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The *But at least* construction – A corpus-based study

The purpose of this research paper was to explore if the adverbial phrase *but at least (BAL)* is a construction and if any constraints could be identified. To be able to determine a classification, the research focused on finding syntactic and semantic patterns, investigating the definition of constructions as being non-predictable and usage-based. The research was a corpus-based study, analyzing 200 tokens that were extracted from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English.* The tokens were analyzed by coding them by syntactic features, the semantic use of *BAL* and the semantics of the whole sentence. The result demonstrated that the *BAL*-phrase is a construction as a syntactic pattern could be determined, the semantic use of *BAL* indicates that it is usage-based and it incorporates non-compositional meanings. Furthermore, three constraints could be identified.

Keywords: Construction grammar, constructions, constraints, usage-based, but at least

1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics went through a change in the 1980's when Construction Grammar (CG) was first developed. CG claims, that our cognition of language is not only based on lexicon but also on abstract syntactic patterns, so called constructions. Since its introduction, CG has been a popular research topic for linguists and many constructions have been identified, for example: the Xer the Yer-, the way- and the ditransitive construction.

In accordance to CG, as cognitive linguistics is based on syntactic patterns, there are a lot of possible constructions to investigate. Therefore, this research paper is dedicated to do such a research on the adverbial phrase *but at least (BAL),* as in: *I may not be a genius, but at least I'm not stupid.* The use of this phrase seems to juxtapose something negative: *I may not be a genius,* with something positive: *I'm not stupid.* When analyzing the components of the *BAL*-phrase, according to The Oxford English Dictionary (2020), *but* indicates a contradiction, and *at least* points to a scale. However, the phrase seems to be able to indicate other semantics that are not inferred by these components. Consider: *they are happy, but at least I don't have to see it. They are happy* by itself does not indicate something negative, however, in this

structure, it receives negative connotation. Additionally, as there is nothing in the semantics of *BAL* itself that implies this imposition, it suggests that there are idiosyncrasies which is an indicator for constructions (Hilpert, 2014, p.25). Hence, the research question of this paper is whether *but at least* is a construction, and if so, can any constraints be identified?

2. Literature Review

Goldberg (2006, p.3) defines constructions as form-meaning pairs. This is something that Hilpert (2014, p.6) simplifies by stating that they are syntactic schemas with open slots to be filled with lexical items. In the Xer the Yer construction, for example, X and Y are the slots that can be filled with comparative phrases. However, Hilpert (2014, p.18-20) emphasizes, that these slots cannot be filled with any lexemes as there are conditions that need to be fulfilled, so called constraints. Hence, in the Xer the Yer, one constraint is that both parts need to contain the definite article. This means that doing research in CG is to be able to determine an abstract syntactic pattern and to detect the constraints.

Furthermore, Hilpert (2014, p.10) highlights, that a main criterion of a construction is that it needs to be non-predictable, which means that some aspect in the construction must be non-compositional. An example of this is idiomatic expressions such as *hit the bucket* that cannot be understood by combining the meanings of its parts. Goldberg (2006. p.5) expands this view by claiming that any syntactic pattern that is frequent enough qualifies as a construction even if it is compositional. This means that expressions that are frequently used, such as *I love you*, are stored in our minds as a unit instead of as separate lexemes. This is what Goldberg (2006, p.43) calls usage-based constructions.

There are many ways to approach CG research. Gries (2013, p.101) discusses one approach which is to locate prototypical instances when the construction is used. He states, that a collection of examples needs to be analyzed and coded by syntactic and semantic features (Gries, 2013, p.101). By doing this, the prototypical instances can be identified which displays the syntactic and semantic patterns.

3. Methodology

This research focused on finding syntactic and semantic patterns to be able to define whether *but at least* is a construction. The data was extracted from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), and this corpus was used as it provided the most hits on *but at least*. The entry in the corpus was the string *but at least (BAL)* to find all the concordances

with the phrase, which generated 8018 hits. A random sample of the concordances were made, excluding all repetitions of the same concordances, and 200 tokens were extracted to a spreadsheet. The analysis was based on Gries' methodology (2013), coding the concordances by semantic and syntactic features. The spreadsheet was divided by subcategories of sentence structure, clause type, and semantics. The sentence structure analyzed word functions, looking at subject, predicate, direct object etc. These findings could then be classified into clause types: intransitive, monotransitive, ditransitive, complex and copular. However, to get a more explicit view, this category was divided into the first clause (coming before *BAL)* and the second clause (coming after *BAL*). The semantics was coded by the semantics of the *BAL*-phrase and the semantics of the whole sentence.

4. Result and discussion

The results are based on the analysis of the 200 tokens. This section has been divided into three subsections to illustrate the results: 4.1 syntactic patter, 4.2 semantic pattern, and 4.3 constraints.

4.1 Syntactic pattern

To define the syntactic pattern of the possible *BAL*-construction, consider examples (1), (2) and (3).

(1) She's hurt, *but at least* she's alive. (COCA, TV)
(2) My kitchen towels don't get replaced every day. *But at least* I know what I'm doing wrong (COCA, SPOK)
(3) It's not perfect, *but at least* you have a chance to improve your situation. (COCA, News)

As can be seen in (1), (2) and (3) they are all structured by two clauses and the adverbial phrase *BAL.* However, these examples disclose that there are variants in the clause types. (1) has two copular clauses, (2) has two monotransitive clauses, and (3) has one copular and one monotransitive clause.

Table 1. Distribution of clause types.

	1st clause	**2nd clause**
Intransitive	3.3%	3.3%
Monotransitive	40.2%	46.7%
Ditransitive	0.5%	3.3%
Complex	5%	6.5%
Copular	51%	40.2%

Table 1 displays the distribution of the different clause types in the concordances, divided into the first clause (coming before the *BAL*-phrase) and the second clause (coming after the *BAL*-phrase). It is important to mention that there was no relationship between the two clauses' clause types, as no combination was prominent. However, these numbers manifest that the monotransitive and copular clauses are the most common types that appear with the *BAL*-phrase, regardless of its position. Hence, as the distribution of both these types are almost equivalent, it establishes that the clause type does not have a significance in this construction. Additionally, if we consider Hilpert's (2014) definition of schemas and slots, this table highlights that the slots in this construction have a broad aspect of possibilities. Therefore, if X is the slot before the *BAL*-phrase and Y is the slot after the *BAL*-phrase, the syntactic pattern of this construction is: X *BAL* Y, where X and Y are clauses.

4.2 Semantic pattern

This analysis revealed that *BAL* is used with different semantics as three different meanings occurred in the concordances. (1), (4) and (5) are examples of these semantics.

(4) Lynx is a northern constellation, *but at least* part of it is visible from earthly locations north of latitude 57 south. (COCA, Magazine)
(5) I know you won't sleep, *but at least* lie down and pretend for a little while. (COCA, Magazine)

Example (1) conveys something good in a bad situation, (4) conveys amount and (5) conveys the minimum someone can do.

Table 2. Distribution of different semantics of "but at least (BAL)".

	As much as/ More than/ Number/ Amount	**Emphasizing something good in bad situation**	**Emphasizing the minimum someone can do**
Number of tokens	5	184	11
Percentage	2.5%	92%	5.5%

Table 2 exhibits the distribution of these semantics in the 200 tokens, and the interesting factor is the frequency. According to this analysis, the *BAL* expression conveys that something is negative while something else is positive 92% of the occurrences. This means that 9 out of 10 times that is the targeted semantics, which indicates Goldberg's (2006) theory of usage-based constructions. As *BAL*'s positive and negative semantics is so re-occurring, it is probably frequent enough to have become a generalization in our minds as a construction. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, these numbers are based on 200 tokens out of 8018, so it is not possible to determine this distribution, but it can be concluded that these numbers are a substantial indicator.

Furthermore, the study manifests interesting results concerning Hilpert's (2014) argument of non-predictability. As mentioned in the introduction, *but* indicates a contradiction and *at least* points to a scale. With this in mind we can examine examples (1), (6) and (7) to see if there are compositional or non-compositional meanings.

(6) She went away mad, *but at least* she went away. (COCA, Blog)
(7) Now they all live with me, *but at least* we have each other. (COCA, TV)

In example (1), the first clause states something negative, and the second clause states something positive. The *BAL*-phrase, in this example, is compositional as it contradicts the first clause and the second clause points to something positive within the scale. Example (6) also displays compositionality as it makes a contradiction and points to a scale. However, if we remove the *BAL*-part, we can see that the clauses by themselves do not convey the negative and positive connotations. This means that it is the *BAL*-part that conveys this stance, which implies that there is non-compositional meaning. This becomes clearer in example (7) where the first clause by itself is not negative and could rather be conventionally positive. However, by adding the *BAL*-part, it receives negative connotation. This leads to the

question of what happens when a clearly positive clause is attached in the X slot. If we consider *I am successful,* the clause is conventionally positive. If we then put it together with *BAL* and a possible Y clause:

(8) *I am successful,* but at least I'm not self-centered.

In (8), *being successful* becomes negative by the use of the *BAL*-phrase, with the semantics that when people are successful, they are usually self-centered. This example proves that whatever is put as the X clause, even if it is positive, the *BAL*-part will cause it to become negative. This phenomenon of causing connotations is non-compositional as there is nothing within the semantics of *BAL* that implies this force. Hence, *BAL* is non-predictable and can therefore classify as a construction.

With all of this in mind, we can define the semantics of the *BAL*-construction. In the 92% of the concordances with the same semantics of *BAL*, a pattern could be identified. If X is the first clause, and Y is the second clause, the semantics is: X is negative but something positive is Y.

4.3 Constraints

According to Hilpert (2014), as the *BAL*-phrase classifies as a construction there must also be constraints. As *BAL* causes connotations, it indicates a constraint. Consider the possible sentence (9).

(9) *I'm happy*, but at least I'm loved.

(9) is hard to understand as both clauses are positive, but as the *BAL*-part causes the X clause to become negative it suggests that the first clause must be ironic. This establishes that a constraint in the *BAL*-constructions must be: X needs to be negative within the context (even if it is not conventionally negative).

The same thing applies to Y. Consider (10) and (11).

(10) I may drink, but at least *I'm sick*.

(11) The house wasn't in the best shape, but at least *her car was running* (COCA, Magazine).

Again in (10), we find a hard sentence to process as the Y clause is negative, but the *BAL*-construction suggest that Y is positive. Nevertheless, Y does not need to be clearly positive as can be seen in (11). Y in (11) is positive, however, only moderately. Hence another constraint is: Y needs to be moderately positive within the context.

Another interesting result is the relationship between the X and Y clause which is demonstrated in (6), (11) and (12).

(12) We have to turn back, but at least *we know we're close*. (COCA, Spoken)

Example (12) displays Y as an outcome of X, and (6) displays Y as an aspect of X. However, in (11), the clauses objectively seem to have nothing to do with each other, but the *BAL*-part implies that they are related in some way for to the utterer. Therefore: Y needs to be an outcome or aspect of X (even if it is contrived).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to determine whether the adverbial phrase *but at least (BAL)* is a construction and if any constraints could be identified. The data was extracted from COCA which generated 8018 hits, where 200 tokens were extracted and analyzed, demonstrating that *BAL* is a construction. Investigating the syntactic pattern, the construction is schematic and has the pattern X *BAL* Y, where X and Y are clauses. The analysis also showed that *BAL* can incorporate different semantics, however, the frequency of the semantics of emphasizing something good in a bad situation was 9 out of 10 times, which indicates Goldberg's (2006) usage-based theory. When searching for prototypical examples, the research concluded that *BAL* is non-compositional as it causes negative and positive connotations that are not conveyed by the clauses themselves. The semantics of the construction could be identified as: X is negative but something positive is Y. Lastly, three constraints could be determined: X needs to be negative within the context (even if it is not conventionally negative), Y needs to be moderately positive within the context, and Y needs to be an outcome or aspect of X (even if it is contrived). In conclusion, this corpus-based study establishes that *BAL* is a construction. However, due to the size of this research, it has not been possible to investigate the argument structure of this construction. Hence, further research focusing on verb semantics would be interesting in the future.

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