Rethinking the *let alone* construction: what are its construction-specific characteristics?

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The aim of this paper is (i) to consider whether *let alone* is really a negative polarity item (NPI), and (ii) to propose conditions that license the *let alone* construction from syntactic, semantic and pragmatic perspectives. I argue that although *let alone* typically appears within negative context, it can also appear within positive sentence. I divide the environment of the *let alone* sentences into three types: (A) Explicit negative type (ex. *The baby cannot even walk, let alone run*), (B) Implicit negative type (ex. *You are too ill to get out of bed, let alone go shopping*), and (C) Explicit positive type (ex. *You’ve got enough material there for a whole semester, let alone a week*) to argue that the speech act function of “objection to the previous utterance,” but not “negativity,” is a construction-specific characteristic. This concept is different from that of “denial of the previous context” which Fillmore et al. (1988:519) propose in that “objection to the previous utterance” does not depend on polarity contrast between the *let alone* sentence and previous utterance, while “denial of the previous context” does. Concerning the well-formedness of the *let alone* construction, I claim that (i) Contextual Givenness Condition (CGC), (ii) Identical Conceptual Domain Condition (ICDC), and (iii) Mental Distance Condition (MDC) play a vital role in licensing the *let alone* construction. CGC is the condition on information structure and ICDC and MDC are those on scalarity.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the *let alone* construction has syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics that are unique to this particular construction. Fillmore et al. (1988:518) state that the *let alone* construction basically must be used in a negative environment, as shown by the following examples:

(1) The baby can’t even walk, *let alone* run.

(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)

However, as (2) – (4) show, the construction can appear in an affirmative environment:

(2) How can I even listen to this stuff, *let alone* join in? (British National Corpus)

(3) It would have been a hot day for July, *let alone* early April.

(World Book Dictionary)
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(4) You’ve got enough material there for a whole semester, let alone a week.
(Fillmore et al. 1988:519)

The aim of this paper is (i) to consider whether let alone is really a negative polarity item (NPI), and (ii) to propose conditions that license the let alone construction from syntactic, semantic and pragmatic perspectives. NPIs are expressions like English at all and a red cent that “appear freely only within negative contexts (Horn and Kato 2000: 1).” I will argue that while let alone typically appears within negative context, it can also appear within affirmative context. I will divide the environment of the let alone sentences into three types: (A) Explicit negative type (ex. The baby cannot even walk, let alone run.), (B) Implicit negative type (ex. You are too ill to get out of bed, let alone go shopping.), and (C) Explicit positive type (ex. You’ve got enough material there for a whole semester, let alone a week) to argue that the speech act function of “objection to the previous utterance,” but not “negativity,” is a construction-specific characteristic. This concept is different from that of “denial of the previous context” which Fillmore et al. (1988:519) propose in that “objection to the previous utterance” does not depend on polarity contrast between the let alone sentence and previous utterance, while “denial of the previous context” does.

Concerning the well-formedness of the let alone construction, I will claim that (i) Contextual Givenness Condition (CGC), (ii) Identical Conceptual Domain Condition (ICDC), and (iii) Mental Distance Condition (MDC) play a vital role in licensing the let alone construction. CGC is a condition on information structure and ICDD and MDC concern scalarity.

2. Construction Grammar

In this section, I will briefly introduce the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar. Fillmore et al. (1988) is an epoch-making paper of Construction Grammar (hence CxG). CxG pays close attention to linguistic expressions whose nature cannot be captured by ordinary syntactic rules and compositional semantics (Fillmore et al. 1988; Goldberg 1995; Kay 1997; Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996; Kay and Fillmore 1999; Jackendoff 1997a, b, 2002; Croft 2001). Within the framework of CxG, such expressions are classified as “constructions.” Goldberg (1995) defines the notion “construction” as follows: 1

1 For example, the following expressions are considered as the examples of “construction.”
   (i) One more beer and/or I’m leaving.
   (ii) The more you eat, the fatter you get.
   (iii) Him be a doctor?
   (iv) What is this scratch doing on this table?
   (v) John shot his way through the crowd.

These examples show that they cannot be explained by normal syntactic or semantic rules in English. (i) has an unusual structure NP conj S which follows none of the