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# Modal scenarios, topoi and incongruity in expressive constructions

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This paper is a contribution to the reflection on the semantic and pragmatic interface in Construction Grammar. Using the example of a particular construction, the Incongruous Sanction Construction, it shows the role played by the notions of modal scenario and topos in qualifying the incongruity present in this construction. This qualification (in this case, axiological) is decisive insofar as it constitutes the necessary condition for the conventionalisation of the expressive value. Constructions that do not meet this condition have expressive values that must be determined from the context.

modal scenario, topos, construction, expressivity, incongruity

Cet article est une contribution à la réflexion sur l'interface sémantique et pragmatique en Grammaire de Construction. À travers l'exemple de la ISC (Incongruous Sanction Construction), il montre le rôle que jouent les notions de scénario modal et de topos dans la qualification de l'incongruité présente dans cette construction. Cette qualification (en l'occurrence, axiologique) est décisive dans la mesure où elle constitue la condition nécessaire à la conventionnalisation de la valeur expressive. Les constructions ne répondant pas à cette condition possèdent des valeurs expressives qui doivent être déterminées à partir du contexte.

Scénario modal, topos, construction, expressivité, incongruité

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to illustrate the complexity of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics by analysing a French construction that I call the incongruous sanction construction (ISC). This construction is very often found in the headlines of press articles. Here is an example<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) Harcelée sur les réseaux sociaux pour avoir défendu la laïcité (Charlie Hebdo)  
Harassed on social networks for defending secularism

The ISC is a construction that can be described as expressive because it is associated with the manifestation of a certain affectivity or emotion. In (1), the headline expresses an affective value,

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<sup>1</sup> All examples come from newspaper websites.

indignation<sup>2</sup>, which is inherent in the construction itself (as I will show). This type of expressive construction has been analyzed in Construction Grammar and other theoretical perspectives. For instance, the form "What's X doing Y?" (Kay and Fillmore, 1999):

(2) What is this scratch doing on the table?

as well as the "Incredulity Response Construction" (Bally 1905; Akmajian 1984; Lambrecht 1990; Szcześniak and Pachoł 2015; Corminboeuf and Gachet 2017):

(3) You, a pick-up artist?

or the "French reason-comment (how) questions" (Brunetti, Yoo, Tovenà, and Albar 2023):

(4) Comment peux-tu quitter un homme aussi adorable?

how can-you leave a man so lovely

'How can you break up with such a lovely man?'

These studies implicitly or explicitly raise the question of the relationship between the conventionalized meaning associated with the construction and the contextual information.

Recently, this question has been at the centre of reflections and debates in Construction Grammar: Cappelle 2017, Liedtke 2017, Finkbeiner 2019, and Leclercq 2020 thus discuss the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, and the place to be given to the latter in the description of the meaning of constructions. But these reflections also concern the very nature of pragmatic information: the pragmatic dimension of elements is not homogeneous, and as we know, there is no consensus as to what exactly pragmatics covers. Some elements are part of inferential processes, and should not be considered a priori as features contributing to the meaning of the construction. Other elements are part of the background necessary for understanding statements: they belong to stereotypical representations of the described situation. Others, on the other hand, are considered to contribute to the meaning of the construction because their original pragmatic dimension has been conventionalized: in this case, pragmatics is part of the grammar of the construction. This leads to another question: even if it is part of the grammar of the construction, should the pragmatic dimension be "merged" with the semantic dimension in order to elaborate the meaning of the construction with the latter, or should it continue to be distinguished from the semantic dimension by virtue of properties that are specific to it? This question was raised by

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<sup>2</sup> The strength of a sentiment (here, indignation) can of course vary depending on the examples.

Cappelle (2017), who proposed to maintain the distinction between semantics and pragmatics in order to give a better and more accurate account of how constructions work.

Generally speaking, the link between semantics, pragmatics and context is a constant subject of reflection in linguistics, whatever the theoretical approach chosen, but it is undoubtedly even more salient in the field of Construction Grammar (CxG) because of the epistemological and semiotic postulates of CxG: constructions emerge from contexts of use; these contexts therefore have an impact on the general functioning of these units.

In this paper, the analysis of the ISC helps us to clarify the nature of certain functions. The ISC has a form ('passive *pour* past infinitive') which is instantiated in other possible realizations with different effects. For example,

(5) Les laboratoires Urgo condamnés pour avoir offert des cadeaux à des pharmaciens (lemonde.fr)  
Urgo laboratories condemned for offering gifts to pharmacists

shares the same form as (1), but does not express any indignation about the sanction suffered by the subject.

The expressive value of constructions (such as indignation, surprise, incredulity, etc.) is generally considered to be a matter for pragmatics. But this assignment should not hide the fact that these values function in a particular way: some constructions (such as the "What's X doing Y?" (WXDY) and the Incredulity Response Construction) are associated with different values depending on the context, while others, such as the ISC, are invariably associated with a single value. This difference needs to be explained, and the notion of *topos*, derived from the work of Anscombe and Ducrot (1983), sheds some particularly valuable light on the subject.

The second section of this article is devoted to describing the form 'Passive *pour* Infinitive Past': its syntax and semantics, the value of the preposition *pour* and its possible competitors. I also propose to examine the form in terms of modalities: 'Passive *pour* Infinitive' profiles phases in a "modal scenario" (Gosselin 2015). The third section justifies the existence of the incongruous sanction construction. This construction borrows the form described in section 2, indexes the same modal scenario, but enriches it with an addition phase. In addition, I show that the ISC is realized in two different ways.

The ISC is not to be confused with The Buzz Construction (section 4), which is nonetheless syntactically identical to it. The ISC differs from the Buzz Construction in that the incongruity on which it is based is expressed compositionally. Moreover, this incongruity is linked to a pragmatic

topos that is considered to be part of the construction (Anscombe and Ducrot (1983)), which also explains the stability of the affective value (indignation) linked to the ISC, whereas the Buzz construction has different values depending on the context.

In conclusion, I hypothesize that speakers can master the various semantic-pragmatic nuances of the 'Passive *pour* Infinitive Past' form thanks to the exemplar organization of linguistic competence.

## 2. Syntax and meaning of 'A *pour* B'

I describe here the grammatical form 'Passive *pour* Infinitive Past' as it appears in the headlines, without taking into account at this stage its constructional dimension illustrated by (1).

### 2.1. Formal properties

The title of the article in the newspaper *20minutes*

- (6) Des parents condamnés pour avoir maltraité leurs sept enfants, à Brest (20minutes.fr)  
Parents sentenced for abusing their seven children in Brest

is made up of a truncated passive proposition<sup>3</sup> (*parents sentenced*) followed by a second proposition introduced by the preposition *pour* (in causal use here) whose verbal phrase is in the past infinitive (conjugated with *avoir* - the past infinitive constructs the process as anterior to the time of the first proposition, the cause logically preceding the consequence). The structure can be realized in an equivalent way, with a process noun:

- (7) Un suspect arrêté aux Pays-Bas pour le vol de deux tableaux signés Van Gogh et Hals (Le Monde)  
Suspect arrested in the Netherlands for the theft of two paintings by Van Gogh and Hals

The noun referring to the past process can quite often be used without a determiner, as long as the sequence *pour* + N (+Adj) remains fixed:

- (8) Le directeur de l'immobilière "Toit et Moi" licencié pour faute grave (RTBF)  
The director of the "Toit et Moi" property company dismissed for serious misconduct

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is the construction itself that leads to the interpretation of the past participle as passive (since the passive is not morphologically marked).

Similarly, the first part of the form can be reduced to the quantification of the penalty:

- (9) 3 ans de prison pour avoir détourné 400 000 euros de son entreprise (leprogres.fr)  
3 years' prison sentence for embezzling 400,000 euros from his company

What is important here is that this first part has a passive semantic value; most often the passive meaning is expressed by the past participle of the passive form, but any other form is possible if it conveys the idea of a state undergone (for example, adverbial forms: *en prison, au tribunal*, etc.).

The structure articulates two propositions: 'A *pour* B'. The first expresses a consequence, the cause (or the reason) of which is expressed by the process in the past infinitive. This is a schematic semantic dimension since, more specifically, there is a sanction (consequence) due to a past action. This sanction and this action are not necessarily negative; there are (rarer) examples of positive sanctions (for positive actions):

- (10) Défilé du 14-Juillet : le gendarme Pecquet récompensé pour avoir sauvé une vie (L'Est Républicain)  
Constable Pecquet rewarded for saving a life

In this respect, we can say that the term *sanction* is used in a technical way; the term is enantiosemic<sup>4</sup>: it applies to negative as well as positive sanctions. I would even extend its use to include any action that a subject undergoes as a consequence of his or her past action: for instance, in a legal context: *sentenced, tried, imprisoned, arrested*, etc.; in another institutional context (school, company, etc.): *dismissed, fired*, etc.; but also outside an institutional context: *harassed, assaulted, killed*, etc.

## 2.2. The preposition *pour*

The preposition *pour* is used here in a special way. In principle, the preposition is essentially final, but here it clearly takes on a causal value. As Gross and Nazarenko (2004:31) point out, *pour* followed by a noun or a past infinitive can replace the canonical causal preposition *parce que* whenever the cause-effect relationship can be reduced to a "merit" relationship that associates an act with its positive or negative sanction. Furthermore, the presence of the causal *pour* in this structure can be explained by the former synonymy of *pour* with the causal *par*, and the fact that *pour* and *parce que* both answer "why" questions.

There are, however, competing prepositions to *pour*: firstly, *parce que*:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Legallois (2022a) for an application of the concept of enantiosemia to the analysis of the transitive construction of French

(11) Un collégien violemment frappé en Dordogne parce qu'il portait un maillot de l'OM (France 3 Régions)

Schoolboy severely beaten in Dordogne because he was wearing a Marseille team jersey

The equivalent headline of (11) with *pour* can be found on the Internet:

(11') un adolescent agressé pour avoir porté le maillot, vive émotion à Marseille (Onze Mondial)  
a teenager attacked for wearing the jersey, emotions run high in Marseille

*Parce que*, however, can be used in sentences in which the subject is not a human:

(12) Une maison détruite parce qu'elle abritait des rebelles  
A house destroyed because it was sheltering rebels

(12') ? une maison détruite pour avoir abrité des rebelles  
a house destroyed for sheltering rebels

It can also introduce a permanent state:

(13) Sanctionné parce que russe (twitter.com)  
Sanctioned for being Russian

which cannot be done by a proposition introduced by *pour*

(13') \* sanctionnée pour être russe  
sanctioned for being Russian

unless the state is finite:

(13'') sanctionnée pour avoir été russe  
sanctioned for having been Russian

On the other hand, *parce que* allows the presence of two different subjects in A and B:

(14) Condamné parce que la victime avait vu son visage dans un rêve (Paris Match)  
Convicted because the victim saw his face in a dream

Here, B is not the reason for the sanction, but the circumstance which enabled the sentence to be passed. The conjunction *parce que* and the prepositional phrase *suite à* behave in the same way. For example, propositions with *suite à* can also refer to the reason for the sanction:

(15) L'hôpital de Blois condamné suite à une faute aux urgences (Lanouvellerepublique.fr)  
Blois hospital condemned following emergency room misconduct

or to the circumstance:

(16) Le rappeur Timal condamné suite à la plainte de la Fondation 30 Millions d'Amis (30millionsdamis.fr)

Rapper Timal sentenced following complaint by the 30 Millions d'Amis Foundation

So while some uses of *parce que*, *car*, *après* and *suite à* are equivalent to those of *pour*, the first three expressions are sometimes used to introduce a circumstance of A rather than a reason. These expressions are less "specialized" than *pour* in marking the causality between the sanction and the past action. For example, if we look at the past participle *emprisonné* (*imprisoned*, *jailed*) in the FrWac corpus, it is followed 58 times by *pour avoir* and only once by *parce que*<sup>5</sup>.

The use of the form 'A *pour* B' in headlines goes back a long way, since occurrences can be found in the Gazette<sup>6</sup>:

(17) Trois Gentils-hommes bannis de Madrid, pour avoir mal parlé de l'imposition sur le sel (La Gazette, 30 mai 1631)

Three gentlemen banished from Madrid for speaking out against the salt tax

The complete form of the sentence, i.e. with the passive auxiliary in place, is of course common, and usually follows the headline by repeating part of it and providing additional information:

(18) Clermont-Ferrand : Un notaire condamné pour avoir détourné la fortune d'une défunte.

Un ancien notaire a été condamné ce lundi dans le Puy-de-Dôme pour avoir détourné l'argent d'un héritage, en 2014. [...] (20minutes.fr)

A notary convicted of embezzling a deceased woman's fortune.

A former notary was sentenced on Monday in the Puy-de-Dôme department for embezzling money from an inheritance in 2014. [...]

### 2.3. Modal scenario

On reading the examples, it is clear that the form activates a script (Schank & Abelson 1977) or a frame (Fillmore and Atkins, 1992), or what Gosselin (2015) calls a "modal scenario". This scenario is said to be modal because it is articulated by several temporally oriented phases, which can be expressed in terms of modalities. This conception is part of a broad analysis of modality, which is not limited to the markers usually analyzed by linguistic or philosophical studies. A modal scenario manifests itself as a background to the meaning of certain lexemes. For example, the word *vengeance* (Gosselin 2015): *vengeance* is an undesirable action against an individual who has committed an undesirable action against someone. These actions can be of any kind. Their only fundamental

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<sup>5</sup> The absence of a French press corpus makes quantitative analysis difficult. FRwac is just a stopgap.

<sup>6</sup> La Gazette was one of the first French newspapers (created in 1631).



property is that they are undesirable. So *vengeance* selects the final phase of a chain of actions and situations whose only relevant characteristic is modal (in this case, negative appreciation). Moreover, a modal scenario, such as that of *vengeance*, can also constitute a discursive structure underlying certain texts (for example, in *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* by Dumas).

The idea here is to extend the notion of modal scenario to certain constructions, in particular to the form 'A *pour* B'. Thus, if for (18) the notary's conviction is a fact which comes under the alethic modality<sup>7</sup>, which the newspaper makes known to the public (epistemic modality), there is a background scenario for the sanction which can be described schematically as follows:

**Phase 1:** An event E1 takes place (alethic modality) which consists of the performance of an action by an individual X (past action B): a notary (X) has embezzled money (E1).

**Phase 2:** the representatives of institution Y are aware of E1 (epistemic modality), and consider such an event to be prohibited (negative deontic modality): justice Y has been warned of this misappropriation (E1) which, from a legal point of view, it qualifies as a crime.

**Phase 3:** the representatives of institution Y impose a sanction on X (deontic modality): the court condemns the notary because of E1. This condemnation, as a fact, comes under the alethic modality.

This scenario can of course be enriched, for example by an additional phase in which X has to pay the penalty (fine, prison, etc.). So - and this is an important point - 'A *pour* B' semantically signifies a relationship between phase 3 (P3) and phase 1 (P1), hence 'P3 *pour* P1'. I consider that the form profiles (Langacker 2009: 7-9), from the scenario, P3 and P1 and their causal relationship - phase 2 remaining in the background. The semantics of the form therefore "detaches" elements from the scenario, which is pragmatic in nature. It is interesting to compare this relatively simple conception with the one developed by Liedtke (2017) concerning causal *and*. Thus, on the basis of:

(19) He robbed the bank and he was sentenced to five years of prison (Liedtke, 2017:160)

there is no point, according to Liedtke, in assuming the existence of a construction whose meaning determines the causal use of *and*. From his cognitive pragmatic perspective, he proposes to explain the causal reading by the stereotypical properties of the situation, properties that are part of a pragmatic template, consisting of a cluster composed of several dimensions. The Penalty Template breaks down as follows:

**Form of utterance:** Morpho-syntactic form of S {S1 and S2}

S1: NP VP (V NP) =He robbed a bank.

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<sup>7</sup> The alethic modality is that of "objective truth". It characterizes descriptive judgements that refer to a reality that exists in itself, independently of the judgements made about it.

S2: NP VP (Vpass. PrepP) = He was sentenced to five years in prison.

**Encyclopaedic knowledge concerning S1:**

Robbing a bank is a criminal act.

**Lexical meaning of 'to rob':**

{deprive sb. of his property}, etc.

**Encyclopaedic knowledge concerning S2:**

A court of law is entitled to sentence persons to pay a fine or to jail.

**Lexical meaning of 'to sentence':**

{state that sb. is to have a certain punishment} etc.

**Stereotypical properties of the reported situation:**

Robbing a bank is a criminal act and the thief risks being arrested by the police. After a while he is brought to justice. The court may impose a penalty if the person is proven guilty. In a serious offence, the penalty is a multi-year prison sentence.

The information to understand how the conjunction works is given by the stereotypical properties of the situation: events are causally linked. So there is no need to consider that a linguistic construction is semantically dedicated to causal chaining.

I agree with Liedtke, but with one reservation: the forms of S1 and S2 are not taken into account. It is clear from (19) that encyclopaedic knowledge is activated, as are the stereotypical properties of the situation whose different stages are causally oriented; the whole thing could be reformulated in terms of a modal scenario to show the articulation of phases linked to different modalities. But that is not enough to show that the notion of construction does not play a role here: there could be a construction with a discursive function, whose form would be something like “(X V NP) *and* (X Vpass. PrepP)”, which would articulate S1, a telic process, to S2, a state process in passive form. S1 and S2 would be in interpropositional junction (Raible 1992) through the coreference of their respective subject X. This arrangement would lead us to conceive of S2, a resultative state, as the consequence of S1 (and thus to see a causal value in *and*). This is a hypothesis that would have to be verified in corpora; if it were verified, we would then have a construction resulting from a routinized linking between S1 and S2. The semantic value of the construction would then be conventionalized, profiling in the modal scenario the passage from one modal phase (alethic) corresponding to S1 (*He robbed the bank*) to another consecutive modal phase (the penalty imposed on X is in the deontic modality) corresponding to S2 (*he was sentenced to five years in prison*). This passage bypasses the intermediate phases.

On the basis of this theoretical example (once again, the existence of a construction '(X V NP) and (X Vpass. PrepP)' remains to be demonstrated empirically), and of the modal scenario of the sentence which prevails for examples such as (18), I consider that the semantic dimension of certain constructions consists in a profiling of a modal phase of a scenario, or of a relation of one phase with another.

So, to understand 'A *pour* B', it is not just a question of decoding the lexical elements and the consequence/cause relationship. One also needs to know that 'A *pour* B' is the articulation of two modal phases of a scenario - this scenario is, in my opinion, indexed to the form.

### **3. The construction of the incongruous sanction**

This section is devoted to justifying the existence of a construction: the incongruous sanction construction (ISC). This construction borrows the form described in section 1, indexes the same modal scenario, but enriches it. There are in fact two types of ISC.

#### **3.1. Two types of ISC**

The first type of ISC (ISC1) is instantiated in examples such as:

(20) Super U : un employé licencié pour avoir récupéré des pizzas qui allaient être jetées (Le Figaro)  
an employee dismissed for salvaging pizzas that were going to be thrown away.

(21) En Iran, 10 ans de prison pour une danse (france24.com)  
in Iran 10 years in prison for a dance

In these examples, the sanction appears disproportionate to the past action. The action appears to be harmless and not a punishable offence. There are a large number of statements of this type on online press sites.

In the second type of construction (ISC 2), which occurs in

(22) tués pour avoir relaté la vérité (amnesty.org)  
killed for reporting the truth

(23) Licencié pour avoir dénoncé ses conditions de travail (L'Express)  
Fired for denouncing his working conditions

there is still a disproportion between the sanction and the past action, but here the action appears to be justified fair (and not harmless as (20)-(21)): it is right to report the truth, it is right to denounce poor working conditions.

These two types of ISC are obviously very similar. Type 2, in non-condensed forms, is manifest in French intellectual history, and in different discursive traditions (Legallois submitted). For example, Clémenceau, then a journalist, wrote in his newspaper *l'Aurore*:

(24) Comment ? On poursuivra Zola pour avoir dit que Dreyfus a été illégalement condamné ? (Clémenceau, *l'Iniquité*, 1899)<sup>8</sup>

What? Will Zola be prosecuted for saying that Dreyfus was illegally condemned?

Type 1 can be found in Voltaire

(25) Un pauvre gentilhomme condamné à la mort pour avoir soulagé la faim dont il était pressé en mangeant de la chair de cheval en carême (Voltaire, *les Guèbres*, 1768)

A poor gentleman condemned to death for relieving his hunger by eating horse flesh during Lent

Both types of ISC are therefore based on the same incongruity: the sanction is considered disproportionate to the past action. In both cases, the incongruity is based on an axiological judgement: because it is disproportionate, the sanction is blameworthy and is disapproved of by the speaker. This incongruity is the basis, no more and no less, of the notion of injustice. In other words, the expression of injustice (or one of its possible realizations) is added to the basic modal scenario (that of Sanction): injustice is the value of the judgement made about phase 3. This judgement responds to an axiological modality, and corresponds to a phase 4:

**Phase 4:** the speaker judges the sanction of phase 3 to be inappropriate (axiological modality), because of an evaluation (axiological modality) of phase 1. Either phase 1 is judged to be trivial, as not constituting a fault (ISC1), or phase 1 is judged to be axiologically positive (ISC2) and therefore not reprehensible (deontic modality).

The fact that ISC is both an idiomatic and open construction that is not equivalent to the simple linking of a sanction to a past action can be demonstrated by the presence, in certain examples, of subjective markers that clearly indicate the speaker's orientation and disapproval of the sanction; for example, the use of the verb *oser* (*to dare*) in this example corresponding to type 1

(26) Viré pour avoir osé mentionner le Maroc à la TV algérienne<sup>9</sup> (hespress.com)

Fired for daring to mention Morocco on Algerian TV

For type 2 cases, expressions such as *avoir eu le courage de* (*to have had the courage to*), *avoir fait son devoir* (*to have done one's duty*), *avoir dit la vérité* (*to have told the truth*) have become quasi-speech and are of course markers of opinion:

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<sup>8</sup> The ISC2 here is embedded in a kind of Incredulity Response Construction.

<sup>9</sup> *Viré* belongs to the colloquial language register and attests to the speaker's attitude.

(27) Covid-19 : ces lanceurs d’alerte menacés pour avoir dit la vérité sur la pandémie (Franceculture.fr)

whistleblowers threatened for telling the truth about the pandemic

Finally, example (28) is interesting in that the headline presents the sanction as itself reprehensible (ISC1), since the motive, eating a banana, is insignificant, whereas the development of the article uses the neutral form ‘A pour B’, in which the past action corresponds to an institutionally defined offence (serious misconduct):

(28) Licencié pour avoir mangé une banane : un protocole d’accord a été trouvé entre le salarié et son ancien employeur. Le tribunal des prud’hommes de Périgueux (Dordogne) examinait jeudi 14 décembre le cas d’un ex-salarié du centre commercial Leclerc de Trélissac licencié pour faute grave, fin 2016. (francetvinfo.fr)

Dismissed for eating a banana: a memorandum of understanding has been reached between the employee and his former employer. On Thursday 14 December, the industrial tribunal in Périgueux (Dordogne) examined the case of a former employee of the Leclerc shopping centre in Trélissac who was dismissed for gross misconduct at the end of 2016.

### 3.2. Other scenarios

We have seen that the term sanction must be given a broad meaning; in addition to the fact that sometimes the sanction can be positive, one must also take into account the fact that the sanction can sometimes respond to a modal scenario different from the one mentioned. In fact, for

(29) Tué pour une cigarette : «Thomas, c’était le grand frère, toujours prêt à nous défendre» (leparisien.fr)

Killed for a cigarette: "Thomas was our big brother, always ready to defend us".

An institution (guarantee of deontic values) is obviously not at stake here. For example, it was not a judge who sentenced the person in (29) to death. The modal scenario is therefore not that of Sanction. Instead, I will consider another scenario, that of "non-institutional" Sanction:

**Phase 1:** An event E1 takes place (alethic modality) which consists of the performance of an action by an individual X (past action B): here X asks Y (volitional modality) for a cigarette.

**Phase 2:** Y does not like E1 (negative appreciative modality)

**Phase 3:** Y kills X (alethic modality)

This scenario is insufficient to account for the ISC, because the same additional phase (phase 4) that modifies the Sanction scenario must be taken into account: the speaker judges phase 3 (which is otherwise deontically prohibited) to be axiologically negative by virtue of phase 1, since the event

(asking for a cigarette) is considered by him to be benign and banal (appreciative modality). Although the scenario is different from Sanction, the construction consistently profiles the same axiological judgement, and the construction can be applied to cases like (29) where no institution and no deontic code apply directly in the first three phases.

The same applies to ISC2:

**Phase 1:** X acts for the good of all (doing his duty, telling the truth etc.)

**Phase 2:** Y does not appreciate phase 1

**Phase 3:** Y sanctions X

Once again, the construction takes into account phase 4.

#### **4. Another 'A pour B' realization: the Buzz construction**

The 'A pour B' form is instantiated in more varied uses than I have shown so far. In addition to neutral uses (with no judgement about the sanction), positive sanction uses, and the two cases of ISC, we should mention another realization whose properties, in my opinion, contribute a great deal to the general reflection on the relationship between semantics and pragmatics in construction grammar.

##### **4.1 Buzz construction**

I call the Buzz construction (BC) a structure that is somewhat different from the ISC. It is used in the following examples:

(30) Un employé d'hôpital arrêté pour avoir sucé les orteils d'un patient retraité dans son lit (doingbuzz.com)

Hospital worker arrested for sucking retired patient's toes in bed

(31) Un homme de 20 ans condamné pour s'être filmé en train de dépecer un chat (Le Progrès)

20-year-old man sentenced for filming himself butchering a cat

(32) Un diacre renvoyé pour avoir fricoté avec une fidèle<sup>10</sup> (ladepeche.fr)

Deacon sacked for fooling around with a churchgoer

(33) New York : une Russe condamnée à 21 ans de prison pour avoir empoisonné son sosie avec un cheesecake (leparisien.fr)

a Russian woman sentenced to 21 years in prison for poisoning her look-alike with a cheesecake

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the deacon in question had taken a vow of chastity in preparation for his ordination as a priest. Since a deacon is a layman, in principle he's allowed to fool around!

These constructions are clearly recent: they are not to be found in the utterances provided by the Frantext database<sup>11</sup>, even in their complete form, i.e. with the realization of the passive auxiliary. They come exclusively from the Internet, sometimes from sensational sites (hence the term *buzz construction*). These uses refer to a sensational, spectacular or funny scene. For example, (33) poisoning someone is certainly a crime, but the crime becomes unusual when the victim is the assassin's look-alike ...and the method used is a cheesecake! The journalist's clarification is the spice of the story, which otherwise would not have been newsworthy otherwise. In other words, examples (30)-(33) could theoretically correspond to more conventional statements, such as arrested for touching, convicted of cruelty to animals, dismissed for breaking vows, convicted of poisoning. But the unusual nature of the situation would not have been expressed, and the reader would not have spent time on the article.

Moreover, in these examples, the speaker shows no disapproval of the punishment; depending on one's convictions, (32) is undoubtedly debatable, but there is nothing wrong with (30) if a person who sucks another person's toes without their consent is held to account, or if a person who has murdered someone is sentenced to a long prison term.

BC is certainly set to develop because of the 'cognitive market' for information on the Internet. But its interest, for my purposes, lies in its confrontation with the ISC.

#### **4.2. Constructions based on incongruity**

The fundamental difference between the Buzz construction and the ISC lies, as I will show, in the nature of the incongruity.

The notion of incongruity is fundamental to a whole range of expressive constructions. Although the term is often evoked in works on this type of construction, it is rarely the subject of a precise definition, and, what is more, its semantic or pragmatic nature is never discussed.

An incongruity can consist of a conflict between an object and a place; this is the case with the WXDY construction, which expresses the idea that an object (human or not) is in a place where the speaker did not expect to find it<sup>12</sup>:

(34) Dior, mais que vient faire un antibiotique dans un rouge à lèvres et une crème anti-âge ?  
([www.regard-sur-les-cosmetiques.fr](http://www.regard-sur-les-cosmetiques.fr))

Dior, what does an antibiotic have to do with a lipstick and an anti-ageing cream?

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.frantext.fr/>

<sup>12</sup> In French, the WXDY construction includes the verb *venir* (to come) that does not denote movement here.

or an object and a process in which the object is said to be involved; this is the case with the most typical cases of the Incredulity Response Construction (*him? a doctor? / Me? Make it up with her?*). We should also mention two other French constructions: the first is Reason-comment questions (Brunetti, Yoo, Tovená, and Albar 2023)

(35) Comment veux-tu faire un régime dans un pays qui cuisine tous ces plats ? (Facebook)  
How can you diet in a country that cooks all these dishes?

(36) Comment veux-tu faire un mot avec des lettres semblables ? (Bart Simpson jouant au Scrabble, The Simpsons Park)  
How can you possibly make a word with such letters? (Bart Simpson playing Scrabble, The Simpsons Park)

in which the speaker doubts whether the proposition characterising the event described in the question is possible, and asks the interlocutor to give a reason why the event is possible. This request is a fiction because the question is usually rhetorical; very often, as in the examples above, it is the speaker who is the agent of the event, and not the interlocutor. The incongruity (or a mismatch) here lies between the possibility of the event taking place (dieting, making a word) and the material conditions for making it possible. The resulting expressivity has a negative polarity.

Another construction, analysed by Dekhissi (2016)<sup>13</sup>, constitutes a conflictual rhetorical type: the form in *qu'est-ce que tu me parles de + compl.*

(37) Mais qu'est-ce que tu me parles de comédie romantique ? Le Parrain est un film de gangsters, un film noir ! (<https://www.radiofrance.fr>)

What are you talking about, a romantic comedy? The Godfather is a gangster film, a film noir!

It is also based on an incongruity which, this time, concerns the characteristics of an object spoken about by the interlocutor, but considered irrelevant by the speaker. All these constructions have idiosyncratic properties, but it would be very interesting to analyze them as part of a construction by specifying the formal, semantic and pragmatic relationships between them.

The notion of incongruity is therefore central to constructions associated with expressivity. We know that incongruity plays a role in the functioning of metaphor (semantic or conceptual incongruity), but it is certainly in the field of humour analysis that it has been studied the most (since Suls (1972), also Attardo 2001, Perlmutter 2002, Brône, Feytaerts, and Veale 2006, Antonopoulou, Nikiforidou and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. also the expressive "mais qu'est-ce que" questions that are the subject of the article by Celle, Jugnet and Lansari (2021): *Mais qu'est-ce qu'elle avait besoin d'assister à ça, à la fin ! (why the hell did she have to attend this, after all ?)*.



Tsakona 2015). It is within this framework that Straßburger recently defined incongruity, the functioning of which is the basis not only of humour, but also of horror:

"The linguistic material that triggers humour or horror can both be traced back to incongruity, understood as a semantic violation through an unexpected combination of oppositional information via the same linguistic links" ( Straßburger, 2022: 1).

I will come back to the qualification of incongruity as semantics.

### **4.3 Incongruity and compositionality**

What differentiates the BC and the ISC is the scope of the incongruity, and to some extent also its nature.

When we look at the examples (30-33), it is clear that they do not function in relation to the conflict between the sanction and the past action. As mentioned above, there is no disapproval of the sanction in the BC uses, as in the "neutral" uses described in section 1. What is incongruous is the event that is represented by B (e.g. poisoning someone with a cheesecake) independently of the sanction. So there is a constant: the event is always unusual, extraordinary in character; in the second proposition of the ISC, B always expresses a "non-extraordinary" event: salvaging pizzas that were about to be thrown away (20) is a banal action that doesn't deserve punishment, and being able to tell the truth (22) is a normal action. In this sense, in the ISC, the incongruity is iconic: it arises from the conflict between the two propositions, i.e. with the two elements A and B, whereas no such iconicity is involved in the Buzz construction, because only B expresses an incongruity. Here, incongruity (in the ISC) functions in a compositional way, reminiscent of the idiomatically combining expressions of Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994). Recall the reasoning of these authors: in an idiomatic expression such as *spill the beans*, *spill* corresponds roughly to *tell* and *the beans* to *a secret*. There is a relationship between the meaning of the expression and the constitution of the expression, and therefore a formal compositionality (even if the meaning is conventional) which contributes to the relative analyzability of the expression. On the other hand, they argue, an idiomatic expression such as *kick the bucket* is an idiomatic phrase which does not respond as easily to the principle of compositionality, insofar as there is no correspondence between the parts of the expression and the parts of the interpretation. This phenomenon is therefore present, in a slightly different way, in ISC (compositional because it is the relationship between A and B that is incongruous) and Buzz constructions (non-compositional because the incongruity lies only in what B represents).

This same compositionality is present in WXDY constructions; in this case, there are not two propositions (because only one event is involved), but a single one that relates the two elements of

incongruity: an object and a location. Compositionality is also present in the Incredulity Response construction<sup>14</sup>, which articulates in its two parts the conflict between an object and a process. This compositionality is a "vitalist" principle: it allows the productivity of the construction and ensures cases of coercion. Note that if we reduce proposition B in the case of Buzz constructions, we almost invariably obtain an ISC; for example

(38) Un homme de 20 ans condamné pour s'être filmé en train de dépecer un chat  
20-year-old man convicted of filming himself butchering a cat

is a BC. But

(38') Un homme de 20 ans condamné pour un chat  
a 20-year-old man sentenced for a cat

becomes an ISC1.

In the same way

(39) Un diacre renvoyé pour avoir fricoté avec une fidèle  
Deacon sacked for cavorting with churchgoer

becomes

(39') Un diacre renvoyé pour une fidèle  
a deacon sacked for a churchgoer

which no longer has the same effect.

After coercion, the reading of these two headlines is no longer the same: in (38), the implicit action performed on the cat is deemed unimportant, and the incongruity arises from the conflict between A and B. This new statement (indirectly) echoes a sentence by Voltaire, in which the philosopher vilified the cruelty of the Egyptians (and not of the cat-killing Roman):

(40) Peuple (Égyptien) qui avait déchiré un Romain pour avoir tué un chat ; Peuple en tout temps méprisable, quoi qu'en disent les admirateurs des pyramides (Voltaire, *Traité sur l'intolérance*)  
A people (Egyptians) who tore apart a Roman for killing a cat; A people at all times contemptible, whatever the admirers of the pyramids may say

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. on this subject Szcześniak and Pachol 2015, who highlight the iconicity and compositionality of this construction.

In the same way, the transformation of (39) shows the sentence as an instance of an ISC1: the relationship between the deacon and the churchgoer is shown as normal, unlike the initial sentence which showed this relationship as unusual.

Compositionality, or iconicity, is therefore a necessary function for coercion. In this respect, the Buzz construction, while productive (insofar as many examples can be counted), does not constitute a coercive form: not just any lexical items can be used in B to systematically express an unusual event). On the contrary, with the other expressive constructions mentioned above, coercion is possible because of the compositionality of incongruity: any lexical elements inserted in WXDY constructions necessarily come into conflict.

Interestingly, we end up with a kind of paradox: non-compositionality and coercion are often evoked to define the constructional status of a form. Yet, as we can see, in the constructions considered here, coercion relies on formal compositionality (in the sense of Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994) in order to function.

#### 4.4. Integrated pragmatics and topos

These reflections lead me to consider the pragmatic or semantic nature of the incongruity at work in ISC. In my opinion, this type of incongruity corresponds to what Anscombe and Ducrot (1983) have called “integrated pragmatics” (*pragmatique intégrée*) in the context of the Theory of Argumentation in Language. The idea of these two authors is that the units of language, but also the sequences between sentences, are based on topoi which can be said to belong to the linguistic competence of speakers, even if their original nature is pragmatic. It is a pragmatics of units and relations integrated into the overall meaning of the sign. Anscombe (1995) uses this example

(41) J'ai rendu un service à Max, et il ne m'en a gardé aucune reconnaissance  
I did Max a favour and he didn't thank me for it.

in which the speaker expresses indignation at Max's behaviour. If the indignation is legitimate, it is because it is based on a commonplace, a shared topos (in Aristotelian terminology) according to which "a service rendered leads to gratitude by the beneficiary". This topos is a general "law", not a truth, but an accepted cultural principle. In a way, it is indexed here by *rendre un service (to do a favor)*, and this helps us to understand the problematic content of the second proposition: there is a conflict with the topos. The topos here has an axiological modal value; not only does it underpin the notion of gratitude, but it is also necessary for the very definition of the lexeme *gratitude*. We are very close to a modal scenario here: when someone does us a favour (alethic and appreciative modalities), it is right (axiological modality) to reward them accordingly. Topoi provide the link between linguistic

knowledge and knowledge of the world. In other words, they are the means of integrating pragmatics (knowledge of the world) with semantics (knowledge of a linguistic nature). What's more, topoi function in a "proportional" way; the topos of gratitude can also be stated: "it is right to reward someone in proportion to their work". Sometimes these topoi are inscribed in language and recorded in a culture by means of proverbs: for example, for (41) *toute peine mérite salaire* (all work deserves a reward). In this example, the meaning of *rendre service*, insofar as it is based on a topos, is fundamentally argumentative. The topos thus makes it possible to link sentences together. The difference between this model and Liedtke's is that, here, the topos is integrated into the linguistic units, rather than being external to them. This is why the Theory of Argumentation in Language is adscriptivist: the meanings of words are not descriptions of objects but argumentative potentialities. Thus, *I did Max a favour*, is an argument for the proposition *he didn't thank me for it* because of the topos. Without necessarily adopting Anscombe and Ducrot's radically argumentative conception, I am inspired by their notion of topos, because I think it is essential for describing how ISC work. Indeed, the incongruity at the root of the way ISC1 and ISC2 operate is also based on a topos, that of justice: any misconduct deserves a proportional sanction. This topos is also a legal principle that jurists pay particular attention to; for example, the German jurist Fleiner is often quoted commenting in 1912 on the Kreuzberg decision of June 14 1882: *The police must not shoot sparrows with cannons* (Sauvé 2018). Although it is part of an institutional framework, the topos also has a linguistic dimension insofar as it is systematically necessary for the semantics of the ISC to function. The ISC is systematically based on a conflict between the topos and the reality described by the instance of the construction. There is no possible variation, except, once again, that the sanction may not be of an institutional nature, but may involve, for example, murder (*killed for a cigarette*). This constant presence of the topos means that the topos is consubstantial with the construction. In the words of Anscombe and Ducrot<sup>15</sup>, although it is pragmatic in nature, the topos is integrated into the meaning of the ISC.

#### 4.5. Stability or variation in emotional value

This topical nature of the construction is important because it allows us to understand a phenomenon often noted in construction analysis but little analyzed: the instability of the expressive value of certain expressions. For example, for the Incredulity Response Construction, Szcześniak identifies several emotional states, depending on the context:

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<sup>15</sup> Note that their focus is not on constructions, but on lexis and connectors.

By focusing on the apparent or actual conflict between such two facts (the person in the subject and the worrying in *Me worry?*), the construction allows the speaker to express incredulity, awe, amusement, surprise, and probably a number of other emotional states (such as Schadenfreude: *Him end up in prison. Who would have thought it!*), each of which could be inferred based on the propositional content of the utterance, the speaker's intonation, facial expression and perhaps situational context (Szczęśniak, 2014: 82)

The same is certainly true of the WXDY construction. The Buzz construction also differs from ISC in that it can take on different emotional values: amusement, indignation, surprise, etc. This leads me to specify that incongruity is not necessarily linked to a single emotional type: it all depends on whether there is a topos involved (if there is a conflict with a topos, then the emotional value will be constant - for ISCs, indignation), or whether there is no topos (as with all the other constructions - in which case the value varies depending on the context). What's more, the emotional invariability of the ISC probably also depends on the axiological modality in which the topos is embedded. As Gosselin (2010: 343) puts it, axiological modalities are specific to moral, ideological and/or legal value judgements; they assess the praiseworthy or blameworthy nature of behaviour, actions and/or situations controlled by agents. The distinctive feature of these judgements is their relatively stable nature, based as they are on systems of conventions (institutions, ideologies). The author also notes that the expression of axiology is itself axiological: it is praiseworthy or blameworthy to make an axiological judgement (for example, it is praiseworthy to be indignant). This point is important because it explains what Legallois and François (2012) and Legallois (2022b) call *ethical expressivity*; in addition to expressivity of an emotional nature, which consists in the speaker showing his emotional state, there is another type of expressivity<sup>16</sup> which consists in the speaker showing his ethos: thus, to be indignant is not only to show emotion, it is also to show ethical behaviour, just as not to be indignant is to show ethical behaviour that may be negative: it is the image of the bastard or the indifferent person.

The other constructions, particularly the Buzz construction, express incredulity. The incredulity is explained by the fact that the speaker is, as it were, "seized" by the incongruity even before categorising it. The speaker does not understand (or pretends not to understand) the situation - hence the often interrogative form of these constructions. Incredulity can be expressed in routinized sentences such as: *I don't believe it! it's incredible, unthinkable! I can't believe my eyes.* All these expressions relate to an epistemic modality. So, while in the case of the ISC incongruity is immediately

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<sup>16</sup> And even a third, mimetic expressivity, which I won't go into here.

categorized as belonging to an axiological modality, in the case of the other constructions it is not categorized apriori: hence the incredulity and epistemic value, which leaves room for a wider emotional range, and the use of contextual elements to interpret the expressive value.

## 5. Conclusion: the hypothesis of a theory of exemplars

An analysis of incongruity based on a study of the ISC and the Buzz construction reveals the complexity of the relationship between:

- Construction and modal scenario: a construction can profile particular phases of a modal scenario.
- Form and meaning: compositionality plays a decisive role in the coercive function of constructions based on incongruity; as coercion does not apply to BC, its incongruity is not conventionalized, but calculated for each instance on the basis of the lexicon.
- Pragmatic integration in the meaning of the construction and pragmatic inferences: in the first case, there is conventionalization of the axiological incongruity by a topos; in the second (for example with the WXDY construction), if the incongruity is indeed conventional, its values are not fixed and are context-dependent.
- Expressive values and modality.

This complexity makes it necessary to reflect on the nature of the speakers' linguistic skills. In fact, the list drawn up here does not take into account the porosity between the different realizations of a construction. For example, it is sometimes possible, without coercion, to interpret a BC as an ISC<sup>17</sup>. So, in this example, concerning a rather undisciplined student:

(42) Renvoyé pour avoir montré son caleçon (La Nouvelle République.fr)  
Dismissed for showing his pants

The pupil's action is somewhat extravagant and the headline of the article is unquestionably based on a BC. However, the rest of the text gives the student's mother the floor:

(43) Je trouve la peine disproportionnée par rapport à l'acte, s'exclame la mère. D'autant plus que ce comportement est peut-être symptomatique d'une précocité intellectuelle souvent liée à la provocation.

I find the punishment disproportionate to the act, exclaimed the mother. Especially as this behaviour is perhaps symptomatic of intellectual precocity, often linked to provocation.

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<sup>17</sup> However, the opposite is not true.

Here, maternal love transforms a BC occurrence expressing amused incredulity into an ISC of indignation (type 1a), while at the same time noting the conflict with the topos associated with this type of construction (*disproportion*). If the transition from one interpretation to the other seems relatively easy, at least for this example, it is because there is a certain porosity between the two constructions (which also applies, and probably even more so, to neutral uses). I therefore concur with Bybee (2013) that linguistic competence is exemplar-based. From this perspective, linguistic forms are objects of a complex memorization: on the basis of what cognitive linguistics calls usage events (Langacker 1987: 67), i.e. concrete uses of a form, speakers memorize information that is not only linguistic (i.e. formal), but also pragmatic and contextual, including the speakers' voices in the case of sociophonemic information<sup>18</sup>. The forms of linguistic experience are mapped by speakers to identical existing representations - the exemplars stored in memory thanks to their high frequency. An exemplar is both the representation (or prototype) of the basic category of a linguistic unit and a stable model of interpretation (although stabilization is always redefined by experience and usage). Within this framework, there are no explicit rules of grammar. Instead, a 'grammar' arises from analogical generalizations about stored units of previous linguistic experience.

As far as the 'A *pour* B' structure is concerned, I hypothesize, along with cognitive linguistics, that speakers store in memory exemplars and clusters or clouds of exemplars corresponding, among other things, to the different realizations of the pattern (ISC1, ISC2, neutral uses, BC), with their expressive values (indignation, incredulity, etc.) encountered during discursive experience. The occurrences relating to 'A *pour* B' are obviously infrequent compared to others. Nonetheless, they have a certain salience, insofar as a good proportion of them correspond to "marked" places, in this case, the titles of articles; the reduced form (the passive without *être*) also contributes to the singularity. Above all, the ISC and BC occurrences are 'impregnated' with affective semantics: we know that emotion facilitates memorization. Each new occurrence is therefore confronted analogically with different clusters of memory traces of past occurrences of this form (Goldberg 2019), to match the most relevant interpretation according to the context; in turn, this new occurrence has an impact on the memory representation of the construction: it itself leaves a trace. Exemplar theory could thus provide an explanation for speakers' mastery of these heterogeneous forms.

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<sup>18</sup> Sociophonetics aims to study the socially organized variability of production and/or perception (Goldinger 1996, Pierrehumbert 2001, Nardy and Duga 2011)

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