling ...

       d. I had called...

       e. I will call...

However, some manifestations of the speaker's imprint are entirely non-truth-conditional. One kind that will feature prominently in our discussion is affect. Briefly, apart from conveying propositional content, language provides means for the expression of the speaker's emotional stance, or as Ochs and Schieffelin (1989) put it, "language has a heart". Affect is illustrated by the use of negation in (3b). While the first member of the pair is an emotionally neutral question about the listener's general knowledge, the negative polarity question in (3b) implies that the speaker's expectations have not been met. Under typical contextual circumstances, such as with the speaker observing the listener's bewilderment at an unwanted pregnancy, (3b) is most likely to convey some degree of frustration or disillusion.

(3)   a. Did you know you can get pregnant even while breastfeeding?

       b. Didn't you know you can get pregnant even while breastfeeding?

Affect is a rather elusive kind of meaning. Cruse contrasts it with propositional meanings and shows that the two differ in terms of reliance on context. Affect conveyed by grammatical means is typically underspecified, relying heavily on intonation and facial expression for precise interpretation. The following are Cruse's examples illustrating this effect.

(4)   a. Hasn't he arrived yet?

       b. Has he arrived already?

       c. Is he still here?

       (examples (26-28) in Cruse 1986: 274)

He explains that "[i]n appropriate contexts, *still*, *yet* and *already* can express emotion: [they] would most likely express surprise." (Cruse 1986: 274) Note his phrasing of "in appropriate contexts" and "most likely". The adverbs do not by themselves express surprise; we imagine a speaker being surprised by first conjuring a context in which the speaker's tone of voice and probably facial expression justify this interpretation. However, examples (4a-c) can just as well signal anger, hope, relief, and likely many other conceivable emotions.

   What needs to be stressed is that the exact reading of the intended emotion does not come from the adverbs directly. To take the case of the aspectual *still,* as examples (5a-c) illustrate, the listener may infer the speaker's emotional stance based on the propositional content of the predicates. Given that the verb expresses a specific truth-conditional eventuality, and the adverb *still* "presupposes that that very eventuality overlapped a past tense" (Ippolito 2004: 130), the interrogative form of the utterance allows us to infer that its continuation into the present, though likely, is uncertain and if it is found to be the case, it will probably be to the speaker's satisfaction (5a), admiration (5b), and disgust (5c).

(5)   a. Do you still accept applications?

       b. Do you still run marathons
          in under three hours?

       c. Do you still beat your wife?

The different affective readings in (5a-c) are not encoded by *still*; rather they are computed after the fact, based on its presupposition-triggering properties. It is certainly not the case that the adverbs *yet*, *still*, and *already* are dedicated to the expression of surprise or any single one of these emotions.

To sum up, the meanings of closed-class forms are characterized by their generality. Additionally, in the case of function words like conjunctions and many syntactic constructions, the meanings are procedural, non-truth-conditional, subjective, and context-sensitive. These properties will be shown to hold even for constructions held up as examples of forms with peculiar meanings unusual for function words. The case in point here is the Incredulity Response Construction, whose meaning will be argued to be perfectly consistent with traditional views of closed-class forms.

3. The Incredulity Response Construction

3.1 Basic description

The type of Incredulity Response sentences exemplified below in (6) originally received the label Mad Magazine sentences (MM) (Akmajian 1984). Although both these names continue being used in the literature, the name IRC seems to be the preferred one in most analyses and we will use it here.

At first glance, the construction may seem like an exception to the generalization that closed-class forms carry minimal general meanings. In the literature devoted to the IRC (Akmajian (1984), Lambrecht (1990), Tomasello (2000), Goldberg (2006), Taylor (2012)), the construction is recognized as a means of expressing disbelief at the proposition it presents.

(6)   a.   Come again? Them work out? That's a good one!

b.   Him, keep a secret? Yeah, right.

c.   You, a pick-up artist? Don't make me laugh.

d.   Her invite you to the prom? In your dreams!

In each of the examples above, the sentences are built around a schematic pattern with no pre-inserted lexical material. The full schematicity of the form alone justifies placing the IRC firmly at the syntactic extreme of the continuum. Nevertheless, the meaning of emphatic incredulity the IRC is said to convey does not seem to be general in the least. The construction questions the validity of the proposition made in the preceding discourse, and it does so in a way involving intense emotions. According to Taylor, the IRC serves as a means of dismissing a preceding proposition as "absurd, unrealistic, preposterous" (Taylor 2012: 86). In a pre-CxG study of the construction in French, Bally (1905: 8) characterizes the communicative content of the construction as that of surprise and indignation.

Many authors discussing the IRC agree that it is idiosyncratic and unique. As Michaelis notes, the form of the IRC "owes little or nothing to the ordinary English syntax of predication and subordination." (Michaelis 2010: 169) In the same vein, Barðdal and Eythórsson (2012) argue that "the semantics of the construction as a whole cannot be derived from either the semantics of the parts or from their form." (2012: 277). Tomasello claims that it is one of "productive constructions that do not behave like any (or many) other constructions in the language" (Tomasello 2000: 237).

What these and other researchers find intriguing is the combination of the oblique subject and non-finite verb, as this association is a peculiarity not found anywhere else in the language. It is probably true that while the forms (oblique and non-finite) are common on their own, their combination does represent a curious configuration endemic only to the IRC.

To give the idiosyncrasy view its proper dues, one should recognize and dismiss one distraction here, namely the fact that an oblique subject followed by a non-finite predicate is not a completely unheard of pattern, when it is embedded in larger constructions. It is a standard feature in verbal complementation (7a), and verbless IRC patterns such as (6c) resemble small clause structures (7b):

(7)   a.   Sarah let <u>him kiss her</u>.

b.   Sarah considers <u>him an idiot</u>.

However, it should be admitted that the IRC is unusual in that it features sequences like the underlined portions in (7) in free-standing utterances. And one cannot view the IRC as an elided form of sentences like (7a), because the pattern in (7a) cannot serve as the original of (8a). That is, even in a conversation where one speaker utters (7a) and the interlocutor says (8a), this reply is not a paraphrase of (7a), but a refocusing of attention to another detail. A true paraphrase would be (8b), but that is not a straightforward derivation from (7a) that would justify viewing the IRC pattern as a perfectly regular form with parallels in related constructions.

(8)   a.   Him, kiss her?

b.   Her, let him kiss her?

Thus, while we agree that oblique subjects with non-finite predication do seem unusual in main-clause-style utterances, in the remaining part of this paper we will question the view of extreme formal and semantic idiosyncrasy of the IRC. We will attempt to show that the IRC is more transparent, predictable, and semantically compositional than the popular belief suggests.

3.2 Semantics

Although in many uses adduced in the literature, such as (9a), the IRC may indeed serve to convey the speaker's incredulity, the range of other possible

effects is much wider. While (9a) could reasonably be rephrased as 'I don't believe that he's a doctor', it should be obvious enough that (9b) does not mean 'I don't believe that I cheated on you'. And although an interpretation of an incredulity reaction could make sense in the case of (9c), which in some contexts could be paraphrased as 'I don't believe that she got pregnant', the elaboration request ('How? Tell me!') suggests that the speaker is leaning toward the scenario being true.

(9) a. Him be a doctor?

b. Me, cheat on you? How dare you?

c. What? Sarah, get pregnant??
How? Tell me!

Indeed, there are probably no limits to the range of conceivable responses that IRC-based utterances can betray. In suitable contexts, the following could convey the emotional reactions suggested on the right.

(10) a. Him, propose to her?
(Envy)

b. What, John Goodman, be a ballet dancer?
(Amusement)

c. Them, win a medal? Whoa...
(Awe)

d. You, sail around the world, single handed?
(Concern)

e. Her, send a hit-man after me?
(Anger / Fear)

f. Him... Come out? Well, good for him.
(Respect)

g. Me, be an Orioles fan? Don't insult me.
(Offense)

h. Morning-after pill? Over the counter?
Finally!
(Joy / Relief)

i. Me? Reconcile with her?
Over my dead body!
(Refusal / Indignation)

j. Me, drink and drive! How dare you!?
(Protest)

k. Well, well, well ...
His saintliness? In prison?
(Schadenfreude)

Theoretically, one could argue that the amusement in (10b) is a result of incredulity, but that is an unnecessary distraction. The fact that a person may feel sceptical in the face of incongruous facts is no more to the point than the fact that it is equally possible to feel surprised. That should be no reason to argue that the construction conveys surprise or to call it the Surprise Response Construction.

It is particularly worthwhile to emphasize the indeterminacy of the readings in (10a-k). The listener can only entertain a conjecture but no certainty as to the speaker's affective stance. As with the interpretation of *still* in section 2.4, all the listener knows is that the speaker implicates an affective meaning, but the details are left to be worked out based on context, tone of voice, or the propositional content encoded by the lexical items. Indeed, the emotive content may sometimes be so unclear that it has to be given additional expression by means of after-comments such as "good for him!" (10f) or "Over my dead body!" (10i).

3.3 Two types of incredulity?

One way to preserve the incredulity reading in the analysis would be to assume that there are two types of incredulity in the IRC. In (9a), incredulity is targeted at the content of the proposition made. In (9b), the incredulity in question would be directed toward the interlocutor's act of making the proposition ('I can't believe you are accusing me of infidelity'). Viewed this way, in both cases incredulity would indeed be the content expressed by the construction. However, there is a problem with this approach. The second type of incredulity (call it "utterance-directed incredulity") cannot be taken literally. In this use, the meaning of the verb *believe* is being considerably relaxed; it is certainly not meant in its strict sense defined as 'to accept the truth, existence, or reliability of'. The speaker cannot be interpreted literally as rejecting a patently true fact, namely that the interlocutor just uttered a statement. Instead, this kind of incredulity is better viewed as a more general (and vague) reaction paraphrasable as 'I am shocked (that you should even say something like that)', 'I am angry', or, depending on context, 'I am amazed', 'I am amused', 'That's rich' and other such highly emotional responses. In a way, this is nothing but a restatement of how the nouns *incredulity* and *disbelief* are often defined – apart from the literal sense 'the inability or refusal to believe or to accept something as true', the Webster's Dictionary provides the secondary definition 'amazement; astonishment'.

But that is precisely the point: the diverse reactions subsumed under incredulity are examples of subjectivization—content perfectly typical of grammatical items. They can be referred to as 'expressive' or 'expressed meanings' (Cruse 1986: 271). "Expressed meaning most characteristically conveys some sort of emotion or attitude—doubt, certainty, hope, expectation, surprise, contempt, disappointment, admiration, flippancy, seriousness, and so on" (Cruse 1986: 274).

As explained in sections 2.3 and 2.4, the prevailing meanings conveyed by closed-class forms are procedural non-truth-conditional ones. The meanings discussed above are consistent with this portrayal. They instruct the listener how to construe the proposition made through the utterance. It is vital

to note here that subjectification and expressive meanings found in the IRC are plausible meanings of run-of-the-mill grammatical items. While it is true to say that lexical forms have the ability to expose the emotional attitude of the speaker as well, the manner in which they do so differs considerably from that of grammatical forms. If provided with a fitting context, examples (11a-b) could be perceived as synonymous – they both express disbelief, although while (11a) uses the IRC, (11b) employs less inferential lexical measures.

(11)   a. Him, publish a book?

       b. I don't believe that he can publish a book.

These two examples can be assumed to have practically the same content. They differ, however, truth-conditionally in that (11b) has truth-conditions and (11a) does not. We can question the truthfulness of the second example by saying "You're lying. Didn't you say he was a promising writer?", but it would be unnatural to challenge the author of (11a) in the same way.

Here, the use of the IRC should evoke some kind of emotional reaction. The structure of the utterance suggests that the proposition consists of incongruous parts that could generate cognitive dissonance.

3.4 Prototypicality

Another way to salvage the incredulity view of the construction meaning would be to assume that if incredulity is the most frequent reaction, it should be treated as the most prototypical reading surrounded by a halo of receding degrees of prototypicality found in the other observed readings. This seems like a reasonable approach, especially given the general spirit of cognitive linguistic research so reliant on fuzzy logic. Here we would like to suggest that prototypicality should not be applied to the semantic content of the construction built around the reading of incredulity.

Before we give specific reasons against invoking prototypicality here, it is worth pointing out that generally, prototypicality should be suspect for the very reason of being invoked so often. The use of prototypes as a linguistic tool is so widespread that Wierzbicka (1996) and Posner (1986) warn against its overuse. Posner admits that linguists were "enamored of the prototype idea" (1986: 55) because of its promise of explanatory power. Wierzbicka remarks that prototype has been "treated as an excuse for intellectual laziness and sloppiness" and goes on to attempt the prediction that "if [fuzzy prototype] is treated as a magical key to open all doors without effort, the chances are that it will cause more harm than good" (1996: 167). One could sweep any exception, anomaly or contradiction under the rug of fuzziness; constructions could also be treated as family resemblance structures with no necessary conditions

for natural usage, and this way no violated constraint will be a problem, but this would effectively make it unnecessary to attempt to describe any construction. The prototype idea and the family resemblance structure both presuppose that constructions involve a high degree of inherent imprecision, which is a plausible hypothesis, but only a hypothesis nonetheless. We believe that prototype and family resemblance should be invoked only as a last resort, when no other descriptions are capable of capturing the nature of a construction with some precision.

And in the case of the reading of the IRC, there are contraindications against viewing it with prototypicality as a defining property. If incredulity is to be treated as a prototypical reading, and if prototypes are understood as the "best examples" of categories, it would have to be established what category incredulity would represent. One possible option would be to take the observed readings as examples of "reactions", but then it would be odd to consider incredulity the most prototypical reaction. Whatever about incredulity would make it the most classic reaction?

Another possibility could be to take the various reactions as examples of incredulity itself on the grounds that they all include or may include an element of incredulity. It should be conceded that the reactions listed in (10) can involve incredulity and therefore, being the main ingredient, incredulity should perhaps be viewed as the centre of a prototype set. This, however, would be comparable to arguing that sweets are examples of sugar because it is their main ingredient. This would have the consequence of making sugar the most prototypical sweet / candy.

Treating the observed readings of the IRC as examples of incredulity carries yet another problem – namely that such an application of prototypicality would run counter to how semantic categories function. To elaborate on this point, it will be necessary to examine in some detail how categories are organized into hierarchies and how prototype sets form within them.

As Rosch (1978) herself explained, the perceived world is organized into categories along two dimensions. Rosch refers to the hierarchy of categories as "the vertical dimension", that is, "the level of inclusiveness of the category -- the dimension along which the terms collie, dog, mammal, animal, and living thing vary" (30). On the other hand, "The horizontal dimension concerns the segmentation of categories at the same level of inclusiveness - the dimension on which dog, cat, car, bus, chair, and sofa vary" (30). This organization of semantic categories is illustrated in Figure 1.
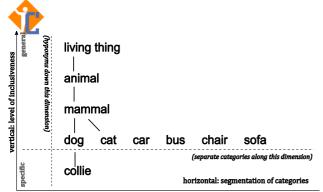
Figure 1. Horizontal and vertical dimensions:
categories and their hyponyms

Prototypicality operates along the vertical axis: prototype sets normally form around the hyponyms of a category. They do not sprawl along the horizontal dimension onto neighbouring categories; a given category does not usually include members of other categories. For example, even very generous use of fuzzy logic would not justify including cow breeds under the category DOG. Therefore, in Figure 2, the broken line representing the outer edge of the prototype set for the category DOG stops before encroaching onto the category COW.
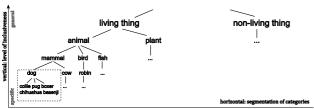

Figure 2. Scope of prototype sets within a category, along a vertical dimension

We are not aware of any prototype sets relying heavily on cross-categorial inclusions comparable to what an incredulity-based set would be. True, some cross-categorial inclusions have of course been attempted or at least considered, perhaps the most familiar of which being the inclusion of bats in the category BIRD, but such category extensions represent vanishingly small levels of prototypicality, occurring around the fuzzy edges of sets, not within their boundaries—bats are barely acceptable cases of birds. Now, the reactions shown in (10) are not "barely acceptable", so they should not be far removed from the center. Prototypical incredulity would then form an unprecedented set made up perhaps entirely of extraneous disparate elements. It should also be stressed that even when category extensions are proposed, they are not uncritically endorsed by all. Wierzbicka (1990) asks

> if informants are specifically instructed to RANGE a set of given species terms on a 'scale of birdiness', and if the set they are given includes both bats and cows, one can understand why they might decide to place bats above cows, but does this really establish that bats are thought of as having any degree of 'birdiness', and that it is impossible to draw a line between words for birds and words for things other than birds? (351)

According to the following figure, the category BIRD features the term 'robin' in its centre, 'stork' and 'eagle' slightly removed from the inner ring, and then the less prototypical flightless members 'kiwi' and 'ostrich'. These are still located within the outer rings (broken line) of the category BIRD. But the category BIRD cannot be seriously argued to include bats (a separate dotted line is used for this extension) as legitimate members, even if they are closer to birds than cows are.
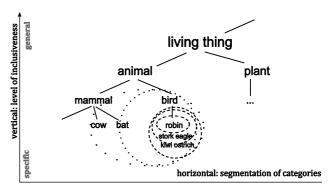

Figure 3. Anomalous category extension: bats

Treating incredulity as a category featuring itself in the centre surrounded by all the other observed reactions would be tantamount to applying prototypicality along the horizontal dimension, creating prototype sets with multiple anomalous category extensions. It would be analogous to attempting to subsume under the category BIRD not only bats, but also dozens of other mammalian or perhaps even fish species.

Category extensions seem to be motivated by empirical findings such as those reported by Rosch and Mervis who observe that "items viewed as most prototypical of one category will be those with least family resemblance to or membership in other categories." (Rosch & Mervis 1976: 575) In other words, membership in one category is inversely proportional to membership in another category, but in principle it does <u>not</u> rule out membership in other categories. However, it seems to us that inverse proportionality and double membership are relevant and most convincing only for those categories that are linked by hybrid members. For example, it is perfectly uncontroversial to place a mule on the fuzzy boundaries of the categories HORSE and DONKEY or wolf-dogs between the categories DOG and WOLF (Figure 4), and there are well known textbook transitional cases such as those between cups and bowls. In these cases, category extensions are justified because they capture phenomena that are naturally occurring combinations of traits of two categories, straddling boundary lines between these categories. While wolf-dogs represent real hybrids (they are considered neither prototypical wolves nor "perfect" dogs[2]), bats are not such combinations.
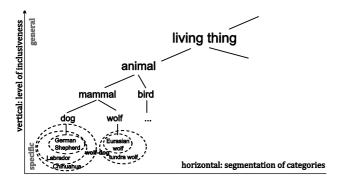
Figure 4. Justified category extension: wolf-dogs

The various readings of the construction meaning may not form a prototype set at all. Instead, what we are probably dealing with here is the expression of the experience of incongruity, which is realized by means of a range of available reactions, and the selection of a reaction will depend on the speaker's mood, topic, context, etc. Those reactions will be consistent with and probably not be better or worse examples of incongruity.

There are at least a few advantages of the interpretation of incongruous parts over the incredulity response reading. First, incongruousness is a meaning general enough to encompass the wide range of expressive meanings observed in possible uses of the IRC, a sample of which is shown in (10). The reactions listed in the sample are examples of expressive options covered by subjectification (section 2.4). Additionally, as was discussed in section 2.1, the sense of incongruousness is a plausible reading for a closed-class form whose meanings are typically general and abstract rather than detailed or encyclopaedic. It should also be noted that incongruousness is a possible closed-class meaning, because in one way or another, it is attested in many other grammatical items (such as discourse markers or concessive constructions). Last but not least, unlike incredulity, the reading of incongruousness can be inferred from the formal properties of the IRC, which contrary to widespread belief, are not as arbitrary or idiosyncratic as they are claimed to be in the literature. The next section will focus on how the reading of two conflicting parts can be derived from what we call a binary composition of the construction.

3.5 Arguments in favour of an iconic binary analysis

Here we offer a number of observations about the properties of the IRC suggesting that the construction is not as idiosyncratic as it has so far been portrayed in the literature. We have gathered examples from various languages to point out some striking cross-linguistic similarities which, in our opinion, make it rather evident that the form of the construction cannot be so arbitrary or random if some of the allegedly unpredictable features recur in many, often unrelated, languages. We remain neutral as to whether the patterns in these languages represent the same construction or whether they

should be treated as equivalents, as in the case of Lambrecht (1990), who refers to the German pattern as "the German equivalent of the English MM" (315). Whether the IRC is a cross-linguistic presence (like the passive voice) or a collection of loosely related patterns, we see no reason (other than perhaps reticent caution) why the obvious parallels should be ignored. Like Lambrecht (1990) who used data about the IRC in German to bear on how the construction should be analysed in English, we would like to consider other languages too, only more. Our sample is larger, including not only English and German, but also other Germanic languages, and further other Indo-European as well as non-Indo-European languages. What we hope to demonstrate is that when more languages are considered, a pattern emerges that eclipses what has so far been treated as a puzzling configuration of unpredictable peculiarities.

3.5.1 Intonation units and segmentation

One of the most salient features of the IRC is its intonation organization. A sentence built around the construction is uttered as two clearly delimited parts—the subject and predicate—separated by a pause and rising intonation on both of them. Put more technically, each of the two parts functions as a separate intonation unit, defined by Chafe (1987) as "a sequence of words combined under a single, coherent intonation contour" (1987: 22). Chafe (1994) stresses the purpose of intonation units in speech, where they are "functional segmentations of discourse" (Chafe 1994: 57).

Given that this intonation-unit-based organization of the IRC is attested in many often genetically unrelated languages, it is reasonable to suppose that this form is not a random accident. We question Taylor's (2012) treatment of the intonation pattern as a "notable feature", where "the 'subject' and 'predicate' need to be spoken on separate tone units, usually with a rising (/), querying intonation" (Taylor 2012: 86) as in (12). It seems to us that this pattern is a natural enough choice. That is, following Chafe's observation that intonation units not only "provide a useful way of segmenting speech, they are profitably viewed as expressing constantly changing foci of consciousness, and hence their relevance to understanding the flow of thought." (1994: 675), one could suppose that the interrogation-style rising pitch is a reflection of the speaker's questioning attitude and the pause between the subject and predicate is something of a breathing spell, as if to give the speaker time to reflect on the logical link between them.

(12)   Me?/ Smoke?/

The division into intonation units is relevant here, given that they function as "basic prosodic units of information flow in natural spontaneous spoken discourse." (Matsumoto 2003: 20). By highlighting a

split between the subject and predicate, the intonation unit-based form of the construction conveys a lack of flow (≠) between the information contained in the two parts of discourse.

(13)   Him… ≠ wear a tux?

3.5.2 Oblique subject and infinitive predicate

Another hallmark of the IRC, the strange pairing of the oblique form of the subject and the non-finite predicate—which can also be viewed as a feature of the binary composition of the construction—has been held up as an example of an idiosyncrasy justifying the IRC's construction status. For example, in his description of the formal properties of the IRC, Taylor states that "...the combination of properties exhibited by the incredulity response expressions turns out to be largely unique to this construction." (2002: 569) Tomasello remarks that IRC sentences "look like degenerate declarative sentences, lacking tense and subject-verb agreement, and with the peculiar property that the 'subject', if a pronoun, appears in oblique form" (Tomasello 2014: 171). The infinitive predicate has been the focus of much research, and many authors have sought to account for its peculiar distribution. For example, Etxepare and Grohmann (2002) analysed the IRC as being an instance of Adult Root Infinitive (ARI).

At first glance, the form of the predicate and the subject do seem rather idiosyncratic and unique to the construction. However, they turn out to be less irregular if viewed as an iconic means of suggesting a disruption of the subject-predicate flow. The logical disruption can be viewed as an interpretation following from Levinson's Manner Heuristic "What is said in an abnormal way isn't normal; or marked message indicates marked situation" (2000: 33). That is, if a typical nominal subject followed by an unmarked finite predicate is a normal way of saying something normal, then an abnormal predicate is a heuristic signal that something about the message is not normal or more specifically, what isn't normal is the pairing of the ideas conveyed by the subject and the predicate. In fact, the disruption in question can also be hinted at by means of other forms of the verb, as long as they are non-finite, which is precisely what can be observed: Although the infinitive is by far the most commonly attested manifestation of the IRC, the construction's idiosyncrasy (if it can be called an idiosyncrasy at all) consists in its resistance to tensed verbs[3]. As a result, any tenseless form will do, because it will then function as an iconic signal of the subject-predicate clash. In (14a), the verb is in participial form and in (14b), it is missing altogether.

(14)   a. Him, *cooking*? Yeah, right.
       b. Nat King Cole sings every Christmastime, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose" . . . An open fire, *in my house*?
          (Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*)

As one reviewer pointed out, there is another motivation behind the non-finite form of the predicate used in the IRC. According to Langacker (1987), non-finite verbs and nouns profile atemporal relations, that is, concepts considered in the abstract rather than realized events. Because the IRC serves to focus on the logical disconnect between the actor and the action, it makes sense to avoid representing "me, lying" as an actual occurrence, but instead profile this relation as hypothetical and "atemporal by infinitivalization or participialization" (Langacker 2008: 124). The construction therefore features infinitives, participles or verbless noun predicates.

English is not exceptional in this regard, as other languages too allow the predicate to be other than infinitive. In Czech (15a) and Polish (15b), the verb can appear in the gerundive form or even as a cognate noun:

(15)   a. On a pít / pití / opilost!
          He and drink-inf / drinking / drunkenness!
          'Him drink / drinking / drunkenness!'

       b. On i pić / picie / pijaństwo!
          He and drink-inf / drinking / drunkenness!
          'Him drink / drinking / drunkenness!'

Similarly, the oblique argument in the subject position in the English IRC is not as bizarre as it is portrayed. Quirk et al. (1985) explain that "the objective pronoun is the unmarked case form, used in the absence of positive reasons for using the subjective form" (338) and the positive reasons include a finite predicate. It is a rather obvious fact that "whether or not a clause is finite in turn determines the kind of subject it can have, in that finite clauses can have a nominative pronoun like *he* as their subject, but nonfinite clauses cannot" (Radford 2009: 10). When the predicate is nonfinite (16a) or has been ellipted (16b-d), the subject pronoun appears in oblique form.

(16)   a. 'Even with them shouting, I still couldn't hear anything.

       b. It's either *us* or *them*.

       c. Let's take turns. / *Me* first.

       d. Who's there? / *Me*!

Interestingly, English is not the only language with a default accusative. In Danish too an accusative subject is required in the absence of a finite predicate, so in the Danish IRC, the accusative, not nominative pronoun is used (17):

(17)   Hende/*Hun? Drikke sig fuld?
       Her/*She? Drink REFL drunk?
       'Her? Get drunk?'

And obviously languages that do not apply the accusative to subjects without tensed predicates do

not do so in the IRC either[4]. So at least as far as the accusative subject is concerned, it is a consequence of more general rules of the English syntax. In other words, at least this aspect of the construction's form is fully predictable in the strong sense of allowing exact falsifiable predictions. Contrary to Michaelis' claims, the construction owes more than just "little or nothing to the ordinary English syntax of predication and subordination" (Michaelis 2010: 169).

3.5.3 Conjunction

In some languages, the construction features an element that may outwardly appear even more aberrant than the oblique subject and the tenseless predicate. In Slavic languages, some Germanic languages and a handful of others, the construction includes the conjunction 'and' between the subject and the predicate. As in the case of the features discussed above, here too, the conjunction makes more sense if viewed as an iconic analogue of the sense of iconic separation between the information conveyed by the subject and the predicate. Below, the use of the conjunction is illustrated by examples from the following languages:

(18) a. Ale on **a** psát básně? (Czech)
          But he and write poems?
          'Him, write poems?'

      b. Čto! Ya **i** yezdit' piyanym! (Russian)
          What! I and drive drunk!
          'What! Me, drink and drive!'

      c. Hij **en** rennen …
          dat gaat niet (goed) samen. (Dutch)
          He and run… that goes not (well) together.
          'Him run… that doesn't go well together.'

      d. Ich **und** lügen? (German)
          I and lie?
          'Me, lie?'

      e. Mida? Tema **ja** mängib malet?? (Estonian)
          What? He and play chess?
          'What? Him play chess?'

      f. Jani **da** tsignis tsera? (Georgian)
          John and books write?
          'John, write books?'

      g. Ne? Ben **ve** dans etmek mi! (Turkish)
          What? I and dance have!
          'What? Me, dance!'

      h. Ana **wa** rraks? (Arabic)
          I and dance?
          'Me, dance?'

The claim that a conjunction may serve to signal separation may seem counterintuitive. After all, *and* normally serves to conjoin, not disjoin, but this is true under normal circumstances, where it appears between two elements of the same status (e.g. noun with noun, predicate with predicate, etc.). In the

IRC, the conjunction is evidently "out of place", probably its only such distribution where it is regularly found between two asymmetric constituents. Taken iconically, when two discrepant elements are conjoined, treated as if they were on a par, the effect is that of juxtaposition highlighting stark contrast.

In some languages, the irregular conjunction can be emphasized by means of additional elements. For example, in Slavic languages, the conjoined subject and predicate can each be preceded by the pronoun 'where', as in example (19a) in Polish or (19b) in Russian. Additionally, in Russian, where the conjunction is optional, the iconic separation of the subject and predicate can be further supported by the subjunctive (Ksenia Shagal, p.c.), as is the case in (19c).

(19) a. Gdzie ja i gdzie gotowanie!
          Where I and where cooking!
          'Me, cook!'

      b. Gde ya i gde gotovka!
          Where I and where cooking!
          'Me, cook!'

      c. Čtoby ya (i) yezdil piyanym!
          That I (and) drive-SUBJUNCTIVE drunk!
          'Me, drink and drive!'

3.5.4 Mutual dependence

Another feature of the construction is that it requires the presence of both the subject and the predicate. According to Lambrecht, the subject cannot be omitted, because "the NP[+acc] and the infinitive are in fact mutually dependent on each other." (Lambrecht 1990: 224) An IRC utterance without the subject would be ungrammatical, even in pro-drop languages, like Portuguese (20b):

(20) a. Speaker A: I hear you got
                      a respectable job?

          Speaker B: *?Get a respectable job!
                      What do you think I am?
          (Example 4 in (Lambrecht 1990, 224))

      b. Speaker A: Vai participar da maratona?
                      'Will you take part
                      in the marathon?'

          Speaker B: O quê? *?Correr?
                      Está a brincar?
                      ('What? Run?
                      Are you joking?')

Although intuitions about the anomaly in (20) may vary from speaker to speaker, IRC utterances do indeed seem to feature both the subject and the predicate most of the time, which is rather predictable given that incongruousness can only be entertained when two parts appear together. It is interesting to add that the interpretation of

incredulity alone could be triggered by the predicate alone, which is rarely, if ever, the case.

3.5.5 Inversion

Finally, the sense of partition conveyed by the features discussed above can also be achieved by means of inversion, a possibility available in probably all languages where the IRC is attested. The point here is that elements can only be inverted around a pivot-like divide. Here, this option is illustrated in the following examples:

(21)   a. What, cook lunch, her?

     b. Co? Tančit sambu? On? (Czech)
         What? Dance samba? He?
         'What? Dance samba? Him?'

     c. Čto! Yezdit' piyanym! Ya!? (Russian)
         What! Drive drunk! I!?
         'What! Drink and drive! Me!?

     d. O quê? Trabalhar? Eu? (Portuguese)
         What? Work? I?
         'What? Work? Me?'

     e. Cosa!? Leggere...? Lui? (Italian)
         Thing!? Read…? He?
         'What!? Read? Him?'

     f. Ra?! Tsignis tsera? Eg? (Georgian)
         What?! Books write? He?
         'What?! Write books? Him?'

     g. Mida? Varastan su rahakoti? Mina?
         (Estonian)
         What? Steal your wallet? I?
         'What? Steal your wallet? Me?'

4. Conclusions

"Incredulity Response Construction" is an over specific misnomer, as the meaning conveyed by this construction does not always have to be that of incredulity. It can encompass many other reactions which, along with incredulity, can be subsumed under the rubric of incongruousness. Thus, in the interest of preserving the familiar abbreviation, it can be proposed that the name IRC could stand for "Incongruous Relation Construction".

The formal properties of the IRC too have been misinterpreted in the cognitive linguistic literature. When viewed as part of the form-meaning pairing, they turn out to have more to do with the meaning than is usually acknowledged. Specifically, we have attempted to demonstrate that the formal characteristics of the construction are remarkably regular, iconically clear, and to some degree cross-linguistically predictable (as in the case of the form of the subject pronoun discussed in 3.5.2), contrary to the belief that they are idiosyncratic or unpredictable. The ambition to point out idiosyncrasies of form is largely an artefact of the constructionist belief that constructions can be

expected to evince some unique characteristics, expressed by Goldberg in the following words,

> Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. (Goldberg 2006: 5)

Idiosyncrasy is not a prerequisite for constructional status. Kay points out that a construction can "lack […] idiosyncratic peculiarities of morphosyntax." (Kay 2004: 695). In the case of the IRC too, the accusative subject and the infinitive predicate are not as arbitrary or peculiar as they may seem at first glance.

We are not claiming that the IRC is entirely regular or transparently predictable. The fact that its form does tend to vary between languages (e.g. some use the coordinating conjunction *and*, and others do not) suggests that the exact pattern has to be memorized by speakers because the right form could not otherwise be wholly "figured out" by logic, common sense, or reference to general rules alone. However, at least some formerly peculiar features like the oblique subject in English are in fact nothing but a straightforward consequence of more general properties (that is, of English being a default-accusative language). And even those features of its form that have to be memorized (such as the preference for the infinitive) are not as mystifyingly idiosyncratic as they have been claimed to be in the cognitive linguistic literature. And as signalled earlier, while the form of the IRC does need to be learned, this does not automatically make it arbitrary. Conventionalization should not be confused with idiosyncrasy, at least not in the case of the IRC.

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[1] We are grateful to the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and helpful suggestions, which prompted us to rethink many points of this paper. We tried to heed their advice as much as possible.

[2] The United States has special state-specific legislation pertaining to their ownership. This illustrates their unclear fuzzy membership: wolf-dogs are viewed by some as pets (almost like dogs), but at least under U.S. law, they are not treated as typical dogs by the authorities, which frequently outlaw them.

[3] As Akmajian (1984) noticed, modals are barred from the construction, due to their defective lack of non-finite forms.

[4] For example, Dutch, which uses nominative pronouns in patterns like *Wie is de volgende? Ik/*Mij!* (*Who's next? I/me!*) will also feature a nominative pronoun in the IRC: *Ik, liegen? / *Mij, liegen?* (These and examples 18c by courtesy of one anonymous reviewer)