Could this phrase *be* more constructional?

A Construction Grammar approach to the phrase *COULD X BE MORE Y* from the television show *Friends*.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the COULD X BE MORE Y phrase (CXBMY), well-known from the television show *Friends,* to argue for its qualification as a construction. By analyzing the phrase’s formal and functional features, as well as its frequency in the COCA corpus, this thesis compares the findings to the definition of constructions by Goldberg (2006, p. 5). The results prove the hypothesis that CXBMY is a construction since the form-function interrelation conveys its meaning; the form of a yes-no question and emphasis on the main auxiliary is understood based on its function as a rhetorical question and potential parody of the *Friends* character Chandler, and vice versa. The linguistic information of CXBMY – syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and information packaging – all contribute to describe the meaning of CXBMY, while simultaneously needing one another to create a complete understanding of CXBMY. Consequently, CXBMY has a non-predictability that requires us to store it in a mental constructicon. While CXBMY shows links to other known constructions, such as the SUBJECT AUXILIARY INVERSION CONSTRUCTION and INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTION, its specific interrelation between form and function distinguishes CXBMY from other known constructions. Thus, this thesis reaches the conclusion that CXBMY is a construction. Additionally, since the inferential pragmatic function, intonation and information structure of CXBMY is crucial to understand its meaning, this thesis highlights the prominence of these linguistic aspects within Construction Grammar, which have so far been sparsely researched (Leino, 2013; Gras & Elvira-García, 2021; Finkbeiner, 2019).

Keywords

Construction Grammar, information structure, CXBMY, construction, SAI, intonation, rhetorical questions, parody.
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1. Introduction

Construction Grammar (henceforth CxG) is a linguistic theory that views linguistic knowledge as based solely on the knowledge of *constructions*, which means the form-meaning pairing within linguistic patterns (Goldberg, 2006). Thus, CxG has a maximalist approach to language (Gras & Elvira-García, 2021; Hilpert, 2019). However, this is challenged by some research gaps. Hilpert (2019) highlights the prioritization of researching written language within CxG while simultaneously mentioning the importance of intonation when conveying information in spoken interaction. So far, both intonation and inferential pragmatics are sparsely researched within CxG (Gras & Elvira-García, 2021; Finkbeiner, 2019), but *INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS* do analyze the pragmatics in relation to sentences’ intonation pattern (Lambrecht 1994; Hilpert, 2019; Leino, 2013).

With this in mind, some linguistic patterns can rely on intonation to convey meaning. The "COULD X BE MORE Y" phrase (henceforth CXBMY), well-known from the situation comedy show *Friends* (Crane & Kauffman, 1994-2004), is one of them. Why is the phrase “Could this phrase be more constructional?” understood as a rhetorical question that the *Friends* character Chandler would say (if he was a Construction Grammarian)? This descriptive and exploratory thesis will argue that CXBMY is a construction by applying a CxG approach to CXBMY. Therefore, the overarching research question is:

- Is the "COULD X BE MORE Y" phrase a construction?

Since the hypothesis of this study is that CXBMY qualifies as a construction because of its non-predictable meaning – it is a rhetorical question with a peculiar prosody and often used to parody the *Friends* character Chandler – the thesis is structured accordingly: section 2 covers the theories and research related to CxG and the characteristics of the CXBMY, and section 3 describes the collection and analysis of the primary sources. Subsequently, section 4 presents the results of the form-function relation analysis and frequency of CXBMY along with a continuous discussion on its relation to the theoretical framework and research question, and section 5 covers the conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Construction Grammar

Construction Grammar (CxG) is the theory that linguistic knowledge is based on our knowledge of constructions, which we store as a cognitive, hierarchal system called a *constructicon* (Hilpert, 2019). As an alternative to the dictionary-and-grammar model that views lexical and grammatical knowledge as separate modules, CxG suggests that the combination of the two is needed for linguistic knowledge (Hilpert, 2019). Thus, CxG has a maximalist approach to language in which every linguistic unit can be described through constructions, since they can include every aspect of linguistics. By “every aspect
of linguistics”, CxG means exactly that: descriptions of constructions include both formal features, such as syntax and phonology, and functional features, such as semantics, pragmatics and discourse related aspects (Hilpert, 2019; Finkbeiner, 2019; Gras & Elvira-García, 2021). Most importantly, constructions allow descriptions of interrelations between form and function and how they create non-typical uses of grammar or lexical items, which is not possible in conventional grammar (Hilpert, 2019). Goldberg defines constructions as follows:

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. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency. (2006, p. 5)

In other words, constructions are form-function pairings, which can be instantiated by constructs. To exemplify, Hilpert (2019) uses the expression I love you as a construct of the TRANSITIVE construction, which qualifies as a construction due to high frequency. Additionally, the phrase I baked you a cake! instantiates the DITRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION, where the ditransitive syntactic pattern coerces the conventional transitive verb bake into a ditransitive verb, which is not strictly predictable. Coercion describes the process of lexical items being forged into non-conventional meanings to fit into the meaning of a construction and can be related to a construction’s event argument structure, which describes the semantic arguments such as agent and theme (Hilpert, 2019; Goldberg, 1996). This thesis, however, encountered an issue with the study of constructions as the interrelation between a constructions’ syntactic and event argument structure – most phrases of the primary data are copular, and thus cannot take event arguments. There are also constructions whose eligibility as a construction is debatable. Goldberg (2006) discusses the SUBJECT AUXILIARY INVERSION (SAI) construction and its versatility as a reason for not qualifying as a construction, which she opposes due to the generalizability in the SAI construction’s formal constraints’ relation to its functional purposes. For example, Goldberg (2006) explains that the SAI construction’s inversion of the first auxiliary conveys a non-canonical polarity that can have functions such as exclamatives or yes-no questions, which are rhetorical if they have the phrase or what as a final constituent.

Even though Construction Grammar prides itself as a maximalist approach in linguistic research, some research highlight the absence of certain linguistic features in CxG research. For example, Hilpert (2019) mentions the written language bias within many linguistic research fields, including CxG. The bias results in prioritized research in written discourse, which does not include certain elements that occur in spoken discourse. To exemplify, Gras and Elvira-García (2021) point out that The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar (Hoffman & Trousdale, 2013) does not include “any chapter dealing with phonological information in Construction Grammar” (Gras and Elvira-García, 2021, p. 234). Moreover, Finkbeiner (2019) discusses the grey area between semantics and pragmatics as a factor to the confusing role of pragmatics in CxG, which might explain Goldberg’s decision to describe functional aspects of a construction as “semantic/pragmatic” (2006, p. 168). Finkbeiner (2019) also highlights that Hoffman and
Trousdale (2013) do not include a chapter regarding inferential pragmatics in Construction Grammar. This is highly relevant to this thesis, since CXBMY has a peculiar intonation and is inferred as a rhetorical question. This calls for a distinction between two types of pragmatics: ‘inferential pragmatics’, meaning “pragmatic meanings that arise in particular contexts” (Finkbeiner, 2019, p. 175) and ‘grammatical pragmatics’, for which Information Structure is a prominent theory within CxG. Finkbeiner (2019) suggests that inferential pragmatics is not grammatical by referencing Fillmore (1996), who describes such pragmatics as controlled by “very general principles that do not need to be covered by locally learned conventions” (p. 55), such as in conventional indirect speech acts. Finkbeiner (2019) further explains that most constructions depend on both inferential and grammatical pragmatics, and notably that information structure does not cover inferential pragmatics, which is something that the results of this thesis might oppose, since the information packaging of CXBMY describes an indirect statement (see p. 13).

2.2 Information packaging and rhetorical questions in CxG

As mentioned above, some researchers highlight the research gap in CxG regarding phonology and pragmatics (Finkbeiner, 2019; Gras & Elvira-García, 2021). However, Hoffman and Trousdale (2013) do include a chapter about information structure, where intonation plays an important role in relation to pragmatic information (Leino, 2013). Leino (2013) mainly describes information structure based on Lambrechts (1994) because of its role as “the single most influential work on Information Structure written in the spirit of Construction Grammar” (p. 334). Along similar lines, Hilpert (2019) chooses Lambrechts (1994) to describe INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS (IPCs); constructions whose non-predictable form is described by information structure. Nevertheless, while Information Structure does ‘bridge’ the gap between form and function, it is seldom treated with certain attention in CxG research (Leino, 2013). Thus, this thesis uses information structure to make sense of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features, while contributing to the research area of CxG.

Information Structure is easily integrated in CxG because of the theories’ similar aims: they both want to incorporate several linguistic areas in order to describe language use, since Information Structure describes an interrelation between syntax, semantics and pragmatics (Lambrecht, 1994). Additionally, just like CxG’s constructicon implies different constructions that speakers use to convey meaning, Lambrecht (1994) describes different allosentences that convey these meanings and is concerned with why certain allosentences are chosen by a speaker in a specific discourse and context. Thus, tools from Information Structure are used in this thesis to determine whether CXBMY is an IPC and why the information has been packaged this way.

As previously mentioned, Hilpert (2019) integrates Information Structure concepts to describe INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS. As the name implies, these constructions package information to fit the discourse and what is known to the
interlocutors. Information structure, or information packaging as Hilpert (2019) calls it, is defined as:

That component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts. (Lambrecht, 1994, p. 5)

In other words, information structure/packaging is defined similarly to constructions, but with an emphasis on the pragmatic aspects. A *proposition* is a combination of *pragmatic presupposition* of what the hearer knows ahead of the utterance, and *pragmatic assertion* of the information conveyed by the utterance. Notably, this definition of pragmatic presupposition differs from traditional descriptions of presuppositions within pragmatics since Lambrecht (1994) has a broader sense of the notion, with the main purpose to distinguish “new” and “old” information. Lambrecht (1994) explains that Speakers evaluate Hearers’ ability to recognize the referents in the forthcoming sentence and package them accordingly, which is called *identifiability*. Leino (2013) illustrates this in the following figure:

![Figure 1.1: The speaker hearer setting (Leino, 2013, p. 337)](image)

Leino’s (2013) figure describes Lambrecht’s (1994) description of the universe of discourse. Similarly to the distinction between cotext and context in the linguistic areas of pragmatics and discourse analysis (Yule 1996; Jones et al., 2021), Lambrecht (1994) distinguishes two parts of discourse: the text-external world, which includes the speech participants and the speech setting, and the text-internal world, including the linguistic expressions and their meanings. While the text-external world is taken for granted by the interlocutors and therefore unnecessary to disclose, the text-internal world is not taken for granted but can be *activated* through anaphoric expressions (Lambrecht, 1994). The universe of discourse of this thesis’ primary data is different in the sense that the scripted conversations occur in a television show. Hence, I have modified Leino’s figure to fit the setting of the primary data:
Figure 1.2: The television setting, modified version of Leino (2013, p. 337)

Based on the Writer’s (and in turn, the Speaker’s) evaluation, or “mind-reading” as Hilpert (2019) calls it, the Writer arranges the sentence’s form by activation, topicalization and focus. Activation is prevalent within CxG and regards the interlocutors’ consciousness of the referents. A referent can be active, which means in the addressee’s current consciousness, semi-active, as in available, or inactive, as in stored in the addressee’s long-term memory but not currently or peripherally in their consciousness (Leino, 2013). The form is adapted depending on the referents’ activation stages; an active referent can be pronominalized by using a pronoun or proximal demonstrative determiner, such as the ‘she’ in ‘Could she be more out of my league?’, while an inactive referent must be nominalized for the addressee to identify it, such as ‘these margaritas’ in ‘Could these margaritas be any stronger?’. The topic is what the sentence is about (Leino, 2013), while focus is “the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition” (Lambrecht, 1994, p. 213), meaning that the focus marks the pragmatic assertion in the sentence. The focus is marked through intonation or pitch movement that typically peaks on the final constituent in the focus domain, meaning the syntactic argument that provides the pragmatic assertion. Lambrecht (1994) declares no point in placing the focus on a sentence’s verb. However, Lambrecht also says that “if the argument following the verb is connected to an active referent, the focus may fall on the verb” (1994, p. 245).

While a pragmatic assertion must include new information to create a complete pragmatic proposition, it is not equivalent to including new referents. Pragmatic assertion can include new information, but also create a relation between two propositions (Lambrecht, 1994) or consist of a proposition that is known to all interlocutors in the context, with the communicative aim to explicitly state just that – that the knowledge of the proposition is
**Common Ground**, a term that Lambrecht (1994) has derived from Spalnaker (2002, p. 72). Špago (2020) interprets **Common Ground** similarly to Lambrecht (1994) in relation to rhetorical questions. According to Špago (2020), rhetorical questions are based on the speaker’s presumption of the Common Ground, with the addition that a speaker can pose as if a proposition is known to all interlocutors. This is what makes a question rhetorical – the speaker presumes that the answer to the question is obvious, which makes an answer redundant (Špago, 2020). In terms of CxG, there are studies that have found lexicogrammatical constituents that signal a rhetorical question in constructions, such as a final *or what* phrase (Goldberg, 2006) or sarcasm as in an initial *as if* phrase and the syntactic pattern *XP pro BE not*, instantiated by ‘a charmer he was not’ (Lehmann & Bergs, 2021). However, these constructions have not been described by explicitly applying information structure analysis, while this thesis does in section 4.1.3.

### 3. Data collection and methodology

This thesis covers an analysis of the CXBMY phrase. The study is qualitative since all instances of scripted utterances from *Friends* that uses CXBMY has been analyzed, with the aim to describe the phrase’s linguistic features and relation to CxG principles. It also has quantitative elements, since the data from *Friends* and random samples of corpus hits in the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) has been discussed in terms of frequency. Consequently, the purpose of the study is descriptive and exploratory; it aims to provide an accurate description of CXBMY while simultaneously looking for new insights relevant to CxG, presumably a new construction as well as further research on INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS.

#### 3.1 Data collection

The main primary source of the thesis is the situation comedy show *Friends* (Crane & Kauffman, 1994-2004). Transcripts of every *Friends* episode were obtained from the Crazy for Friends website ([https://www.livesinabox.com/friends/scripts.shtml](https://www.livesinabox.com/friends/scripts.shtml)) to create a complete corpus in the plain text format with a total of 939,916 tokens, including season and episode numbers (10 seasons and 236 episodes in total), scene descriptions and the character for each line. These where then analyzed in the software AntConc. The corpus assisted in identifying every instance in which the CXBMY phrase is used by looking at the N-grams to the word *could*, since this initial word in the phrase is fixed. This search resulted in a total of 11 instances (see Appendix A) that have been extracted for analysis, together with descriptions of the text-internal and text-external world relevant for analysis. To obtain the intonation pattern of (and proof-read) the corpus hits, the scenes with the extracted utterances were watched and transcribed through the streaming website HBO Max ([http://hbomax.com/](http://hbomax.com/)).

Besides the Friends corpus, further data was collected from the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) to compare the usage of the phrase inside and outside of the *Friends* discourse.
within the time frame 1994-2019. The following strings were applied to the corpus interface:

- _vm _pp _vb more
- _vm _pp _vb any _jjr
- _vm _pp _vb any more

From the corpus hits of each string, a random sample of 100 were analyzed by using the findings of the analysis as criteria, except for the second string (any _jjr), where only 65 samples were available. The sections ‘blog’ and ‘web’ only contain data from the year 2012 and has therefore been excluded from the results of the sample to avoid skewed results. Additionally, it is important to note that a corpus does not include information on prosody, which is an important characteristic for CXBMY (see 4.2.2). These limitations in the corpus analysis confirm that the data analysis should focus on another form of primary data, namely the scripts and video footage from *Friends*.

### 3.2 Data analysis

The aim of this thesis is to analyze CXBMY and determine its formal and functional features to understand its characteristics in relation to Goldberg’s (2006) definition of a construction (see section 2), as well as its relation to other constructions in the constructicon. To obtain the information needed, the collected data was analyzed by close-reading and structured in accordance with Lambrecht’s (1994) multi-modular approach – that syntax is analyzed through semantics, and their relation is described through pragmatics. To exemplify, see the analysis of example (1), where CA denotes conversation analysis (see Appendix A for the analysis of all the eleven instances identified):

**Table 1. Initial analysis of example (1)**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>Oh please, could she be more out of my league?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 CA transcript</td>
<td>&quot;Oh please, could she be more out of my league?&quot; (Crane et al., 1994a, 00:02:25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Syntax</td>
<td>Copular: [s could be [s be]] more out of my league]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Semantics</td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could be Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Pragmatics</td>
<td>Parody: No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical question: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pragmatic presupposition: ‘she’ pronounization + the woman is pretty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pragmatic assertion: The woman is out of Chandler’s league.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus: Predicate (be more out of my league)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Topic: The woman’s beauty in relation to Chandler’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Surrounding context</td>
<td>Text-external world: The speech participants are in the same room as another woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text-internal world: &quot;RACHEL: Come on, she’s a person. You can do it. CHANDLER: Oh please, could she be more out of my league? Ross, back me up here. ROSS: He could never get a woman like that in a million years.” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1994a, 00:02:23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rows (1.1) and (1.2) in Table 1 describe the form of example (1), meaning the syntactic and phonological information. Since the analysis considers the information structure in the intonation of the phrase in *Friends*, the prosodic features are covered further in the pragmatics section of this study by a transcription with conventions from Jeffersonian Transcription. Rows (1.3)-(1.5) describe the function of the phrase. Regarding the semantic aspects (row 1.3), the lexical features of the data were analyzed. However, since the CXBMY phrase functions as an information packaging rhetorical question, the pragmatic aspects (rows 1.4-1.5) became more prominent for the analysis than the semantics. Consequently, the data has been analyzed through application of the criteria for rhetorical questions derived from Špago (2020):

a) The implied answer is negative.
b) An answer is not necessary.
c) The Common Ground is presumed by the speaker.

While separating the linguistic areas at this stage of the study may seem to contradict the maximalist approach within CxG, I find it necessary to illustrate their short-comings and interrelation between one another to obtain the meaning of CXBMY. The information structure analysis contains identification of the phrases’ pragmatic proposition, focus, activation and topic and their relation to the function of CXBMY as well as the function of other known INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS (IPCs).

Following the analysis, the data from *Friends* was quantified to rule out the Goldberg’s (2006) alternative criterion of high frequency. Additionally, the random samples from the COCA corpus were obtained to compare the proportions and characteristics of the CXBMY construction in American English between 1994-2019 (see 3.1). Since the hits cover proportions of a random sample of 100 from a schematic pattern, I used the per million provided by the COCA per each string and divided them by the percentage of hits that showed CXBMY.

Moreover, the data from *Friends* can be divided into two sub-categories: assigned character-utterances (4 instances) and parody-utterances (7 instances). The former describes when the speaker is playing their assigned character, while the latter describes parodies that the speaker is doing of another character. To exemplify, in “Could she be more out of my league?”, Chandler is using the CXBMY phrase as himself, while Joey is explicitly parodying Chandler by using the phrase, in “Look at me, I’m Chandler! Could I be wearing any more clothes?”
4. Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis confirm the hypothesis that CXBMY is a construction based on Goldberg’s definition (see section 2), because the formal features of the CXBMY phrase can be described by its function. The CXBMY construction is represented with the following schema:

\[
[\text{COULD}_1 \text{X}_2 \text{BE}_1 \text{more}/\text{any}/\text{less} \text{Y}_3] \leftrightarrow 'X_2 \text{IS}_1 Y_3' \text{ (+ Chandler parody)}
\]

This section will describe the CXBMY construction’s form and its interrelation with function. Subsequently, these results will be used to determine the construction’s information structure, as well as the construction’s occurrence in the COCA corpus (Davies 2008–). Finally, the results will be described in relation to known constructions in the constructicon.

4.1 Form and meaning pairing of CXBMY

4.1.1 Syntactic possibilities of CXBMY

Firstly, let us review the syntactic arguments of CXBMY. The utterances from Friends that use CXBMY are nearly consistent in their form, generalized as:

\[
\text{COULD}_1 \text{X}_2 \text{BE}_1 \text{more}/\text{any}/\text{less} \text{Y}_3
\]

On a clausal level, every utterance has the form of an interrogative clause with an emphasis on the main auxiliary:

(1) Could she \text{be} more out of my league\footnote{According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus (CALDT), to be out of someone’s league is an idiom synonymous to being “too good or too expensive for you” (CALDT, 2024). Thus, it is a preposition phrase which functions as an adjective phrase, leading to another example of how form and function must be understood in relation to one another. I have therefore categorized example (1) as copular instead of intransitive in this instance.}? 
(2) Could that shot \text{be} any prettier? 
(3) Could there \text{be} more Kims? 

The modal auxiliary verb preceding the subject creates the interrogative form, which also instantiates the SUBJECT AUXILIARY INVERSION construction that can be used to formulate a yes/no-question. The verb \text{be} is the main verb in nine of the examples, as in (4). This indicates that the phrase is usually copular. However, in (5) \text{be} functions as an auxiliary to the main verb \text{wearing}, and in (6) the main verb is \text{want} – a verb in base form, which blocks \text{be} as either main verb or auxiliary, consequently deviating from the form of the scheme, while agreeing with the function (see 4.1.2.).

(4) Could you \text{be} less enthused? 
(5) Could I \text{be} wearing any more clothes? 
(6) Could you \text{want} her more?
Consequently, most of the examples are copular, interrogative clauses with the verb phrase *could be*, broken up by the subject \((X_2)\). The subject is mostly consisting of a personal pronoun: for example, the subject in (1) is *she* and *you* in (4). CXBMY can also take a noun phrase as its subject, which is exemplified in (2) with a demonstrative determiner and noun, *that shot*, as its subject. There is also an instantiation of an existential *there* in (3), keeping the place for extraposed subject *Kims* following the verb *be*.

As mentioned above, the phrase is mainly copular, since the verb *be* is followed by a predicative \((more/any/less Y_3)\) that describes the subject. The predicative mostly consists of a comparative phrase with the adverbs *more, any, any more or less* followed by an adjective phrase or preposition phrase. Example (3) and (5) instantiate exceptions to this pattern, where *more* and *any more* are determiners to the nouns *Kims* and *clothes*. Depending on the adverb in the adjective phrases, the adjective is in base form or comparative form; with the comparative adverbs *more, less* and *any more*, the adjective phrase is in base form (e.g. example (1)), while the adverb *any* is followed by a comparative adjective (e.g. example (2)).

To summarize, the formal aspects are characterized by the phrase’s interrogative form, the emphasized copular verb in base form and the adverbs or determiners *more, any* and *less*. The interrogative form relates CXBMY to the SAI construction, whose generalized feature is the inversion of subject and the first auxiliary of the verb phrase (Goldberg, 2006; Hilpert, 2019). But much like the SAI construction cannot create any generalizations without attending to its function (Goldberg, 2006), the CXBMY phrase’s function must be analyzed to obtain its meaning.

### 4.1.2 Meaning expressed through constructional constraints of CXBMY

While some variation occurs in the syntactic pattern of CXBMY, the lexical information of the phrase can initially be generalized as:

Speaker wonders if \(X_2\) possibly could be more/less \(Y_3\).

In each utterance, the Speaker asks if the subject is something in terms of scalar possibility. The scalar evaluation is conveyed through the adverb or determiner in the complement – *more, any, or less*.

(1) Could she *be* more out of my league?
(2) Could that *shot be* any prettier?
(4) Could you *be* less enthused?

Regarding event argument structure, only example (6) (Could you *want* her more?) and (5) (Could I *be* wearing any more *clothes*) can be analyzed since they are the only utterances with lexical verbs in the primary data, which further deviates these examples from the hypothesis. For example, the event argument structure in example (6) consists of a mental transitive verb with an experiencer and theme, which is completely
predictable. Apart from these findings, a further analysis of the semantics is difficult to execute due to an important factor – CXBMY does not have the function of a question. While we have described the meaning of the *could* and the words *more, any and less*, the actual meaning of the phrase is reduced to ‘X is Y’. Instead, we must take a holistic approach to CXBMY to understand the function of the phrase.

While not applicable to theta-roles, the copula *be* is important because of its fixed tense in the CXBMY phrase.

\[(2.5)\]

CHANDLER: Kick, save and… denied.

RICHARD: But… he gets it back, pass to the middle, lines it up and…

BAM! Yes! **Could that shot be any prettier?**

JOEY: Man, you are incredible.

In example (2.5), the speaker comments on a foosball goal. Anyone who has played foosball knows that it goes very quickly, and at the point of the utterance the ‘shot’ has become a goal and the game is over. Naturally, this means that the shot has passed, and a conventionally grammatical utterance would be ‘could that shot have been any prettier?’.

Still, the speaker chooses the base form *be*. This suggests an example of coercion, a phenomenon characteristic for CxG (Hilpert, 2019), where a lexical unit is forged because of the phrase’s constraint to have the main verb in base form. Another example of potential coercion is in (7), where the adjective *sorry* is preceded by *more*.

\[(7)\]

**Could I be more sorry?**

A quick search on the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) shows, firstly, that using *sorry* in comparative form is rare with only 218 corpus hits in the corpus (which is not surprising since *sorry* is a feeling that you either feel or you do not), and secondly, that *sorrer* is slightly more common than *more sorry*. The reason for using *more sorry* nonetheless could then be because of coercion, where the adjective *sorry* has been forged into comparative form because the phrase’s structure needs it to be, and that *more* is slightly more common than *any* in (7).

CXBMY is a rhetorical question since it is in interrogative form but works as a statement, and thus although its syntactic structure is interrogative, it works as a statement. Consequently, an answer to the utterance is unnecessary, and if answered, it would be in negative form or signs of agreement. This is exemplified in the context of (1), where Chandler continues talking after using the CXBMY phrase, and Ross agrees with Chandler by answering with a negative (*never*) sentence:

\[(1.5)\]

“RACHEL: Come on, she’s a person. You can do it.

CHANDLER: Oh please, **could she be more out of my league?** Ross, back me up here.

ROSS: He could never get a woman like that in a million years.”
Example (1.5) also shows how the utterance is used as a rhetorical question even though Rachel disagrees with Chandler’s indirect statement, namely that “she” is too attractive for Chandler. Thus, the Common Ground is imposed by the speaker rather than something obvious to every interlocutor. This agrees with Špago’s explanation of rhetorical questions as indirect statements that are evident from its contextual information which makes an answer redundant, but possible if negative or a sign of agreement (2020). Most importantly, the rhetorical question is only realized when the main verb is emphasized:

(1.1) “oh” please, could she(. )\textbf{be} more out of my league?
(2.1) could \textbf{that} shot(0.4)\textbf{be} (. ) any prettier?

As shown above, the main verb of each utterance from \textit{Friends} is stressed – it has a slightly higher pitch and is emphasized in the sentence. This can be juxtaposed to another show’s, \textit{Bones} (Hanson et al., 2010), use of the same syntactical pattern, where interlocutor B does not stress the main verb and interlocutor A infer interlocutor B’s question as information seeking, meaning a direct speech act:

(12) 
A: ↑Ribs. Broken ribs.
B: Could you be more specific?
A: Okay: ↑this is a magnification of the fourth left rib [...] 

(Hanson et al., 2010, 00:28:35)

In summary, the results of the function of CXBMY show evidence of suggested coercion in the lexical items to fit into the CXBMY phrase, which is a feature of constructions (Hilpert, 2019), but also that a further semantic analysis is inefficient. Firstly, the copular verb prevents an analysis of event argument structures. Secondly, pragmatic features such as the CXBMY phrase’s function as an indirect statement and parody counter any information that can be derived from the semantic explanation of the syntactic argument structure, such as the meaning of modal auxiliaries and comparative determiners. This strengthens Finkbeiner’s (2019) statement that a distinction between semantics and pragmatics is difficult, and further explains the maximalist approach in CxG. Now, there is more to analyze concerning the intonation of CXBMY and its form-function relation, regarding the information structure.

4.1.3 The information packaging of CXBMY

The function of CXBMY as a rhetorical question and possible parodic use indicates that it is an information packaging construction (IPC) according to Lambrecht’s (1994) definition (see section 2). Its function as a non-parodic rhetorical question is instantiated by (4.5):

(4.5) CHANDLER: Why, it’s six tickets to Hootie and the Blowfish!
   … The Blowfish!
MONICA: It’s on us, all right, so don’t worry. It’s our treat.
PHOEBE: So… Thank you, okay.
ROSS: Could you be less enthused?

JOEY: Look, it’s a nice gesture, it is. But […]

As described in 4.1, the CXBMY construction consists of an interrogative clause, which is a whole sentence and makes this a sentence level construction, thus agreeing with the requirements of an IPC. This lexicogrammatical structure is paired with the proposition of the utterance – the presupposition being that the pronominalized referents (you) responded to the previous utterance with indifference, and the assertion that Ross acknowledges the response and thus brings it into the text-internal world (be less enthused). This structure-proposition pairing is in accordance with the mental states of the interlocutors, who are participants and aware of the context, making the speaker able to use a rhetorical question. In other words, the proposition does not convey new information, but rather brings the ‘obvious’ information into the text-internal world to establish Common Ground.

As shown in 4.1.2, though, the rhetorical question is only realized when the main verb is emphasized. This explains why the intonation peaks on the verb of the focus predicate (be less enthused). This seems rather odd, since Lambrecht (1994) claims no reason for placing the focus on a verb. However, Lambrecht (1994) also explains that it may happen if the focus constituent relates to active referents, which is the case in the primary data, since they are either copular or describing an active referents’ feelings or circumstances. Moreover, predicate-focused sentences allow alternative focus-readings based on context (Lambrecht, 1994). In the case of CXBMY, the contextual information is that using CXBMY within the Friends discourse includes emphasis on the be or corresponding verb in base form, which was brought into the text-internal world when Phoebe explains that Chandler tends to use the CXBMY phrase in this manner (see (11.5) in Appendix A). Thus, the CXBMY phrase as a non-parodic rhetorical question functions as an information packaging construction. We can therefore conclude that the function of (4.5) as an indirect statement, which is a part of inferential pragmatics (Finkbeiner, 2019), is described by grammar – the syntax of the lexical items is ordered after information structure, whose combination with the intended speech act determines the focus, which in turn signals a rhetorical question. This suggests that some inferential pragmatics can be grammaticalized, despite Finkbeiner’s (2019) statement that they cannot. However, our understanding of the CXBMY phrase is based on the use specifically in the Friends franchise, while Fillmore (1996) explains that inferential pragmatics is usually not based on locally learned conventions.

How does the analysis above relate to the tendency of using the CXBMY construction to parody Chandler? To answer this question, we must consider the topic of the parodic utterances, since they consist of two levels. On the first level, the topic is what the sentence is about in the current conversation. For example, in (2) (Could that shot be any prettier?) the topic regards foosball skills, and in (11) (Could that report be any later?) the deadline for a report. The second level of the topic is the Speaker’s act of parodying Chandler. This is possible because the first instance of a parodic use of CXBMY, example (11), explicitly states that others parody Chandler by using the CXBMY phrase:
PHOEBE: Yeah, yeah. They even do you.

CHANDLER: They do me?

PHOEBE: You know like- uh okay- uh-

'Could that report be any later?'

By using CXBMY to parody Chandler, it is integrated in the text-internal world of the Friends discourse, and makes it available for anaphoric expressions due to it being a semiactive or inactive referent – the referent being the character Chandler. Thus, the action of recognizing the CXBMY phrase as a characteristic of Chandler’s speaking manners makes the phrase both a conventionalized way to create a rhetorical question and a phrase strongly related to the character Chandler. Consequently, it is possible to topicalize (or rather parody) Chandler in an utterance implicitly by using CXBMY.

4.2 CXBMY in COCA

The question of frequency regarding the CXBMY phrase in Friends (Crane & Kauffman, 1994-2004) is complex. By quantifying the utterances from the TV show, it only occurs 11 times (corresponding 32 seconds total of a show consisting of 87 hours) and should therefore not be viewed as a construction due to frequency. However, it is important to note that Friends was extremely popular during the time it aired (1994-2004) and recently became the most watched show on streaming services following the death of Matthew Perry, the actor who played Chandler (Spangler, 2023). Consequently, while the CXBMY phrase was only spoken 11 times, it was received by a myriad of Watchers (see figure 1.2). As section 4.1 shows, the action of recognizing the CXBMY phrase as a characteristic of Chandler’s speaking manners makes the phrase an option to create a rhetorical question and a phrase strongly related to the character Chandler. Consequently, it is possible to topicalize (or rather parody) Chandler in an utterance implicitly by using CXBMY. Both purposes can also be seen in the COCA corpus – there are instances where the phrase is used as a rhetorical question, but also references to Matthew Perry.

When using the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–), applying the string ‘_vm _pp _vb _more’ to the interface resulted in 598 corpus hits. A random sample of 100 from the corpus search resulted in 11 instances of CXBMY, in which every instance was initiated by the modal auxiliary could. Secondly, the string ‘vm _pp _vb any _jjr’ resulted in a total of 65 hits that showed 27 hits agreeing with the CXBMY phrases’ characteristics, in which 25 of them was initiated by could. The remaining hits were initiated by can. In this string, there was also a reference to Friends:

(13) As Perry’s alter ego Chandler might say,

‘Could we be any sadder to see them go?’

(Davies, 2008–)

Lastly, the results of the string ‘_vm _pp _vb any more’ contain 114 hits. A random sample of 100 showed that 53 hits align with the characteristics found in the utterances from Friends. Similarly to the previous strings, the majority of the hits are initiated by
could, while the rest are initiated by can. Two of the hits also include references to Matthew Perry:

(14) Oh, let’s try Matthew Perry. ‘Could I be any more of a house?’.
(15) As his alter ego might have put it, “Could he be any more famous?” But behind the scenes, Perry […]

(Davies, 2008–)

In terms of discourses, the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) shows a significant frequency in TV and movie discourse in comparison to other discourses. Regarding frequency over time, the usage increased in the period 1994-2009, which is roughly the time frame of Friends airing, and decreased in 2010-2019:

Table 2. CXBMY in different discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Random sample of 100, string with:</th>
<th>Film/TV</th>
<th>Spoken</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Mag</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Per million words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any more</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.157</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. CXBMY over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.157</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the results show that the usage of the CXBMY phrase is not frequent enough to meet Goldberg’s criterion of high frequency (see section 2) in the COCA corpus with a total of 91 constructs of CXBMY in a corpus with 1+ billion words (Davies, 2008–). However, four interesting discoveries were made: (i) the CXBMY phrase including the determiners any more is far more often used as a rhetorical question than the alternatives, (ii) CXBMY is used more in Film/TV than in any other discourse, (iii) the use of CXBMY increased
slightly after *Friends* started airing, and (iv) CXBMY is used as a reference to *Friends* in two strings. This further strengthens the claim that CXBMY is associated with the Chandler character from *Friends*.

To summarize, the usage of CXBMY as a rhetorical question and a parody of Chandler can be seen outside of the *Friends* setting. This brings us back to the modified version of Leino’s (2013) figure in section 2.2 – the function of CXBMY is not only stored in the fictional minds of the Speaker and Hearer, but also in the minds of the Watchers. In other words, IPCs exist because we need different ways to arrange meanings for different purposes and in the case of CXBMY, the arrangement conveys the meaning of a rhetorical question and a potential parody of Chandler.

### 4.3 CXBMY in the constructicon

A construction must differentiate from recognized constructions in the constructicon (Goldberg, 2006). Initially, CXBMY and the SAI construction are similar in their initial auxiliary position and their functions as a rhetorical question. However, the combination of the syntactic structure and focus marking of CXBMY creates the rhetorical question, while in Goldberg’s (2006) example, the addition *or what* constitutes the rhetorical question. This distinction also applies to the sarcastic function of the AS IF CONSTRUCTION and *XP pro BE not CONSTRUCTION* (Lehmann & Bergs, 2021). Additionally, while CXBMY is an IPC, it distinguishes from other IPCs in its syntactic structure since the alternative locations of syntactic arguments characterizes IPCs (Leino, 2013; Hilpert, 2019) rather than CXBMY’s specific initial *could* and adverbs or determiners *more, any or less*. Most importantly, neither of these known constructions are related to the specific TV discourse of *Friends*, while CXBMY is – it is mostly used in the TV/Film section of the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) and refers to the *Friends* character Chandler. One could therefore consider CXBMY as linked to other constructions in the constructicon but also as differentiated from them, due to its specific sentence structure and function as a parody of Chandler.

Similarly to the SAI construction’s function as the reason for the inversion of syntactic arguments (Goldberg, 2006), and just like Lambrecht (1994) description of the syntax-semantics pairing through the lens of pragmatics, the form of CXBMY is understood by its function and the information structure describes the form-function pairing. In the case of CXBMY, the phrase’s meaning is a rhetorical question that can be used as a parody of the character Chandler from *Friends*. As section 4.1 shows, this cannot be understood solely by neither the form nor its component parts because the meaning of the CXBMY phrase relies on a form-function interrelationship. For example, the function of (11) (*Could that report *be* any later?*) as a rhetorical question and reference to the character Chandler explains the syntactic structure and intonation, while the syntactic structure is recognized as a rhetorical question based on the focus position, and in the cases of parodies, knowledge of the character Chandler. However, in terms of usage frequency, the CXBMY phrase is used very scarcely in both the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008–) and *Friends*. 16
Consequently, CXBMY is not a construction because of high frequency, but has non-predictability in both its form and function when separated since it needs the combination of the two – thus, CXBMY qualifies as a construction.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has applied a Construction Grammar approach to the COULD X BE MORE Y phrase (CXBMY) known from the television show Friends to argue for its qualification as a construction, presented as:

\[
[\text{COULD}_1 \text{ X}_2 \text{ BE}_1 \text{ more/any/less Y}_3] \leftrightarrow 'X_2 \text{ IS}_1 \text{ Y}_3' (+ \text{ Chandler parody})
\]

By analyzing excerpts from Friends using CXBMY, this thesis found that the meaning of CXBMY relies on an interrelation between its syntactic structure and its function as a rhetorical question and potential parody of the Friends character Chandler, thus agreeing with Goldberg’s definition of constructions (2006, p. 5). Moreover, CXBMY is linked to the SAI CONSTRUCTION and INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS, while possessing distinctive functional features regarding its parodic function and relation to the TV/Film discourse, specifically Friends.

The limitations of the study are mainly related to the intonation patterns of the primary data. In the COCA corpus, the instances were in written form without phonological information. Moreover, since the auditory information of the instances from Friends were obtained by transcribing episodes on HBO Max, the analysis was only conducted based on my own judgement of the intonation. In further research, analyzing spectrograms in software designed for phonological analysis would be a more appropriate method. Additional limitations are the restricted scope, leading to limitations in analysis depth, especially regarding the analysis of the information structure of CXBMY.

Despite the limitations, this study explored a new area within Construction Grammar by responding to Leino’s (2013) suggestion that Construction Grammarians should embrace information structure more. Additionally, the study looked at the form and meaning paring of CXBMY in terms of both syntactic structure and phonological realization, beginning to address a research gap within inferential pragmatics and intonation (Finkbeiner, 2019; Gras & Elvira-García 2021), which should be investigated further in future research within Construction Grammar.
References


Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Chase A. (Writers) & Sanford, A. (Director). (1994, October 27). The One with the Butt (Season 1, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/

Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Astorf, J. (Writers) & Burrows, J. (Director). (1995a, March 2). The One with All the Poker (Season 1, Episode 18) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/

Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Junge, A. (Writers) & Sanford, A. (Director). (1994, October 27). The One with the Butt (Season 1, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/

Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Brown, C. (Writers) & Gittelsohn, E. (Director). (1995c, October 19). The One with Five Steaks and an Eggplant (Season 2, Episode 5) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/

Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Chase A. (Writers) & Lembcke, M. (Director). (1996a, April 4). The One Where Old Yeller Dies (Season 2, Episode 20) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/


Crane, D., Kauffman, M., Kunerth, M. (Writers) & Weiss, B. (Director). (2002, December 5). The One with Rachel’s Phone Number (Season 9, Episode 9) [TV series episode]. In D. Crane & M. Kauffman (Executive Producers), Friends. HBO Max. https://www.hbomax.com/


# Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>Oh please, could she <em>be</em> more out of my league?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 CA² transcript</td>
<td>°oh° please, could she(.)↑<em>be</em> more out of my league? (Crane et al., 1994a, 00:02.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Syntax</td>
<td>Copular: <code>[auxcould[NPshe][VPbe[PPmore out of my league]]]</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Semantics</td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could be Y.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1.4 Pragmatics | Parody: No.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘she’ pronominalization + the woman is pretty.  
Pragmatic assertion: The woman is out of Chandler’s league.  
Focus: Predicate (be more out of my league)  
Topic: The woman’s beauty in relation to Chandler’s. |
| 1.5 Surrounding context | Text-external world: The speech participants are in the same room as another woman.  
Text-internal world:  
“RACHEL: Come on, she’s a person. You can do it.  
CHANDLER: Oh please, could she *be* more out of my league? Ross, back me up here.  
ROSS: He could never get a woman like that in a million years.”  
(Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1994a, 00:02.23) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>Could that shot <em>be</em> any prettier?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 CA transcript</td>
<td>could that shot(0.4)↑<em>be</em>: any prettier? (Crane et al., 1996, 00:15.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Syntax</td>
<td>Copular: <code>[auxcould[NPthat shot][VPbe[AdjPany prettier]]]</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Semantics</td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could be Y.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2.4 Pragmatics | Parody: No.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: NP ‘that shot’ + the goal in foosball was good.  
Pragmatic assertion: The shot was good/pretty. |

² ‘CA’ stands for ‘Conversation Analysis’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus: Predicate (be any prettier)</th>
<th>Topic: Richard’s foosball skills + parodying Chandler.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.5 Surrounding context</strong></td>
<td>Text-external world: The speech participants are playing foosball. Text-internal world: “CHANDLER: Kick, save and… denied. RICHARD: But… he gets it back, pass to the middle, lines it up and… BAM! Yes! Could that shot be any prettier? JOEY: Man, you are incredible.” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1996, 00:15.50)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3) CA transcript</th>
<th>Could there be more Kims? (Crane et al., 1997, 00:20:25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.1 CA transcript</strong></td>
<td>could there be more Kims? (Crane et al., 1997, 00:20:25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.2 Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Existential: [[[aux could][NP there][VP be][NP more Kims]]]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.3 Semantics</strong></td>
<td>Speaker wonders if there could be X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.5 Surrounding context</strong></td>
<td>Text-external world: The speech participants are having a conversation at a café. Text-internal world: “MONICA: Oh! Did anybody see that—that documentary on the Korean War? ALL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. PHOEBE: Oh God, Korea is such a beautiful country. ROSS: With such a sad history. CHANDLER: Could there be more Kims? (they all laugh)” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1997, 00:20:15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(4) CA transcript</th>
<th>Could you be less enthused? (Crane et al., 1995c, 00:13:13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.1 CA transcript</strong></td>
<td>could you be less enthused? (Crane et al., 1995c, 00:13:13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.2 Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Copular: [[[aux could][NP you][VP be][AdjP less enthused]]]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **4.3 Semantics** | Speaker wonders if X could be Y.  
Parody: No. |
| **4.4 Pragmatics** | Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘you’ + context of suggesting something which is received with indifference.  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker thinks that ‘you’ is not as enthused as expected.  
Focus: Predicate (be less enthused)  
Topic: The addressees’ reaction to getting a present. |
| **4.5 Surrounding context** | Text-external world: The speech participants are divided into two groups because of an earlier discussion about their different economic situations.  
Text-internal world:  
“CHANDLER: Why, it's six tickets to Hootie and the Blowfish! (Pause) The Blowfish!  
MONICA: It's on us, all right, so don't worry. It's our treat.  
PHOEBE: So...Thank you, okay.  
ROSS: Could you be less enthused?  
JOEY: Look, it's a nice gesture, it is. But it just feels like…” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1995c, 00:12:55) |

(5) Could I be wearing any more clothes?  
5.1 CA transcript **could I: ↑be: wearing any more clothes?** (Crane et al., 1996b, 00:16:43)  
5.2 Syntax Transitive: [aux could [NP I] [VP be wearing [NP any more clothes]]]  
5.3 Semantics Speaker wonders if X could be wearing Y.  
WEAR <agent, theme>  
5.4 Pragmatics Parody: Yes.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker is wearing many layers of clothes.  
Focus: Predicate (be wearing any more clothes)  
Topic: Teasing Chandler.  
5.5 Surrounding context Text-external world: Joey enters the room wearing many layers of clothing. Chandler has previously pranked Joey by hiding his underwear.  
Text-internal world:
"JOEY: Okay, buddy-boy. Here it is. You hide my clothes, I'm wearing everything you own.
CHANDLER: Oh my God! That is so not the opposite of taking somebody's underwear!
JOEY: Look at me! I'm Chandler! Could I be wearing any more clothes? Maybe if I wasn't going commando..." (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1996b, 00:16:27)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>Could you want her more?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.1 CA transcript</strong></td>
<td>could you ↑want her more? (Crane et al., 1995a, 00:02:41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.2 Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Transitive: [aux could[NP you][VP want[NP her[AdvP more]]]]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.3 Semantics</strong></td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could Y Z. WANT &lt;experiencer, theme&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.5 Context</strong></td>
<td>Text-external world: The speech participants sit in the café in which Rachel works as a waitress. Ross stares at Rachel when she walks by. Text-internal world: “ROSS: No, it's not just that. It's just—I want someone who... who does something for me, y'know? Who gets my heart pounding, who... who makes me, uh... (begins to stare lovingly at Rachel) CHANDLER: ...little playthings with yarn? ROSS: What? CHANDLER: Could you want her more? ROSS: Who? CHANDLER: Dee, the sarcastic sister from What's Happening. ROSS: Look, I am totally, totally over her, OK, I just... (Rachel comes over, Ross lays head on table): Hiiii!” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1995a, 00:02:25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(7)</th>
<th>Could I be more sorry?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.1 CA transcript</strong></td>
<td>could I ↑be more sorry? (Crane et al., 1998, 00:19:26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.2 Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Copular: [aux could[NP I][VP be[AdvP more sorry]]]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.3 Semantics</strong></td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could be Y.</td>
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</table>
| 7.4 Pragmatics | Parody: Yes.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘I’ pronominalization + preceded by apology.  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker ‘I’ is sorry.  
Focus: Predicate (be more sorry)  
Topic: The Speaker’s guilt about hurting the Addressee’s feelings + parodying Chandler. |
|---|---|
| 7.5 Surrounding context | Text-external world: Ross and Chandler play themselves in a play that Joey has written.  
Text-internal world:  
“ROSS: Hey man.  
CHANDLER: What is up?  
ROSS: About yesterday, I was really wrong. I am sorry.  
CHANDLER: No, it was me. I'm sorry. I over reacted.  
ROSS: Maybe it was both of us, but we had our best friend's interest... (Pauses and looks at Joey.) But we had our best friend's interest at heart.  
CHANDLER: Could I be more sorry?  
ROSS: I don't know, I'm one sorry polentologist. (Stops reading.) All right Joey, we get it. I'm sorry.  
CHANDLER: I'm sorry too.” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1998, 00:19:02) |
| (8) | Could these margaritas be any stronger? |
| a. CA transcript | could these margaritas ↑be: any stronger? (Crane et al., 1995c, 00:18:51) |
| b. Syntax | Copular: [\[\text{aux Could}\[\text{NP these margaritas}\][\text{VP be Adj any stronger}]\]] |
| c. Semantics | Speaker wonders if X could be Y. |
| d. Pragmatics | Parody: Yes.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: –  
Pragmatic assertion: ‘these margaritas’ + The speaker thinks that ‘these margaritas’ are strong.  
Focus: Sentence (Could these margaritas be any stronger?)  
Topic: The alcohol content of the margaritas + parodying Chandler. |
| 8.5 Surrounding context | Text-external world: The speech participants are joking by the water cooler about Chandler’s way to speak.  
Text-internal world:  
“GERSTON: Uh, like, could these margaritas be any stronger? (They discover that Chandler is listening) Hey, Chandler. 
SANTOS: Hello, Mr. Bing.” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1995c, 00:18:50) |
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<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>Could we be more white trash?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>9.1 CA transcript</strong></td>
<td>could we ↑be: more white trash? (Crane et al., 1997, 00:21:16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9.2 Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Copular: [[[aux could][NP we]][[vp be][NP more white trash]]]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9.3 Semantics</strong></td>
<td>Speaker wonders if X could be Y.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **9.4 Pragmatics** | Parody: No.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘we’ pronominalization.  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker thinks that ‘we’ look ‘white trash’.  
Focus: Predicate (be more white trash)  
Topic: The setting. |
| **9.5 Surrounding context** | Text-external world: Chandler and Joey are in their apartment. They are sitting in rusty lawn chairs and watch their pet duck and chicken walk into the room.  
Text-internal world:  
“CHANDLER: Could we be more white trash?” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 1997, 00:21:16) |
| (10) | Could I be any more turned on? |
| **10.1 CA transcript** | could I (. )↑be: any more turned on? (Crane et al., 2002, 00:06:18) |
| **10.2 Syntax** | Copular: [[[aux could][NP I]][[vp be][Adj more turned on]]] |
| **10.3 Semantics** | Speaker wonders if X could be Y.  
Parody: Yes. |
| **10.4 Pragmatics** | Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘I’ pronominalization + preceded by comment about being sexy.  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker is ‘turned on’. |
| 10.5 Surrounding context | Text-external world: Monica does not let Joey inside the apartment and speak with the door half-closed. Monica tries to hide herself behind the front door.  
Text-internal world:  
“MONICA: Hi!  
JOEY: Why are you dressed like that?  
MONICA: [Nervous giggle] Because I, erm, well, Chandler’s gonna be home in a couple of days, so I thought that I would just, er, practice the art of seduction.  
JOEY: I thought I heard a man’s voice before?  
MONICA: I was just doing Chandler’s side of the conversation, y’know like ‘Hi, How do I look?’ [In Chandler’s voice] ‘Really sexy, could I be any more turned on?’” (Crazy for Friends, 2004; Crane et al., 2002, 00:06:08) |}

| (11) | Could that report be any later? |
| 11.1 CA transcript | could that report (. ) be (. ) any later? (Crane et al., 1995c, 00:07:58) |
| 11.2 Syntax | Copular: [[aux could][NP that report][VP be [Adj P any later]]] |
| 11.3 Semantics | Speaker wonders if X could be Y. |
| 11.4 Pragmatics | Parody: Yes.  
Rhetorical question: Yes.  
Pragmatic presupposition: ‘that report’  
Pragmatic assertion: The speaker thinks that the report is delayed + parodying Chandler.  
Focus: Sentence (Could that report be any later?) |
| 11.5 Surrounding context | Text-external world: The speech participants are having a conversation in a café. Phoebe has started working in Chandler’s office.  
Text-internal world:  
“JOEY: Hey, hey. How was the first day?  
PHOEBE: Oh, excellnt. Everyone was so, so nice.  
CHANDLER: See, it pays to know the man who wears my shoes. (Joey and Ross wonder what he means) Me.  
PHOEBE: No, I didn't tell anybody that I knew you.  
CHANDLER: Why not?  
PHOEBE: Oh, because, you know... they don't like you.” |
“CHANDLER: I can't believe it.
PHOEBE: Yeah, yeah. They even do you.
CHANDLER: They do me?
PHOEBE: You know like- uh okay- uh- 'Could that report be any later?' (Joey and Ross laughs)"