

## The Phrase-as-Lemma Construction in English

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Using corpus analysis, survey data, and cross-linguistic comparison, we provide a usage-based constructionist analysis and motivation for the form and function of phrases that are treated syntactically as if they were words as in (1 – 4) from COCA (Davies, 2008):

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| (1) a <u>don't-mess-with-me</u> driver   | (2) It's not a " <u>call Ronan Farrow</u> " scenario            |
| (3) We're at the <u>people-are-moving-to-Jersey</u> stage of nationwide collapse | (4) This is my " <u>can you believe this bull****t?</u> " face. |

We show that, as in a wide range of other cases, a family of constructions is required to account fully for the data, which include conventionalized cases and occasional uses of PALs as verbs or adjectives (Figure 1). We argue, as sketched in (a)-(g), that the construction's special function emerges from its unique form and distribution:

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|--|---|
| (a) The construction treats a phrase formally as if it were a word root.   | Weise 1996; Pafel 2017; Müller 2008; Meibauer 2007; Trips & Kornfilt 2017 |
| (b) Word roots are <i>lemmas</i> .   | Definition  |
| (c) Lemmas evoke familiar, recurrent semantic frames.  | Fillmore 1976; Geeraerts 2009   |
| (d) PALs are therefore understood to convey a type of event or situation that the speaker expects the listener to find familiar. | (a)-(c), Survey 1 on shared background                                    |
| (e) Observation humor involves talking about familiar events that are not usually talked about.                                  | Definition  |
| (f) Novel PALs express events, presumed to be familiar, that are not often talked about → they convey observational humor.       | (d)-(e), Surveys 2-3 on wittiness and sarcasm                             |

We confirm key aspects of the construction's function in three surveys: 240 participants witnessed 32 pairs of sentences with a PAL or a non-PAL paraphrase. Using generalized linear mixed models, with random intercepts for subjects and items, we show that participants find that PALs imply more shared background between speaker and listener (survey 1;  $M = 66.43\%$ ,  $\beta = 1.12$ ,  $z = 4.67$ ,  $p < .0001$ ); find PALs more witty (survey 2;  $M = 80.08\%$ ,  $\beta = 2.22$ ;  $z = 8.30$ ;  $p < .0001$ ); and more sarcastic (survey 3;  $M = 82.82\%$ ,  $\beta = 1.67$ ,  $z = 13.09$ ,  $p < .00001$ ).

While our focus is on English, we predict a comparable PAL function should emerge in any language that allows a modifying phrase to appear in a slot usually reserved for simple, word-level modifiers, formally distinct from pragmatically less marked phrases that serve as relative clauses and/or clausal complements: in fact, Turkish (Trips and Kornfilt 2015), German (Meibauer 2007), and Hebrew have a comparable PAL construction, while Japanese does not.

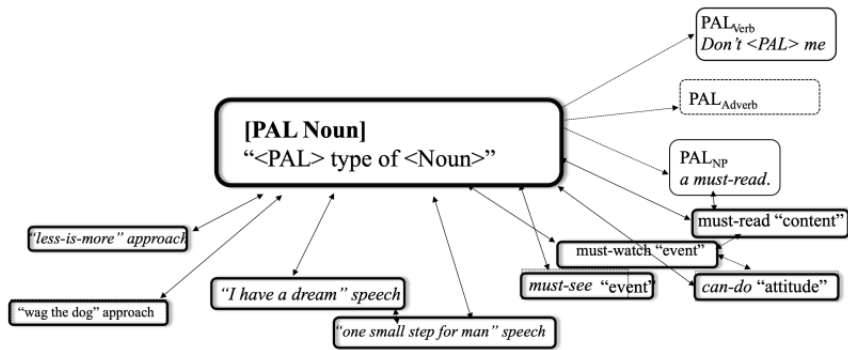


Figure 1: Family of PAL constructions: directed arrows represent motivation, which may be mutual. Border thickness indicates token frequency.

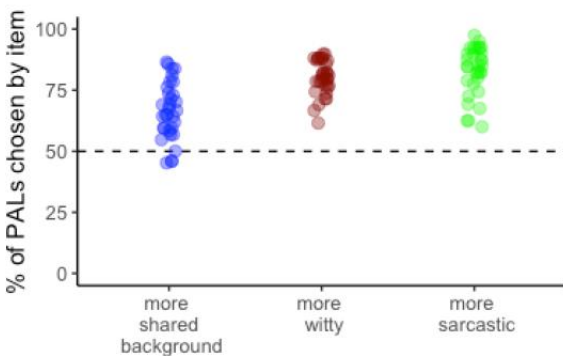


Figure 2: Average percentage of PAL expressions selected over a non-PAL expression paraphrase, per item, as indicating more shared background with listener, being more witty, and more sarcastic (chance is 50%). Three groups of 80 participants each (N=240).

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