UC Berkeley

2014 SURF Conference Proceedings

Title
Because Meaning: Language Change through Iconicity in Internet Speak

Permalink

Author
Rehn, Anneliise

Publication Date
2015-03-01

Undergraduate

Because Meaning: Language Change through Iconicity in Internet Speak

Anneliise Rehn | Linguistics | Session 7B
Mentor: Professor Line Mikkelsen, Linguistics

This thesis explores the meaning of a newly recognized usage of *because*, in which *because* is followed by a single word, such as *meaning* in the thesis title. Language observers have noticed that for English speakers, especially on the internet, the possibilities for *because* are expanding. Traditionally, we've understood two contexts for *because* to be grammatical. The first with *because* followed by an of-phrase such as *The apple falls to the ground because of gravity* and the second with because followed by a clause such as *I'm going to the store because I need food*. In the past four years, we see an increasing usage by people on the internet of sentences like *The apple falls to the ground because science* and *I'm going to the store because hungry*. All parts of the sentence after the word *because* are replaced by a single word. As demonstrated by these examples, that word can be a noun - like science here - or an adjective - like hungry. We also see examples with interjections such as *because yay* and *because no*, proper nouns such as *because George Bush* and adverbs: *because honestly* was an initially popular example. Authors have disagreed on how to definitively describe that pattern syntactically. Mark Liberman's post on Language Log follows a common trend in labelling it "Because NOUN." Stan Cary on his blog Sentence First argues that this name is inaccurate since it fails to capture the variety of word classes which can follow *because*. He renames it "because as preposition." Due to this variety of options, the construction will be referred to as *because X* throughout this thesis.

People are noticing and talking about this new grammatical construction. Dis- cussions of *because X* have popped up on internet forums and individual blogs, including some authored by professional linguists, dictionary staffs, and the general populace as well. The Urban Dictionary includes eleven distinct entries with the construction. So much excitement has been generated, in fact, that the American Dialect Society chose *because* as their 2013 Word of the Year. Simple, humble, old *because* beat out all of the year's neologisms based on the excitement surrounding the new contexts of usage. People are clearly excited, and with good reason accord- ing to the research described in this thesis. The research focusses on how *because* is now being used, what the new construction means, and the impact of this case on our understanding of language as a whole. The research indicates quite interesting, significant, and new conclusions about language development. Specifically we see the role that meaning plays in that development, even in grammatical change. The popularity of *because X* has multiplied through the iconic meaning users of the construction have attached to it. This shows a function of iconicity with meaning drawing upon form as a means for language change.

In order to examine the meanings of *because X* in real world contexts, a database of instances of the construction has been compiled. I find instances through google searches of common combinations, such as *because science* and *because reasons*. Any page that has one of these combinations is searched for other usages of *because*, since the author/site has

demonstrated a penchant for the construction. This method- ology has been conducted for the first 10 pages of Google results for the searches "because awesome", "because crazy", "because math", "because patriarchy", "because reasons", "because science", "because tired", "because want", and "because yay".

The instances are arranged into three categories. One category, labeled Popular includes instances where people consciously used *because X* in a way that shows they appreciate, and somewhat celebrate the construction. We see people giving themselves the twitter handle *because yay*, or naming their whole blog *because awesome*. There are two websites named *because science*. We see frequently used hashtags, t-shirts, advertising campaigns, and, perhaps the instance which most evidenced the hype, a band which named themselves, "because reasons." 52 examples of this Popular type have been compiled. Also included in this list are the urban dictionary entries mentioned earlier. This list establishes that individuals are consciously recognizing their usage of the construction, and in many cases analyzing it. This analysis is invaluable in informing and providing evidence for the conclusions discussed below.

Table 1: Popular Instances	Type	Date
Tour Because Awesome	Music/Comedy Tour	04.25.2014
Doctor Who Because Yay	Pinterest Board	07.2013
BECAUSE REASONS	Tumblr Title	08.03.2012
Why? Because Science.	Website	06.26.2012
Because Honestly	Urban Dictionary	01.14.2005
#because awesome	Tumblr Hashtag	Unknown

Table 1 provides instances of the Popular type.

All other instances separate into two categories. One, the Limited category, is contexts which fall outside the Popular category but are still inherently space- limited; tweets, headlines, blog post titles, etc. were placed here. Of those, 141 instances have been compiled. The google search algorithm preferences instances in this and the above Popular category so the proportional difference between Limited and Sentential below does not necessarily indicate that these space-limited instances are more common.

The final list is labeled Sentential. 124 Sentential instances have been compiled. These are found in contexts which are not limited in space such as the text of blog posts, internet articles, and books. This list demonstrates that people are not using the construction purely for the sake of brevity, as they might for the sake of fitting information into a headline or tweet. Examples are even attested spoken in videos. While only two spoken instances have been collected, nothing indicates they are significantly less common than written instances, but rather owe this disparity to the fact that video text is less easily searchable. Since saying "of" takes essentially no time, these spoken examples show particularly that brevity is not the only motivator for utilizing *because X*. The verbalized occurrences point also to the fact that the construction is jumping off the internet into the spoken English. Because Meaning

Examining the secondary literature of people talking about the construction we find that this conversation is had by linguists and non-academics alike. Different people take interest for

various reasons. The conversation has mainly focused on questions of origin, where this construction came from and what was the first usage of it. Mark Liberman's July 2012 post "Because NOUN" on Language Log speculates that the construction came from a TV show or internet meme. He invites commenters to share their theories, and nearly every one of the 95 commenters advances a different theory of the earliest instance that follows this syntactic pattern.

My contention on the topic of origin is that this construction didn't necessarily come from anywhere and isn't hugely innovative. As you can see when you consider the difference between "because of gravity" and "because gravity:" it's the dropping of an insignificant little word, *of*. This dropping happened on several occasions long before the internet. *Because X* is attested in limited or poetic contexts from as far back as 1783, another from 1898, and others from the 20th century as well. In 1783, a cattle drive account lists some animals as "sold along the way because tired or lame." In 1898, an author wrote "The wealthy, healthy, wise, famous and those favored by song, women and wine, all have, in individual instances, committed suicide because 'tired of life.'" The point proven with these examples is that this construction is not a huge step grammatically, not a big innovation. Then why the excitement? Why am I still talking about this? The recent popularization of *because X* remains exciting because meaning.

People are finding *because X* useful to communicate a meaning that is not communicated by the traditionally common *because* constructions. The genesis of usefulness is illustrated from the very beginning of modern usage. *Because awesome* is a particular case study. The sequence *because awesome* was occasionally attested in the past. In 1918, Edward Hopkins wrote, "Taboo connotes Greek $\alpha' \gamma o \varsigma$ and $\alpha' \gamma \iota o \varsigma$, Latin *sacer*, holy or accursed because awesome." This example could be a straightforward case of ellipsis, but nonetheless it demonstrates that the sequence was attested before popularly used.

The modern popularization of *because X* began around 2010, and an early example of "because awesome" reveals the process. In September 2010 an individual titled their image album, "awesome because awesome." The phrasing implies that the awesomeness of the collected images is simply inherent, explainable through nothing other than the single word *awesome*. This meaning of the only explanation that's either offered or available being contained in a single word becomes one of the most common meanings associated with *because X*. We have an initial clause that the speaker – or writer – wants to give an explanation for, but the only explanation they can or choose to provide is that one word. This can convey that that word is solitarily a sufficient explanation, or if it's not good enough than there is no other explanation.

Another exemplary instance of the semantics of *because X* is found in ". . . nobody pay attention to all the other times a gunman shoots someone at school because shut up, that's why." The usage of a marked grammatical form which is missing the elements typically found in a *because*-phrase, namely *of* or the rest of the clause, indicates that the position has no real explanation. This meaning, of questioning the existence of a rational explanation, becomes common for *because X*. This is evidenced by the extensive use of *because patriarchy* on both sides of multiple debates. Feminists will use *because patriarchy* to dismiss arguments made by those they disagree with as invalid, while at the same time those they disagree with will use *because patriarchy* to dismiss the reasoning of feminists by indicating that the feminist worldview does not truly have a rational basis.

All of these meanings tie in to the form of the construction in a particularly apparent way, or to put that in linguistic jargon, *because X* becomes iconic.

This thesis focuses specifically on the semantic implications associated with the usage of *because X*. The ways in which the meaning of *because X* has impacted how its usage has developed, and why the construction has become commonly used, become apparent upon investigation. This section consults and compares this analysis to linguistics literature to consider what the popularization of *because X* tells us about language as a whole, and how added iconic meaning can contribute to language change.

The concept of iconicity has long been a topic of discussion in linguistics. Iconicity contrasts with the general linguistic understanding and conception of language as arbitrary, wherein the form of a linguistic sound or motion is not connected in any logical way with the meaning communicated by that sound or motion (cf. Hockett, 1959). The only way a speaker can discern the meaning from the form is based on previous social experience. As one example, take the word monkey. There is nothing in the string of sounds in the word *monkey* which inherently connects with the animal whose image the word calls to mind.

This arbitrariness is true of most words. Some exceptions are recognized as iconic, to varying degrees. The quintessential iconicity example is onomatopoetic words, such as *crash*. In this case, our spoken word attempts to imitate the exact sound made in a crash. We call that connection between form and meaning iconicity.

Certain words can be iconic and grammatical constructions can as well. The discussion of this form-meaning connection in grammar was stirred up in the early

1980s with an Iconicity in Syntax symposium (Haiman 1985). One paper presented by T. Givón describes in a broad theoretical framework the ideas behind our under- standing of iconicity and ways we can see how language developed through iconicity (Givón, 1985). This paper shows traditional linguistic understanding of iconicity as an attempt by speakers to produce a linguistic form based closely on the real world meaning, to produce a type of imitation. Then as language develops that imitation moves gradually away from being similar in form to the meaning until it is completely symbolic and we have that standard arbitrariness of language, with no remaining form-meaning connection. So we see traditionally understood a trajectory from more iconicity to more arbitrariness as language develops.

Because X fits in to the more recent discussion as the conversation has come around to a point where that uni-directional trajectory has been challenged. This is the thesis of Lars Elleström's 2010 paper "Iconicity as meaning miming meaning, and meaning miming form." He argues that iconicity can be added to and mimed from existing forms. He does not provide any case studies in his abstract paper, which makes *because X* particularly significant in its relevance to this discussion.

As I'm proposing the way that it's developed, the way we can see it develop from the examples shown above, *because X* was no intentional innovation created to match a meaning, but rather an existing form as a rare variant to traditional because usages, shown in the printed

examples. However, when it was rare, it did not carry any particular meaning distinct from those traditional usages. When meanings became uniquely associated with this form, *because X* took off and became a popularly recognized form. The form became usable because it had become useful. This process was empowered by the iconic connection between the form of *because X* and the associated meanings.

I propose that this sort of grammatical iconicity connection could be more easily made on the internet, because speakers are in fact seeing what they write and read written out, and therefore have the added visual sense to rely on for making a form- meaning connection. That question would be worth exploring in other grammatical changes on the internet as well.

I will be moving forward with this project by seeking clarification and evidence for how speakers understand the meaning of *because X*. I am expanding and refining the questions to be presented to a wide pool of survey respondents for quantitative results. This survey will present different meaning options for sentences with *because X*. I'm working to word questions so that my understanding isn't coloring the choices available, and to get responses on why people make a meaning connection. From the secondary sources of blogs and urban dictionaries, I've already seen evidence indicating that people do make an iconic connection between the form as they're seeing it and the meanings that they glean from that form.

On an analytical level, I plan to assess and present my conclusions in a thorough and formal way. For many, iconicity is soundly in the domain of functional lin- guistics, but recent work in Optimality Theory shows that it is possible to formalize the role of iconicity in grammar (e.g. Aissen 1999). I will be exploring whether a formalization of the role of iconicity in the meaning and development of *Because X* is similarly possible.

Bibliography

Aissen, Judith. 1999. Markedness and subject choice in optimality theory. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 17(4). 673–711.

Carey, Stan. 2013. 'Because' has Become a Preposition, Because Grammar. Sen- tence First. http://stancarey.wordpress.com/2013/11/13/because-has-become-a- preposition-because-grammar/.

Elleström, Lars. 2010. Iconicity as meaning miming meaning and meaning miming form. *Signergy, Iconicity in Language and Literature* 9. 73–100.

Givón, Talmy. 1985. Iconicity, isomorphism and non-arbitrary coding in syntax. *Iconicity in syntax* 187–219.

Haiman, John. 1985. *Iconicity in syntax: proceedings of a symposium on iconicity in syntax, Stanford, June 24-6, 1983*, vol. 6. John Benjamins Publishing.

Hockett, Charles F. 1959. Animal" languages" and human language. *Human Biology* 32–39.

Liberman, Mark. 2012. Because NOUN. Language Log. Upenn.edu.