

# Cause and comment

## Two functions of non-finite causal constructions

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In this paper, I investigate the functional dimension of non-finite causal constructions, exemplified using the English *because* X constructions. The analysis identifies two functions of these constructions: expressing causality and commenting. Primarily, non-finite causal constructions express cause or reason. Secondly, however, speakers can also use these constructions to offer a comment about the expressed cause or reason. These two functions represent two poles on a functional continuum. While some non-finite causal constructions only express causal meaning and some serve predominantly as comments, they usually combine both functions.

**Keywords:** non-finite causal constructions, cause, commenting, speech action, social media, Twitter, *because* X

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, I investigate the functional side of non-finite causal (NFC) constructions in English, also known as *because* X constructions (see, e.g., Kanetani 2015; Bohmann 2016; Bergs 2018; Okada 2021; Konvička & Stöcker 2022; Konvička 2023, 2024). Formally, NFC constructions (1a) differ from causal clauses (1b) in that they lack a finite verb.<sup>1</sup> Functionally, NFC constructions, just as causal

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1. At first glance, as remarked by one of the reviewers, this definition seems to include the English causal constructions *because of* NP as they also lack a finite verb. From a purely synchronic point of view, it is true that the *because of* NP constructions are causal and also non-finite. However, NFC constructions represent a larger group not limited to prepositional uses of the causal connector (see Konvička 2023). Moreover, NFC constructions, in the sense discussed in the present paper, are defined against the backdrop of causal clauses from which they emerge. As a final argument, NFC constructions as defined in this paper provide a tool for a cross-linguistic comparison of a family of constructions, while the *because of* NP constructions in English are language-specific.

clauses, express a causal link between the elements preceding and following the causal connector.

- (1) a. *never see[n] a movie with Ryan Gosling that I didn't like. Because, Ryan Gosling.* (Twitter, 2019)  
 b. *never see[n] a movie with Ryan Gosling that I didn't like. Because, Ryan Gosling [is such a good actor and excels in every movie].*

NFC constructions such as (1a) are not limited to English but are also attested in a number of other languages, such as German, Dutch, or Czech (see, e.g., Konvička 2024: 124ff. for an overview). These constructions are both formally and functionally cross-linguistically equivalent, so the findings reported here for English can also be extended to the NFC constructions in languages other than English.

The causal link expressed by NFC constructions such as (1a) and causal clauses such as (1b) varies in nature. It can be factual but also epistemic or speech-act-related (Sweetser 1990). In the case of NFC constructions, however, an additional layer of meaning can be present as well – the layer of commenting.

This functional layer of NFC constructions is usually backgrounded. Sometimes, as in (1a), it is only present as an implicit reference to the intersubjectively shared details concerning the complement and its connection to the matrix clause. The author of (1a) does not want to (or does not need to) explain what exactly is meant by *Ryan Gosling* and why *Ryan Gosling* can be a valid reason to enjoy a movie. The addressee is expected to know all this already.

The interpretation of the causal link expressed by an NFC construction, therefore, relies, to a higher degree, compared with causal clauses (1b), on knowledge shared by the interlocutors or knowledge inferred from context (see Bisang 2015; Konvička 2019). The reliance on shared knowledge has both formal and functional consequences. Formally, being able to rely on shared knowledge means that more aspects of the utterance can be left implied. Functionally, because the addressee is expected to be already aware of the causal link expressed by an NFC construction, the construction allows the expression of more than just the causal link.

In some cases, as in (2), the usually foregrounded expression of causality is so suppressed that the commenting function becomes dominant. These pseudo-causal constructions formally resemble constructions expressing causality, but they primarily convey the speaker's unwillingness or inability to express causality (Konvička 2019: 173–175). In other words, it is more important to say something *about* the speaker's reasons than to really express them.

- (2) *I'm going to set up a private twitter because reasons.* (Twitter, 2019)

In sum, while NFC constructions share their core causal meaning with causal clauses, they differ in that they also serve a commenting function. However, which of the two functions of non-finite causal constructions is primary and which ancillary (and to what degree) is subject to individual variation.

## 2. The data

The present study is based on the English part of a trilingual Twitter corpus of Dutch, English, and German NFC constructions (Konvička & Stöcker 2020). The corpus consists of tweets collected between 18 and 23 November 2019. A set of 10,000 tweets containing *because* was collected using *twarc*, a command line tool and Python library for collecting and archiving Twitter data via the Twitter API. First, all tweets containing the causal connector *because* were collected.<sup>2</sup> Second, the collected tweets were tokenised and tagged using *SpaCy*, an open-source library for Natural Language Processing in Python.

Given the non-standard nature of the language used on Twitter, often containing errors and non-standard forms, a conservative search pattern was designed to ensure the quality of the results. This pattern singles out strings of words delineated on the one hand by the causal connector *because* and on the other by a punctuation mark indicating the end of a sentence. In between these two ends, no finite verb forms are allowed.

In addition, the results were manually checked to rule out any false positives. The final set contained 84 instances of NFC constructions in the collection of 10,000 tweets. These constructions, therefore, amounted to 0.84% of the overall collection. This is lower than the 6.3% in Bohmann's (2016: 160) analysis. Still, the discrepancy can be, at least partially, explained by the very conservative search pattern and by the inaccuracy of the annotation tool in light of English morphology. For a causal construction to qualify as a non-finite causal construction, no finite verb can occur after the causal connector. However, since finite verbs in English are often formally identical to nouns, some genuine cases of non-finite causal constructions might have been eliminated as false negatives in the process.

As a medium, Twitter is generally "tolerant towards deviations from the norms of Standard English" (Bohmann 2016: 170). This means that texts produced on this platform can be seen as a source of *conceptually spoken* language (see, e.g., Koch & Oesterreicher 1985; Landert & Jucker 2011; Burger & Luginbühl 2014;

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2. I use the term *connector* or *causal connector* as a functional description of *because* without any commitment to its word class membership (for a discussion of the categorisation of the connector, see Konvička 2023).

Bohmann 2020). Conceptually spoken language refers to written language that is, in some of its aspects, structurally closer to spoken language.

Tweets were used as the empirical basis also due to the (assumed) importance of online communication platforms in the emergence and spread of non-finite causal constructions. Although earlier claims that computer-mediated communication was responsible for the rise of these constructions (Bailey 2012; Whitman 2013; McCulloch 2014) have eventually been disproven (Bergs 2018; Konvička & Stöcker 2022), the role of online platforms such as Twitter should not be underestimated.

### 3. Causal meaning

Formally, the NFC constructions follow their matrix clause A and consist of two parts: the causal connector, in English most typically *because*, and its complement B (3).

(3) A *because* B

In terms of their function, NFC constructions primarily express causal meaning. By means of a causal connector, they combine one proposition,  $P_1$ , expressed in the matrix clause, with a second proposition,  $P_2$  (4). The second proposition,  $P_2$ , then expresses the cause of proposition  $P_1$  in the matrix clause.

(4)  $P_1$  is caused by  $P_2$

The causal links expressed by a causal clause can be divided, according to Sweetser (1990: 76–77), into three prototypical variants based on the nature of the causal link: real-world causality (5a), epistemic causality (5b), and speech act causality (5c) (see also Kanetani 2019; but also Verstraete 2007).

- (5) a. *I cannot see John because the lights are not on.*  
 b. *John's gone because the lights are not on.*  
 c. *What are you planning to do because John's back?*

Causal constructions of the type (5a) express real-world causality. The real-world fact that it is dark directly *causes* the speaker's inability to see John. This is not the case in epistemic causal constructions such as (5b). The real-world fact that the lights are not on does not directly cause John to be absent. The real-world fact that the lights are not on is the reason why the speaker *knows* that John is absent. Finally, causal constructions of the type (5c) convey the reason for a speech act expressed by the matrix clause. The fact that John has returned is, in this case, not

the cause of any plans on the part of the addressee but the reason why the speaker *is asking* the addressee about their plans.

NFC constructions can express all three types of causality relations. For instance, in (6), the fact that the speaker struggles to find the appropriate words in the correct language *causes* the fact that they need five minutes to compose a tweet.

- (6) *When you're so exhausted you can't think in Dutch OR English.. And it's taken 5 minutes just to write the damned tweet. **Because words.*** (Twitter, 2019)

In (7), however, the fact that negative interest rates are used as a monetary policy does not cause anything, as was the case for *words* in (6). Rather, negative interest rates are the reason why the speaker *thinks* that people will get paid to consume goods. The causal link between the proposition contained in the matrix clause and the proposition expressed in the NFC construction is, therefore, an epistemic one.

- (7) *Soon we will get paid to consume goods **because negative interest rates.*** (Twitter, 2019)

Finally, (8) illustrates speech act causality. The expression of a certain degree of shared emotional experience between the speaker and the addressees is the reason why the speaker *is asking* the question conveyed in the matrix clause. The proposition contained in the NFC construction *enables* (see Sweetser 1990:77) the speaker to utter a particular speech act.

- (8) *You ever wanna kick your own ass? **Because same.*** (Twitter, 2019)

Although all three types of causality are attested in NFC constructions, identifying the exact type of causal link can sometimes be challenging. Particularly in the present study, this difficulty stems from the reliance on written data. Lacking any contextual details of the analysed texts can lead to ambiguity. A case in point is the causal link between *Kenney* in (9) and the proposition expressed in the matrix clause.

- (9) *There's something deeply ironic about Albertans handing their money over to a bank headquartered in Quebec "**because Kenney**"* (Twitter, 2019)

Jason Kenney, the 18th premier of the Canadian province of Alberta, who was in office between 2019 and 2022, can be analysed in the context of the NFC construction in (9) as being the reason for the speaker *thinking* that the Albertans' actions are deeply ironic. This would qualify as a case of epistemic causality. However, it might also be the case that *Kenney* is used as the reason why the speaker is *telling*

the addressee that the financial behaviour of the Albertans is deeply ironic. This context would, in turn, qualify the example as a case of speech act causality.

Under certain conditions, moreover, *because Kenney* can also be taken to express real-world causality. This interpretation, however, depends on the scope of the introductory phrase *there's something deeply ironic about* in (9). If the NFC construction *because Kenney* serves to back the speaker's opinion about the Albertans and their relationship to the banks in Quebec, as suggested in (10a), it can either be a case of epistemic or speech act causality, as discussed above. However, if the introductory phrase has a larger scope and the speaker finds deeply ironic not only the behaviour of the Albertans but also their reason for it, i.e. *because Kenney*, as indicated in (10b), the causality expressed by the NFC construction can be analysed as a case of real-world causality.

- (10) a. [There's something deeply ironic about Albertans handing their money over to a bank headquartered in Quebec] [because Kenney]  
 b. [There's something deeply ironic about] [Albertans handing their money over to a bank headquartered in Quebec because Kenney]

The bottom line is that without other than textual cues, the three causality types cannot be distinguished with any certainty. The decision concerning the causality type expressed by such cases as *because Kenney* (9) is, therefore, to a large degree, arbitrary. It is particularly difficult to distinguish between epistemic and speech-act-related types of causality in written data.

Moreover, it has also been suggested that the differentiation of the three categories of causal links is not a matter of discrete categories but a continuum. The essential factor for distinguishing the three types of causality is the degree of speaker involvement (e.g., Pit, Maat & Sanders 1997; Maat & Sanders 1995; 2000). This factor also underlies Verstraete's (2007) distinction between *speaker-oriented* and *state-of-affairs-oriented* causal links.

In cases of real-world causality (11a), the speaker has no influence on the causal link between the two propositions. It takes time to write a tweet if one's exhausted and must find the right words in the right language, regardless of the speaker's cognition. However, cases of epistemic (11b) or speech act (11c) causality depend on the speaker's will. Negative interest rates (11b) or the recognition of a shared emotion (11c) as such are not the causes of anything. The speaker interprets them as reasons to act in a certain way.

- (11) a. ...And it's taken 5 minutes just to write the damned tweet. **Because words.**  
 b. Soon we will get paid to consume goods **because negative interest rates.**  
 c. You ever wanna kick your own ass? **Because same.**

While the tripartite distinction of causality types is widely accepted, some scholars have proposed grouping epistemic and speech-act-related causality under the label of speaker-oriented causality (Verstraete 2007) or reasoning constructions (Kanetani 2019). In what follows, I use the latter term to refer to constructions where the speaker has to infer a causal relation and use the term *causation* to refer to constructions expressing real-world causality.

However, as the NFC construction in (12) demonstrates, even the distinction between constructions of causation and reasoning cannot be categorical and must be viewed as gradual, at least to a certain degree.

- (12) *But those who benefit from labour policies are voting Tory because... well, the Daily Mail!* (Twitter, 2019)

The construction in (12) can most easily be analysed as a reasoning construction. The speaker *reasons* that “people who benefit from labour policies are voting Tory” due to their reliance on “the Daily Mail” as their source of information. In the right context, however, the same construction could also be interpreted as an observation of one proposition being *caused* by another. In other words, the fact that certain people read the Daily Mail *causes* them to vote for the Conservative Party and not for the Labour Party.

In addition to the distinction between causation (13a) and reasoning (13b), I identify a further type of causality, which I term *pseudo-causal* (13c) (Konvička 2019: 162). The following section will discuss this last type.

- (13) a. NFC constructions expressing causation  
 b. NFC constructions expressing reasoning  
 c. NFC constructions expressing pseudo-causality

#### 4. Pseudo-causal meaning

Pseudo-causal NFC constructions, as described in Section 3, are formally identical to NFC constructions proper, yet they differ functionally. With a pseudo-causal construction, the speaker only purports to give a reason for the proposition in the matrix clause, while in fact, no actual reason is given.

Pseudo-causal constructions are comparable to the so-called *pseudo-conditionals* (Declerck & Reed 2001: 359), also known as *pleonastic conditionals* (e.g., Sommerer 2023) or *presumption-invoking existentials* (McGregor 2013). These constructions (14a) share the bi-clausal form with regular conditionals (14b) but differ semantically.

- (14) a. *I need to do this on my own. If I fail, I fail. If I pass, I pass.* (Sommerer 2023)  
 b. *If it rains, the street will be wet.*

According to Sommerer (2023), the repetition of linguistic material in the pseudo-conditionals serves four main functions: acceptance of the outcome (15a), indifference to the outcome (15b), factuality of the outcome (15c), and prototypicality of the outcome (15d).

- (15) a. *I was hoping to make it to my prom. But if I can't, I can't.* (Sommerer 2023: 357)  
 b. *If it breaks up, it breaks up! Who cares?* (Sommerer 2023: 357)  
 c. *I don't know what to tell you, if they are closed, they are closed.* (Sommerer 2023: 358)  
 d. *What a sickly little bunch of violets? When I buy flowers, I buy flowers.* (Sommerer 2023: 359)

Returning to pseudo-causal NFC constructions, two main types can be distinguished based on the speaker's motivation. Either the reasons are (or should be) obvious to all interlocutors, or the speaker does not want to reveal them. This is particularly the case in NFC constructions, such as (16), where the antecedent is (at least partially) repeated as the complement of the causal connector.

- (16) *Yeah! Why not? (Because... not!)* (Twitter, 2019)

In these utterances, the complement slot, rather than providing a reason by expressing a new proposition, repeats the proposition already expressed in the matrix clause.<sup>3</sup> Although the form of the pseudo-causal constructions is the same as the form of causal constructions (17a), their propositional structure differs, as indicated in (17b).

- (17) a. *A because B*  
 b.  $P_1$  is caused by  $P_2$  ( $=P_1$ )

By using these pseudo-causal constructions, the speaker conveys the expectation that the addressee can understand the relevance without any further explanations. Based on the assumption that the speaker observes the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975: 45) and gives the addressee enough information (see Maxim of Quantity; Grice 1975: 45), it can be assumed that the point of the utterance is not to provide *new* information but to remind the addressee that they, in fact, already have all the information at their disposal.

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3. Rehn (2015) describes such cases of pseudo-causal NFC constructions as *inherent* because the truisitically repeated expression in the complement slot is *inherently* supposed to provide enough information.

An example of the second type of pseudo-causal NFC constructions is provided in (18) (briefly mentioned in Section 1 as 2). The addressee expects the expression in the complement slot of the construction to express the reason for the proposition in the matrix clause. The speaker, however, dashes these expectations by using such a semantically vague expression as *reasons*. From a purely formal perspective, the construction follows the pattern of regular NFC constructions. However, the expression *reasons* used in the complement slot does not convey any actual reason apart from self-evidently stating that a reason for the speaker's decision exists.

(18) *I'm going to set up a private twitter because reasons.* (Twitter, 2019)

One interpretation of the type of pseudo-causal constructions in (18) could be that the speaker is, in fact, not willing to disclose their reasons. This interpretation is, however, not likely. Should the speaker really want to remain silent about the reasons, a formulation along the lines of (19) would have been preferable.

(19) *I'm going to set up a private twitter.*

Against this backdrop, the utterance in (18) would flout the Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975: 45) because the speaker would be using more words to say less. For that reason, I argue that the communicative goal of the speaker is to remind the addressee that they are expected to be already aware of the exact reasons or that they should be able to deduce the reasons from the context.

Looking at the propositional structure of the second type of pseudo-causal NFC constructions, we find the expected formal structure, but again with just one proposition (20). However, unlike in the case of pleonastic pseudo-causal NFC constructions, we do not find the same proposition twice. Rather, the second proposition is absent because a semantically vacuous expression is used instead.<sup>4</sup>

- (20) a. *A because B*  
 b.  $P_1$  is caused by  $P_2$  ( $=\emptyset$ )

The existence of the pseudo-causal NFC constructions that, for various reasons, fail to express the causal link between the two propositions present in the construction begs the question of their function. Next, I will argue that the main function of pseudo-causal cases of NFC constructions is not expressing causality but commenting.

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4. Rehn (2015) describes such cases of pseudo-causal NFC constructions as *diversions* because by using these constructions, speakers do not even attempt to explain anything and divert the listener's attention elsewhere.

## 5. Commenting function

So far, I have highlighted the primary function of NFC constructions as the expression of a causal link between a proposition expressed in their matrix clause and a proposition expressed in the NFC construction itself. This causal link can express either real-world causation or a more speaker-oriented reasoning type of causality. In this section, I will, in turn, focus on the secondary function of NFC constructions, which becomes particularly prominent if the primary function of expressing causality gets backgrounded. I refer to this secondary function of NFC constructions as their *commenting function*.

Although a precise definition of comments has proven elusive, Sbisà (this volume) offers a useful characterisation (see also Schneider-Mizony 2021). Comments can be described as utterances that not merely report that something has happened or been said but also provide extra information by expressing the speaker's assessment of whatever has happened or offering the speaker's emotional reaction to it.

While all NFC constructions can, in principle, be used as comments, the commenting function is most salient in their pseudo-causal uses, such as in (21), because their primary causal function is completely absent or maximally backgrounded.

(21) *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because playoffs* (Twitter, 2019)

Superficially, the speaker expresses two causally linked propositions: one in the matrix clause (22a) and a second one in the complement slot of the NFC construction (22b).

- (22) a.  $P_1$ : the speaker is saving energy for playoffs  
 b.  $P_2$ : playoffs

By virtue of the tautological character of pseudo-causal constructions like (21), the addressee understands, assuming a cooperative speaker (Grice 1975: 45), that the expression of causality cannot be the intended meaning of the utterance. Instead, the repetition of the expression *playoffs* from the matrix clause in the complement slot of the NFC construction *because playoffs* is understood as being intended as the speaker's implicit comment on that very expression. In other words, as schematically represented in (23), the expression in the complement slot of the NFC construction serves as the *commentandum* (see Posner 1972: 25) of the speech act of commenting (Sbisà, this volume).

- (23)  $P_1$ :                                   the speaker is saving energy for playoffs  
 $P_2$ :                                   playoffs

COMMENTANDUM: *playoffs*

COMMENT: 'addressee should know that playoffs are hard'

Against this backdrop, following Sbisà (this volume), we can categorise comments in general and NFC constructions in their commenting function in particular as belonging to the category of expositive speech acts. These speech acts "make plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or, in general, are expository" (Austin 1975: 152) and "are used in acts of exposition involving the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments, and the clarifying of usages and of references" (Austin 1975: 161).

The speaker employs the commenting function of NFC constructions to expand on the simple expression of causality between two propositions. This is one of the three main pragmatic functions of comments, as defined by Schneider-Mizony (2021: 18). This fact can be best seen if we compare a canonical causal clause (24a) with an NFC construction (24b). While (24a) merely expresses the causal link between two propositions, (24b) also expresses the speaker's emotional reaction or assessment. In other words, by using an NFC construction instead of a causal clause, the speaker takes an evaluative stance towards the stance object, i.e. *playoffs* (see, e.g., Du Bois 2007).

- (24) a. *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because playoffs are hard*  
 b. *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because playoffs*

In their expression of the speakers' attitude, NFC constructions functionally resemble so-called *comment clauses* (see, e.g., Quirk et al. 1985: 1112–1118; Brinton 2008) such as *I think* or *wouldn't you say* which are used by speakers as a way of expressing their "emotional attitude" (Quirk et al. 1985: 1114) towards a proposition. It can, in fact, be said that the commenting function of an NFC construction, such as (24b), can be paraphrased, as illustrated in (25), by a causal clause complemented by a comment clause.

- (25) *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because playoffs are hard, as everyone should know*

From a formal perspective, comment clauses are parentheticals, unlike NFC constructions. They are positionally mobile and syntactically disconnected from the rest of the sentence on which they offer a comment (see, e.g. Brinton 2008: 7–9; but also Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011). From a functional perspective, however, comment clauses are comparable to NFC constructions in that they not only express a causal link between two propositions but also offer additional information by expressing the speaker's attitude.

This means that if NFC constructions are used as comments, their meaning becomes more subjective (see, e.g., Traugott & Dasher 2002:225; Traugott 2003:126; 2010:31–38), compared to the non-subjective, strictly causal uses of NFC constructions. The commenting uses of NFC constructions do not simply express a causal link but also offer the speaker's perspective on it. This subjective viewpoint, as noted above, can consist of an ironic undertone or implicit message to the addressee that the reason expressed by the NFC construction should be known to them.

What exactly such an evaluative stance or implicit comment can express varies significantly from case to case. The early discussions, which were conducted mainly on academic blogs, paraphrased what I call the commenting function of NFC constructions as follows. Bailey (2012) described the constructions as expressing that the addressee “should know about this”. Similarly, Romano (2013) observed the implied intention of people using NFC constructions not “to bore [...] with lengthy explanations”. This is also mirrored in Whitman's (2013) remark that these constructions are accompanied by an implicit “hand-waving you-know-what-I-mean overtone”. Finally, some also described NFC constructions as “implicitly ironic” (Garber 2013).

(26) is an example of an NFC construction with an ironic or even sarcastic comment. The primary function of such an NFC construction is to provide a causal link between the proposition in the matrix clause and the proposition in the NFC construction. The addressee's emotions and opinions can be ignored due to the patriarchal character of the society. The secondary function of the construction is, however, to ironically distance the speaker from the primary causal meaning.

(26) *This shaming tactic can be employed in the following way: “I can ignore your emotions and opinions because... patriarchy!”* (Rehn 2015: 10)<sup>5</sup>

Speakers sometimes use the implicit comment expressed by the NFC constructions to distance themselves from the proposition expressed by the construction, which is even more prominently present in (27), a direct reaction to (28):<sup>6</sup>

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5. As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, a multimodal analysis of prosody, of pauses or even of facial expressions would be beneficial to our understanding of the role of irony and sarcasm in NFC constructions. Although true, this is unfortunately outside the scope of this study. Moreover, the textual data, such as the use of ellipsis marks, enables only an indirect look, at best, at the role of intonation.

6. The examples (27) and (28) are not part of the corpus (Konvička & Stöcker 2020) used for the present study but were taken directly from Twitter.



merely the speaker's subjective meaning but must also be known to the addressee. While a causal clause explicitly expresses the reason for or the cause of one proposition by providing the addressee with new information, an NFC construction, particularly one used also as a comment, expresses the reason or cause as something (supposedly) already known to the addressee.

This allows the speaker to do two things. First, using less linguistic material allows the speaker to be less explicit. An NFC construction, unlike a causal clause, never contains a finite verb. Second, it allows the speaker not just to state something as the reason or cause but to make an implicit comment about this reason or cause. The NFC construction typically consists of two propositions – one causal and one commenting – unlike a causal clause, which only consists of one causal proposition.

An NFC construction is, therefore, semantically/pragmatically richer than a causal clause while, at the same, it does not require so much linguistic material. However, the coexistence of the primary causal function and the secondary commenting function is only possible if the interlocutors share a certain amount of information.<sup>7</sup>

As I have shown, “[w]hen speakers speak they *presuppose* certain things, and what they presuppose guides both what they choose to say and how they intend what they say to be interpreted” (Stalnaker 2002: 701, original italics). In terms of NFC constructions, the speaker presupposes that the addressee will be, at least to a certain degree, familiar with whatever the speaker chooses as the complement in the construction. This fact subsequently limits the use of NFC constructions. In some cases, if the interpretation of the construction, and therefore by extension, also the speaker's communicative success, requires a very specific type of shared knowledge, the speaker might use a causal clause instead.

Twitter, like other social media, offers a way to control this through so-called @mentions. Using the @ sign allows the author of a tweet to target their tweet at a concrete recipient specifically and, by doing so, establish conversational and interpersonal communication (see, e.g., Bruns & Moe 2014). Posts containing @mentions have been found to be associated with more informal, non-standard spelling (Eisenstein 2015: 181; but see Bohmann 2020: 270–271). An early exploratory study

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7. Causal clauses are formally more complex as they always contain a finite verb form which is, by definition, lacking in NFC constructions. Functionally, on the other hand, causal clauses are less complex because they cannot be used as comments. This observation has led to the application of the concepts of *overt* and *hidden complexity* (Bisang 2014; 2015) to NFC constructions (Konvička 2019). While overt complexity refers to the type of complexity expressed by linguistic material, hidden complexity refers to that type of complexity that is “determined by economy and depends on pragmatic inference” (Bisang 2015: 177). NFC constructions can then be said to be less overtly complex than causal clauses, but more dependent on hidden complexity.

suggested that NFC constructions are particularly frequent in @messages as compared to posts without @mention (Schnobelen 2014). This finding, however, could not be replicated in a later study (Bohmann 2016: 169).

On the other hand, it may not be necessary for the speaker to know *exactly* who the addressee is. Instead, we can hypothesise that it is sufficient to know the addressee *well enough*. Particularly in mass communication and public speaking, speakers adjust their language based on the audience they have in mind (see, e.g., Bell 1984: 170ff.). The concept of imagined audiences has also been shown to be essential for language use on social media, especially Twitter (see, e.g., Marwick & boyd 2011). In this light, we can argue that when speakers use NFC constructions in their commenting function, they imagine an audience equipped with the shared knowledge necessary to interpret the intended comment of the NFC construction.

## 6. Functional continuum of NFC constructions

The type of implicit comment NFC constructions can express is highly variable. Regardless of the exact type of the implicit comment, whether it is the implied humorous reading, the expected familiarity, or any other type of comment, the commenting function cannot be expressed alone. A comment is always a comment *about* something and is, therefore, in an ancillary position to the primary causal meaning. This means that while the causal function can be described as communicative, the commenting function is necessarily meta-communicative.

Not all NFC constructions are, however, used in their commenting function. When the commenting function is present, on the other hand, it is also not always equally backgrounded, just as the causal meaning is not always equally foregrounded. The commenting function is absent in canonical causal clauses (30a) as well as in elliptical NFC constructions (30b). Constructions of the latter type lack finite verb forms, which qualifies them as NFC constructions, but a finite verb can nevertheless be recovered thanks to the parallel structure of the matrix clause (see Konvička & Stöcker 2022: 345–354; Konvička 2023). On the other end of the spectrum are prepositional NFC constructions (30c), with noun phrases as complements of the connector, and pseudo-causal NFC constructions (30d), with an even more prominent role of the commenting function.

- (30) a. *I woke up in the middle of the night crying because I had a bad dream.*  
 b. *Shipping always is a pain because [shipping always is] expensive for another country* (Twitter, 2019)  
 c. *My favorite place is the bakery. Because food.* (Twitter, 2019)  
 d. *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because playoffs* (Twitter, 2019)

Against this backdrop, we can postulate a continuum based on the prominence of the commenting function, ranging from causal clauses on the one end to pseudo-causal NFC constructions on the other. The commenting function is typically most prominent in pseudo-causal cases of NFC constructions because these constructions only purport to express the causal link between two propositions. On the other hand, causal clauses typically do not function as comments, as illustrated by (31) – a version of (21), rephrased here as a causal clause.

(31) *Saving energy for the playoffs hehe because they're going to be a challenge*

Because of their structural similarity to causal clauses, elliptical NFC constructions functionally behave more like causal clauses and less like NFC constructions. The higher prominence of the commenting function in the pseudo-causal NFC constructions can, in turn, be explained by the fact that the complements in these constructions are semantically almost completely empty.

In sum, NFC constructions can be described as having a two-layered functional structure, schematically represented in (32). This is compatible with the idea that comments can be described as having a two-layered illocutionary structure (Sbisà, this volume; but see also Johnson 2023). In other words, an utterance can serve as a statement while also being intended as a comment.

The primary causal function of NFC constructions is always present, even if sometimes backgrounded, as in the case of pseudo-causal NFC constructions (see Section 4). On the other hand, their commenting function is not always present, which is signalled by the brackets in the schema below. The more backgrounded the expression of causality is, the more foregrounded the commenting function becomes.

(32) Form:                      *A because B*  
     $A = P_1$   
     $B = P_2$   
    Causal function:  $P_1 \text{ because } P_2$   
     $\left( \begin{array}{l} \text{Commenting function: } \text{COMMENTANDUM} = P_2 \\ \text{COMMENT} = X \text{ about } P_2 \end{array} \right)$

## 7. Concluding remarks

Paraphrasing a famous book title, the main question I have asked in this paper is what things we can do with English NFC constructions. These constructions, also known as *because X* constructions, express a causal link between two propo-

sitions: one in its matrix clause and another one in the NFC construction itself. In this regard, NFC constructions function exactly like regular causal clauses and express the same range of causal relations. On top of their primary function, however, unlike regular causal clauses, the speaker can also use them to convey a subjective attitude towards the proposition expressed in the complement slot of the NFC construction.

The answer to the first question then raises a second one. Namely, why do the NFC constructions lend themselves to serve as comments when this function seems to be unavailable in regular causal clauses? I have suggested that the answer lies in the dependence on knowledge shared between the speaker and the addressee. This means that the speaker can communicate their assessment of the propositional content of the NFC construction only if the addressee shares a certain pre-understanding of whatever the speaker expresses in the complement slot of the NFC construction. Recalling the very first example of this paper, an NFC construction such as *because Ryan Gosling* can only be communicatively successful if the speaker assumes that the addressee shares certain ideas about *Ryan Gosling* and why mentioning him can plausibly justify an earlier proposition. This pre-understanding, in turn, allows the speaker to be more linguistically economical and refrain from using a full causal clause.

This strategy is particularly fruitful in the context of social media, where language is frequently aimed at an imagined audience. This means that the author of a post who wants to exploit the commenting function of an NFC construction, such as *because Ryan Gosling*, aims their utterance at imagined addressees who are assumed to share certain preconceptions about Ryan Gosling. Because all the data discussed in this paper originate from social media, it remains an open question whether the use of NFC constructions in face-to-face communication and other communicative contexts would show any differences. In particular, whether the commenting function of NFC constructions used on social media is also equally present in NFC constructions in other usage contexts.

Finally, a word on the cross-linguistic generalisability of the presented findings is in order. Although I have exclusively analysed English data in this study, NFC constructions are by no means limited to English (see, e.g., Konvička & Stöcker 2022; Konvička 2024). Given the remarkable cross-linguistic structural similarity of NFC constructions, it seems plausible to assume that such parallelism can also be found in the functional domain.

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