

## **'Let alone' from a Construction Grammar perspective**

Jesús Francisco Olguín Martínez<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Humboldt University of Berlin

**Keywords:** 'Let alone', Linguistic typology, Standard negative markers, Mono/polyfunctionality

One construction that has traditionally been neglected in the typological study of clause-linkage is that built on 'let alone' (e.g. 'the baby can't even talk, let alone walk'). The present study explores 'let alone' constructions in a convenience sample of 47 languages. The 'let alone' clause is semantically negative (Fillmore et al. 1988: 523; Croft 2022: 545). The sentence 'the baby can't even walk, let alone talk' could be paraphrased as: lit. 'the baby can't even walk and certainly NOT talk.' Because of this, there are languages in which 'let alone' clauses appear not only with a clause-linking device, but also with a standard negative marker that can be omitted without affecting the interpretation holding between clauses (1). Moreover, there are languages in which standard negative markers are forbidden in the 'let alone' clause (2).

The question is: why are standard negative markers forbidden, or optional in 'let alone' clauses? Here it is shown that standard negative markers tend to be forbidden in 'let alone' clauses marked with semantically monofunctional clause-linking devices. Intriguingly, there are languages in which standard negative markers may be licensed in 'let alone' constructions marked with monofunctional clause-linking devices. In these cases, standard negative markers have an expressive-evaluative layer of semantic interpretation or a mirative function. When the standard negative marker appears in the 'let alone' clause, the proposition should be characterized as surprising. On the other hand, when the standard negative marker is absent from the 'let alone' clause, the proposition does not involve surprise.

In addition, the paper investigates whether the analysis advanced for 'let alone' clauses can also be generalized to other semantically negative adverbial clause-linkage constructions: 'without V-ing' clauses, 'instead of V-ing' clauses, and 'before' clauses. These constructions, along with 'let alone' constructions, form a 'Family (of constructions)'. In recent years, the notion of Family has established itself in Construction Grammar as a label for sets of constructions with a similar function (see Diessel 2019: 199-200; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez et al. 2017). In the usage-based approach, grammar consists of constructions that are interconnected by various types of links that reflect the language users' experience with particular grammatical patterns (Croft 2001; Diessel 2019). It is demonstrated that in these adverbial clauses, negative markers may be forbidden or optional when they appear with a monofunctional clause-linking device. Interestingly, there are languages in which negative markers may be obligatory. In this scenario, the 'without V-ing', 'instead of V-ing', and 'before' meanings do not reside exclusively in a clause-linking device but they are compositionally encoded by a standard negative marker together with a general marker. From a Construction-Grammar perspective (Croft 2001), the polyfunctional clause-linking device and the standard negative marker are 'Gestalt Features' that work in concert in the expression of 'let alone'. These Gestalt Features should be considered cues that are relevant to the long-term organization of knowledge about grammatical constructions (Croft 2001: 52).

Huasteca Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan/Aztecan)

(1) *ach-kin-kuah-ki tama-li,*  
NEG-3PL.OBJ-eat-PFV tamal-ABS  
'He did not eat tamales,

*ni menos (amo) ki-kuah-ki sopelik.*  
NEG less NEG 3SG.OBJ-eat-PFV candy  
let alone candy.' (Manuel Peregrina, pers. comm.)

Basque (Isolate)

(2) *gizon-a-k ez du ariketa-rik egi-ten,*  
man-DEF-ERG NEG AUX exercise-PART do-IPFV  
'The man does not do exercise,

*(eta) are gutxi-ago jateko osasuntsu-a ja-ten.*  
and even little-COMP food healthy-DEF eat-IPFV  
let alone eat healthy food.' (Iker Salaberri, pers. comm.)

### References

- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical construction grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Croft, William. 2022. *Morphosyntax: Constructions of the world's languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diessel, Holger. 2019. *The grammar network. How linguistic structure is shaped by language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, Charles J., Paul Kay & Mary Catherine O'Connor. 1988. Regularity and idiomatity in grammatical constructions: The case of let alone. *Language* 64(3). 501–538.
- Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, Francisco José, Alba Luzondo Oyón, & Paula Pérez Sobrino. 2017. Investigating the construction. In Francisco José Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, Alba Luzondo Oyón, & Paula Pérez Sobrino, *Constructing families of constructions: Analytical perspectives and theoretical challenges*, 1-16. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.