

An afterthought on *let alone*

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Abstract

We here revisit the *let alone* construction, which was first described in a 1980s paper that put Construction Grammar on the map. Our focus is on a seemingly aberrant use where the first conjunct does not entail the restored second conjunct, as in *I don't have ten children, let alone one*. We argue that this use should not be considered as a highly exceptional speech error or as evidence that some speakers wrongly assume that the first proposition is the entailed one. First, a systematic examination of *let alone* examples extracted from the BNC and COCA shows that it is not exceedingly rare, as does a growing collection of authentic examples we have collected over the years. Second, it constitutes a usage type in its own right, whereby the first proposition has most contextual relevance and the second conjunct is represented by the speaker as an apophasis-like afterthought. There are transitional cases between the two types (canonical and afterthought), where both conjuncts have considerable relevance. For contemporary speakers, the afterthought use may require extraction of a general pattern with bleached semantics and pragmatics, possibly re-filled in with specific information.
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1. Introduction

1.1. A classic construction

In this paper we re-examine the *let alone* construction, first described in a landmark *Language* article by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (henceforth FKO) in 1988. This article, together with the chapter on *there*-constructions in Lakoff's book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which appeared just a year earlier (1987), is widely considered to be the foundational study of Construction Grammar. Though perhaps not so catchy as Goldberg's (1995) famous example *sneeze the napkin off the table*, which clearly shows that constructions may contribute meaning over and above what is contributed by the individual lexical items they host, *let alone* resonates with Construction Grammarians as a language phenomenon that lies at the basis of the paradigm they work in.

For all its fame and familiarity, we argue here that the *let alone* construction has still not been given a fully adequate description. In particular, some speakers' use of *let alone* seems to deviate quite drastically from the way it is used in the example sentences in FKO's article and from its standard description in dictionaries. This seemingly aberrant use, which

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we will come to after first reminding readers of the grammatical properties characterizing the ‘standard’ use, raises interesting issues about the nature of pragmatic information encoded in constructions.

The brief but for now adequate definition in (1), taken from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE, s.v. *let*), along with its example sentence, can serve as a starting point to illustrate the main points that FKO made when they dealt with this construction:

- (1) **Let alone** used after a negative statement to say that the next thing you mention is even more unlikely:
*The baby can't even sit up yet, **let alone** walk!*

The ‘deviant’ type superficially looks like an erroneous reversal of the parts making up a canonical *let alone* structure. An authentic example is shown in (1’):

- (1’) ... her muscles were so limp that most activities like walking, **let alone** sitting up, seemed like an impossible dream ...
http://www.sutterhome.com/recipes/sutter-home-burgerbase-recipes/volcano-burger-with-molten-cheese-fresh-avocado-mash-and-a-0#.U4baC_m1Yf5 [The boldface rendering of *let alone* in this and other examples in this paper is our own.]

1.2. A deviant example?

In a post on the linguistic weblog *Language Log*, Pullum (2013) discusses the contextualized example in (2):

- (2) “No pictures should have been sent out, **let alone** been taken,” said Trent Mays after he was found guilty of disseminating a nude photo of a minor, according to this account of the notorious Steubenville rape case.

Pullum comments: “If that is what Mays said, then he has apparently internalized the wrong meaning of the idiom *let alone*. He used it as if it had the inverse of its usual meaning. In other words, he apparently thinks that *let alone* means *or even*.” Pullum further explains that on the generally agreed-on assumption that “distribution via social media of nude photos of a drunken naked 16-year-old girl being assaulted and raped should count as even more callous and heinous than merely taking the photos” (Pullum, 2013), it would have been coherent to say *No pictures should have been taken, let alone sent out*. Pullum then remarks: “The key thing about the meaning of *let alone* is that it has to connect a first half that is lower on some dimension to a second half that is higher on that dimension” (Pullum, 2013). The reader familiar with FKO’s article will recognize the scalar semantics discussed there, and indeed, Pullum then goes on to refer to this classic account of the construction, which we will present in detail in section 1.3. The background presupposition involves a scale of depravity. It allows one to infer that if an act low on that scale should not have happened, then *a fortiori* any act higher on that scale should not have happened either.

Two points are worth stressing. First, note that in rejecting this example, Pullum only refers to the *meaning* of the *let alone* construction, suggesting that speakers just get it wrong: “the difference between getting the relation the right way round and getting it reversed is what is of interest here” (Pullum, 2013). Second, Pullum ends his post by marvelling at the complexity and subtlety of the canonical construction, which apparently speakers nevertheless manage to acquire. This leads him to conclude: “The wonder is not that Trent Mays got it wrong (. . .); the wonder is that any of us ever get it right” (Pullum, 2013).

Let us therefore examine two claims related to Pullum’s post:

- (i) Does an example such as (2) show that some speakers wrongly assume that *let alone* has as its meaning that the first proposition is entailed by the second rather than the other way round?
 (ii) Is an example such as (2) really such an exceptional phenomenon? Do speakers as a rule use *let alone* only as described in FKO’s article, such that (2) can be discarded as a very occasional performance error (or as one of the highly exceptional cases in which the normal acquisition of *let alone* has gone awry)?

In this paper, we will put the second claim to the test by means of a small-scale corpus study, complemented with a body of less systematically gathered but still substantial evidence (section 2). For the corpus study (section 2.1), we extracted a random sample of one hundred examples from the British National Corpus (BNC), using Mark Davies’s search interface (Davies 2004-) and another hundred examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008-). In section 3, we will look into the first claim above, by considering the reasons why someone would deviate from the canonical pattern and the linguistic mechanism that might allow such uses. First, though, we will discuss in some detail the canonical *let alone* construction as described in FKO (1988) and consider some refinements that have

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