

# Intersubjectification in constructional change

## From confrontation to solidarity in the *sarcastic much?* construction

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This paper addresses constructional change in a dialogical construction that is illustrated by utterances such as *sarcastic much?*, which typically serve the purpose of an interactional challenge. Drawing on web-based corpus data, we argue that this construction is currently undergoing a process of change that expands its range of possible uses. Specifically, we observe the emergence of uses with a different intersubjective function, in which the writer does not aim for confrontation, but is rather seeking the solidarity and alignment of the addressee. We offer an account of this development in terms of constructional change, and we use this case study to explore how intersubjectification and the dialogic nature of language can be accommodated more thoroughly in a constructional theory of language change.

**Keywords:** intersubjectification, constructional change, constructionalization, sarcasm, solidarity, alignment, GloWbE corpus

### 1. Introduction

It is a basic tenet of usage-based construction grammar (Goldberg 2006; Bybee 2010) that long-term linguistic changes originate from processes that are at work in actual communicative situations. While this notion has only been implicitly acknowledged in early constructional work, there is now research that focuses on interactional aspects of constructions (Deppermann 2011; Brône & Zima 2014; Imo 2015) and that has revealed phenomena that reflect the intersubjective, dialogical nature of constructions. Another strand of current research highlights the social dimension of constructions (Kristiansen 2008; Kristiansen & Geeraerts 2013; Ziem 2015; Hilpert 2017). So far, however, relatively little work on constructional change

addresses either the dialogical nature of language or the social context in which a particular construction is used. This paper focuses on these issues by discussing current developments in a pattern that will be called the *sarcastic much?* construction. The construction is illustrated in (1–2) with two examples from the GloWbE corpus (Davies 2013).

- (1) A. And, Zythou, I don't care what you fucking think – when you do think, that is. Shove off, punk.  
B. Geeze, angry much? All I did was demonstrate why your points were wrong.
- (2) As a woman who loves baseball, I'm a little insulted by the suggestion that women won't read a book just because it has something to do with sports! Stereotype much?

The *sarcastic much?* construction typically conveys a critical or sarcastic meaning, often in response to an utterance by another (Lieberman 2010; Adams 2014; Gutzmann & Henderson 2019). Furthermore, Adams (2014) links the construction to genres of computer-mediated communication, which often function to invoke both otherness and affiliation (Zappavigna 2012). The critical meaning of the construction is non-compositional, i.e. not fully derivable from the meaning of its parts. The construction always involves the adverb *much* at its right edge, in writing the adverb is typically followed by a question mark. Pragmatically, *sarcastic much?* does not constitute an interrogative speech act, but rather a verdictive speech act: a previous statement or behavior, often directly associated with the conversation partner, is being criticized. In the following, we will call this previous statement or behavior the antecedent of the construction. In Example (1), writer B's use of *angry much?* amounts to the statement that writer A's comments were needlessly offensive. In Example (2), the writer critiques a previous comment as drawing on a stereotype. The construction thus exemplifies what Brône & Zima (2014) call a dialogical unit. The *sarcastic much?* construction is a relatively recent phenomenon that is nonetheless well-documented in web-based corpora such as the GLOWBE corpus (Davies 2013) and which thus affords a rare look at constructional change in real time. We will argue that *sarcastic much?* is currently on a trajectory towards a widening set of communicative contexts and dialogical functions, which is a development that we will interpret in terms of intersubjectification (Traugott 2010). Specifically, we observe newly emerging uses in which the construction serves to make self-deprecating and meta-textual comments, or even to brag about an achievement. Both of these functions are exemplified below. The examples illustrate different aspects of intersubjectivity. Example (4) makes a statement about the addressee, who might be jealous of the writer's holiday plans,

while Example (3) uses self-deprecating humor to pre-empt a statement that the addressee might make about the writer.<sup>1</sup>

- (3) Still I kept at the classic literature because it was important to me that others respect my intelligence (damaged by high school much?: -P). Naturally when I decided to write a novel, it came out as literary fiction.
- (4) We have a few fixed points: a dinner here, a soccer football game there. Christmas in southern Germany, New Year's in Paris (jealous much?!). But apart from that it's all pretty wibbly-wobbly.

The main aim of this paper is to show how developments such as these can be usefully incorporated into a constructional theory of language change. For this, we draw on concepts such as constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale 2013) and constructional change (Hilpert 2013), and specifically the network structure of linguistic knowledge (Diessel 2015; Hilpert 2017, 2019).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 motivates the constructional status of the *sarcastic much?* construction and discusses its formal and functional aspects in the light of previous research on the topic and other related work. Section 3 addresses gradience and constructional change in the *sarcastic much?* construction, focusing on four different issues. First, we will argue that there is intersective gradience (Aarts 2007) between the *sarcastic much?* construction and questions that may receive a positive or negative answer. While the two construction types show similarities on several structural levels, they will be shown to differ with regard to answerability and recoverability. Second, we will discuss semantic variation in the construction with regard to the element that is verbalized in the open slot that precedes the adverb *much*. Here we observe that the construction accommodates a widening set of elements, which are not restricted to inherently negative meanings, but which are currently branching out to other functions. Third, we investigate a gradual loss of an interactional constraint on the construction. Whereas the construction emerged in contexts that involved what we call a conversational antecedent, we observe new uses of the construction that no longer require such an antecedent. We discuss how the construction expands from clearly dialogical uses that react to a prior event or utterance to uses that can be the starting point of an interaction. Fourth, we track the changing intersubjective nature of the construction, with a special focus on the change from highly confrontational uses to examples in which the construction is produced to solicit alignment and solidarity. In Section 4, we draw together our empirical observations and examine how they allow us to contextualize intersubjectification and constructional change. Section 5 offers a brief conclusion.

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1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing us towards this distinction.

## 2. Formal and functional characteristics of *sarcastic much?*

The following example, an excerpt from an episode of the TV series “Buffy the vampire slayer”,<sup>2</sup> serves to illustrate the basic formal and functional characteristics of the *sarcastic much?* construction.

(5) BUFFY: I’m sorry.

DAWN: You hurt my arm.

BUFFY: I know.

DAWN: Butthole.

BUFFY: Really sorry.

DAWN: I tell you I have this theory? It goes where you’re the one who’s not my sister. ‘Cause mom adopted you from a shoebox full of baby howler monkeys and never told you ‘cause it could hurt your delicate baby feelings.

BUFFY: That’s your theory?

DAWN: Explains your fashion sense. And smell.

BUFFY: I’m sorry, okay?

DAWN: Broken record much?

BUFFY: You can’t even take an apology. You always do that.

The interacting characters are Buffy and her sister Dawn. Dawn is upset with Buffy, who enters Dawn’s room in order to apologize. She actually apologizes three times in this segment, but none of the apologies is followed by a positive acknowledgment on Dawn’s part. In fact, after the third time, Dawn snaps at Buffy and produces the utterance *Broken record much?*, which instantiates the construction that we focus on here.

The idiosyncratic and non-compositional characteristics that make this pattern a construction (Goldberg 1995, 2006) are in plain sight. The utterance *Broken record much?* neither follows a canonical pattern of English syntax, nor does it have a meaning that could be derived from compositional principles. It is what Fillmore et al. (1988: 508) have called an extragrammatical idiom, in which familiar pieces are unfamiliarly arranged. As will be explored in more detail below, the meaning of the construction has both subjective and intersubjective aspects. Uses such as the one in (5) commit the speaker to a critical, even sarcastic, attitude,

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2. The episode has the title “No place like home”, the example starts at 39:55. The example has been retrieved from the following website: [[http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/transcripts/o83\\_tran.html](http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/transcripts/o83_tran.html), date of access: 1.3.2018]

which means that the construction conveys subjective meaning.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the speaker's critical attitude is directed towards a contextual element that constitutes its target. Typically, this target is the conversation partner, or some action or entity that is associated with the conversation partner. The dynamics between the speaker and the attitudinal target constitutes the intersubjective component of the constructional meaning. Despite the fact that Example (5) stems from carefully scripted and mediatized language use, it can be seen as a typical example in that it is produced in a dialogical setting, shows a prosody with terminal rise, conveys a strongly confrontational meaning towards the conversation partner, and exhibits the common formal variant of a bare nominal that is followed by *much*. Many examples of the *sarcastic much?* construction differ in one or more aspects from this prototype. As a first step towards exploring that variation, we will discuss the following example from spontaneously produced speech.<sup>4</sup> The context of the example is a video blog episode in which it is discussed how politicians need to be perceived as authentic, but at the same time have to appeal to the general public, for example by avoiding accessories that could be seen as overly luxurious.

- (6) When your job is to try to relate to people? You know, when your job is to try to come off as honest and ... and forthcoming, and this is me, like I'm levelling with you and I'm gonna be your leader, uh-but in order for you to trust me, I have to be honest with you at who I am?  
 I just feel like it's ... it's so disingenuous ... to wear an everyman watch.  
 If we saw Donald Trump tomorrow, in Timberlands and and jeans, and a ... and a dirty white shirt, you know, and a G-Shock in a coal-mining town, we'd be like c'mon, y-you know really ... Pander much, jerk-off?  
 You know, so ... a-and... so that principle kind of stands.

The example pictures a counterfactual scenario in which Donald Trump dresses up as an industry worker in order to appeal to voters. The speaker views this as a hypocritical act and phrases his negative reaction with the expression *Pander much, jerk-off?*. Several aspects of this usage merit discussion. First of all, it is noteworthy that a dialogical, intersubjective construction is used in a situation that only has one speaker. The insult produced by the speaker is not directed at the audience, but rather at a fictional conversation partner who is not present, and thus not able to either hear the challenge or to respond. What this shows is that the *sarcastic much?* construction can be used for the expression of critical attitudes not only towards

3. For a discussion of another English interrogative construction that has acquired a conventionalized meaning of sarcasm, see Michaelis & Feng (2015).

4. The example is taken from a YouTube video with the title "President Obama wore a Rolex Cellini. The utterance in Example (6) occurs at 4:25. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPHwLl1-vPo&t=313s>, date of access: 1.3.2018]

the hearer, but in fact towards any contextually relevant idea. Another aspect that is worth noting is the syntactic behavior of *Pander much, jerk-off?*. Prosodically and syntactically, the construction stands on its own, that is, it is not embedded into a hypotactical structure. This corresponds to the earlier example of *Broken record much?*, in which the construction takes the role of a turn-construction unit in a dialogue. Another parallel between the two examples concerns the morpho-syntactic form of the initial element, which is a bare nominal in the first case, and a non-inflected verb in the second. As will be discussed below, the absence of determiners and inflectional affixes is not a coincidence. In sum, then, the spontaneously produced example has several features in common with the dialogical example, but we already begin to see that the construction exhibits some gradience with regard to its formal and functional features. The following paragraphs will explore this variation in more detail. As a point of entry, Figure 1 offers a schematic view of the sequential structure of the construction. Optional components are shown in grey, obligatory ones in black.

Antecedent	Expressive	Addressee	Anaphoric	Pivot	Insult / emoji
			Broken record	much?	
			Pander	much	jerk-off?
	Geeze,		angry	much?	
	Wow	Jersey ...	bitter	much?	
			Damaged by high school	much?	:-P
	Oh my god,		up your own ass	much?	

Figure 1. Schematic structure of *sarcastic much?*

The *sarcastic much?* construction resembles pivot schemas that are well-known from constructional research on first language acquisition (Tomasello 2003). The pivot in this case is the adverb *much*, which is used in the construction with its meaning of ‘a lot’ or ‘frequently’. This in itself is a canonical sense of *much* that is listed in most dictionaries of English.<sup>5</sup> In the context of *sarcastic much?*, however, that meaning is coerced into ‘excessively’, and a negative judgment is attached to it. Both Adams (2014: 182) and Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 109) comment on this verdictive and evaluative nature of *sarcastic much?*. The semantic enrichment of *much* with verdictive meaning makes the *sarcastic much?* construction a case of subjectification in the sense of Traugott (2010: 35), who defines this term in such a

5. For example see *OED Online*: Much, adv. B.1.h [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/123133?rskey=kZAYIr&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>, accessed 10.03.2018]

way that “meanings are recruited by the speaker to encode and regulate attitudes and beliefs”. The critical attitude of the speaker would have emerged as a pragmatic implicature, but it has become conventionalized to such an extent that even uses of the construction that involve words with inherently positive meanings will take on a critical tone. For example, an utterance such as *Best friends much?* can be understood as a resentful remark, but not as a compliment. The GloWbE contains Example (7) that further supports this observation.

- (7) I really have to ask this, what the hell is up with the heroine, Anastasia Steele? Why does she keep saying ‘Oh my’ during sex? Come on, you’re 21; never had sex, and you say ‘Oh my’? In this day and age? Really? And why does she have an inner goddess and a subconscious that wears (was it) winged shaped specs? Dumbledore much?

While the writer does not have anything critical to say about Dumbledore as a fictional character, the construction makes it clear that the writer is critical of presenting Anastasia Steele’s inner self as a person who wears half-moon shaped spectacles in the style of Dumbledore. This critical meaning cannot be attached to any of the individual words, and so it is a non-compositional feature of the construction.

Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 122) point out that the scalar meaning of adverbial *much* and the meaning of a critical attitude can be related to one another. They argue that an example such as *Rude much?* commits the speaker to the view that a behavior can be located on a scale of rudeness, where it exceeds an established normal value. As will be discussed in more detail below, this characterization accounts very well for many examples in our database. At the same time, we observe cases that call for a different analysis.

Moving on to the next element in the structural schema of *sarcastic much?*, the pivot of the construction is preceded by another obligatory component that we label here as the anaphoric judgment. The examples that have been discussed up to this point indicate that the speaker typically takes offence at an event or action, which is back-referenced in this part of the construction. As the examples in Figure 1 illustrate, this slot can accommodate different phrasal syntactic categories, including nominal, verbal, adjectival and prepositional phrases. This variety is idiosyncratic: in canonical English syntax, combinations of nouns and adjectives with the scalar adverb *much*, such as *\*computer much* or *\*yellow much* do not occur. What explains these combinatorial possibilities in the construction is that the scalar meaning of *much* has, through subjectification, given way to a meaning that conveys a critical attitude in the context of the construction. Since *much* no longer encodes the scalar meaning ‘a lot’, the construction can feature elements as anaphoric judgments that are not inherently scalar, such as *broken record* or *stereotype*, and also elements that are not inherently negative, such as *Dumbledore*. That said, our data from the GloWbE show a predominance of anaphoric judgments that

are in fact negatively charged. Expressions such as *double standards*, *hypocritical*, *jealous*, *racist*, *angry*, and others vastly outnumber more neutral terms. This corroborates frequency counts from Adams (2014: 180), who lists the elements *jealous*, *pathetic*, *insane*, and *awkward* as typical adjectival uses.

Importantly, the syntactic variation in the anaphoric judgment slot does not indicate that the construction will accommodate anything. All of the following modifications of the examples above result in unacceptable utterances, as seen in (8).

- (8) \* A / The broken record much?  
\* Panders / Pandered much, jerk-off?  
\* Geeze, angrier / angriest / too angry much?  
\* Could be damaged by high school much?  
\* Up much?

Comparative adjectival forms (*angrier*) and excessives (*too angry*) cannot be used freely in the *sarcastic much?* construction, and also bare prepositions are unacceptable. These observations can be extended with regard to verb forms, which must not be inflected or modalized, and nominals, which must not have determiners. We argue that these restrictions have the same underlying motivation. What verbal inflections, modal auxiliaries, determiners, and comparative and superlative marking have in common is their participation in the English grounding system (Langacker 1987; Brisard 2002). As defined by Langacker (1987: 489), “[a]n entity is epistemically grounded if its location is specified relative to the speaker and hearer and their spheres of knowledge”. Grounding elements thus serve to tie conceptual content to the actual speech situation that involves the speaker, the hearer, and their common context. Any such ties are prohibited in *sarcastic much?*, which indicates that the descriptor of the antecedent makes reference to generalizations, rather than specific situations. An utterance such as *Broken record much?* implies that the addressee’s repetitive apologies are not just a gaffe, but rather a more general characteristic. Support for the notion that grounding predications cannot be used with *sarcastic much?* comes from the fact that uses with pronouns, demonstratives, or deictic adverbials are unacceptable, as is shown in (9).

- (9) \* She much?  
\* That one much?  
\* Yesterday much?

By contrast, inflections such as plural marking or adjectival modification do not pose a problem (*hypocrites much?*, *double standards much?*), since these markers are no grounding predications. Finally, also the unacceptability of bare prepositions finds an explanation with reference to grounding. An expression such as *up much?* would prompt the hearer to construct a spatial reference point for *up* in the speech situation, which amounts to grounding the utterance. In summary, the

descriptor of the antecedent can take a variety of syntactic shapes, but it cannot involve grounding predications.

We now move on to a discussion of the antecedent of *sarcastic much?*. The examples above suggest that the construction back-references a previous statement or behavior that is open to criticism. In other words, the *sarcastic much?* construction is typically not used to start a conversation, but it rather occurs within the course of an ongoing interaction. Example (10) illustrates this.<sup>6</sup>

- (10) “I take it back” he said. “I will be your anti-date. But that is all. So don’t get any crazy ideas.”  
 “Crazy ideas like what?”  
 “Like, don’t get jealous when all the other girls at the party try to make out with me.”  
 I scoffed. “Don’t hold your breath, darling.”  
 He paused. “Whoa. Did you just call me darling?”  
 “Um. Flatter yourself much?”

In the example, the first speaker produces several self-aggrandizing statements, which eventually prompt the second speaker to produce the utterance *Flatter yourself much?*. As in Example (5) above (*broken record much?*), the speaker criticizes a behavior that is viewed as a general characteristic of the addressee. The dynamics between antecedent and anaphoric judgment motivate why many authentic examples of the construction in the GloWbE involve an expressive or even the addressee’s name before the anaphoric judgment, as shown in (11).

- (11) Wow, rude much?  
 Get a grip, false equivalence much?  
 Christ, Dan, shit on your shoes much?  
 Jack, red herring much?  
 Nathan, bitter much?! It may time to see a shrink & let go of your anger.

Examples of this kind indicate that the target of criticism is typically a conversation partner. Meanwhile, other targets are possible, as can be concluded from Examples (2) (*stereotype much?*) and (6) (*Pander much, jerk-off?*). We will return to the issue of gradience in the conversational antecedent in Section 3.2 below.

As a last point concerning the formal characteristics of *sarcastic much?*, we still need to address the prosodic structure of the construction. Despite the fact that

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6. The example is from the novel “The catastrophic history of you and me”. The excerpt was retrieved from the following website: [https://books.google.ch/books?id=K3gMXoVxDKsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Catastrophic+History+of+you+and+me&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5rqpAp-HZAhWCCewKHTrHCNsQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=The%20Catastrophic%20History%20of%20you%20and%20me&f=false, date of access 10.3.2018]

the construction has its natural habitat in written computer-mediated communication, there are regularities with regard to its use in speech. Figure 2 visualizes the pitch contours of Examples (5) and (6). Both examples show a rise in intonation. It is interesting to note that in *Pander much, jerk-off?*, the rising intonation actually continues with the insult that follows the pivot, which motivates its status as part of the constructional unit. Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 116) find rising intonational contours with other examples of the construction, and they remark that the rising prosody is connected to its discourse properties, as well as to the fact that in writing, the construction is typically used with a final question mark.

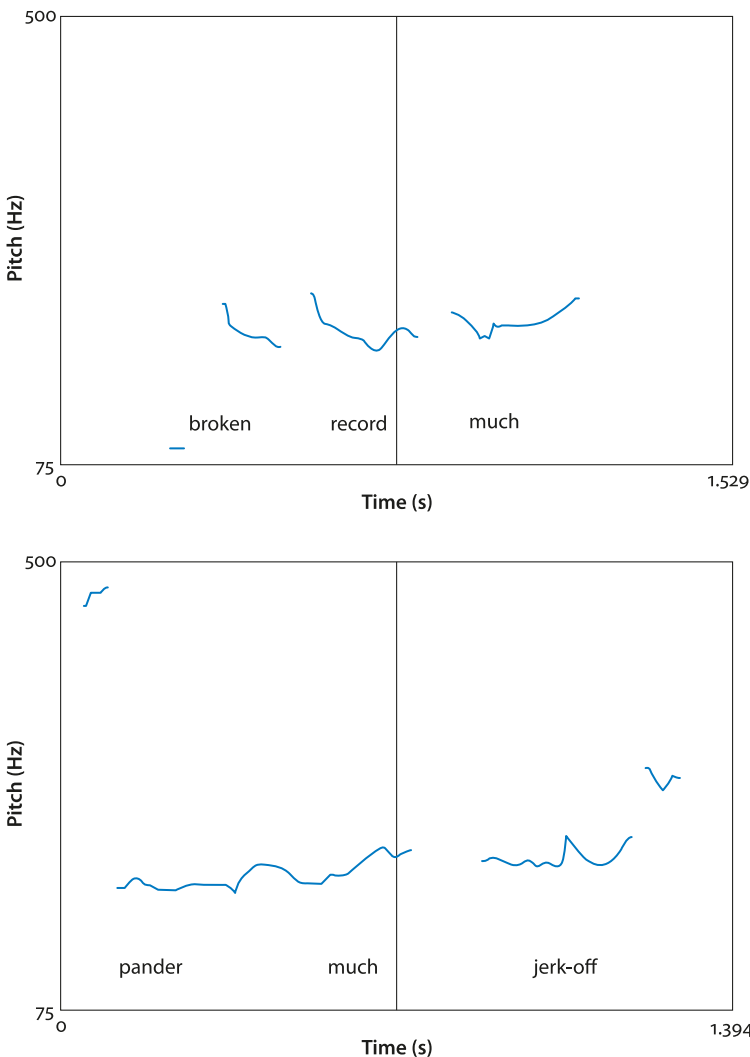


Figure 2. Prosodic contours of *sarcastic much?*

Summing up our observations about the formal and functional characteristics of *sarcastic much?*, we have proposed that the construction involves the pivot *much* and a preceding element that can take varying syntactic shapes and that anaphorically refers to an utterance or event that is viewed critically. Typically, and as argued by Gutzmann & Henderson (2019), the criticism targets an excess on a scale of conventional norms. This critical meaning has come about through subjectification and represents a holistic property of the construction. The obligatory elements of the construction can be preceded by expressives and the name of the addressee, and they can be followed, optionally, by an insult. The peripheral elements of the construction are integrated with the obligatory elements under the same intonational contour, which exhibits a final rise.

### 3. Gradience and constructional change in *sarcastic much?*

The preceding section has drawn a sketch of the *sarcastic much?* construction that has been focused on typical instances. This section will open up to the variation that can be observed in corpus data. Throughout the discussion, we will link variation and gradience to the question of how the current usage of the construction has emerged through constructional change.

#### 3.1 Intersective gradience between questions and *sarcastic much?*

It is uncontroversial that typical uses of the *sarcastic much?* construction do not constitute requests for information (Gutzmann & Henderson 2019: 108), and yet the construction shares a number of features with ordinary questions (Adams 2014: 178). This motivates a closer look into the mutual relation of *sarcastic much?* and interrogative speech acts. It will be argued that their relation is one of intersective gradience (Aarts 2007), so that both represent their own respective categories, which however show convergence with regard to a subset of their features (cf. Traugott & Trousdale 2010: 29).

A first piece of evidence that relates the two constructions lies in the fact that verbal examples of *sarcastic much?* show traits of the syntactic form and prosodic quality of ordinary questions. As has been argued above, verb forms in *sarcastic much?* are obligatorily non-finite. This is in line with the syntax of ordinary questions with either *do*-support (*Do you travel much?*) or subject-auxiliary inversion (*Will it change much?*). An account of *sarcastic much?* as deriving from elliptical questions would predict that *ing*-forms should be attested, since there are questions such as *Are you exercising much?*, and in fact the GloWbE contains examples of this kind – see (12).

- (12) Okay ... projecting much?  
    Seriously, sociopathic? Poisoning the well much?  
    Enjoying your police state much?  
    Get onto YouTube and have a look. Lacking the facts much?

Second, there are verbal examples that illustrate potential bridging contexts between ordinary requests for information and sarcastic commentary, as in (13).<sup>7</sup>

- (13) Procrastinate much? How 20 seconds could help keep you on task

Importantly, the news article from which this example is taken is not satirical, but aims to offer practical advice to people who procrastinate too much. The lead-in is thus a bona fide question, which however has the full potential to be uttered as a criticism. We leave it open whether elliptical questions of this kind represent the origin of *sarcastic much?* or whether examples like (13) in fact exploit the existing formal similarities between the two construction types in order to create pragmatic ambiguity.

A third point that *sarcastic much?* and ordinary questions have in common concerns their syntactic behavior. Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 112) observe that neither can occur in syntactically subordinate contexts, and they argue that this behavior is due to similar pragmatic properties of the two construction types – see (14).

- (14) \* If broken record much, I'm going to leave.  
    \* I'm leaving, because broken record much?  
    \* I believe that broken record much?

This observation is in line with an observation by Lakoff (1987: 476), who argues that “[o]nly speech act constructions that (directly or indirectly) convey statements can occur in performative subordinate clauses”. Lakoff (1987: 476) offers the examples in (15) as illustrations.

- (15) I'm going to vote for Snurdley, because I maintain that he's the only honest candidate. (statement)  
    I'm leaving, because isn't it a beautiful day? (statement)  
    \* I'm staying, because I order you to leave. (directive)  
    \* I'm leaving, because I ask you which girl pinched me. (directive)

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7. The example has been retrieved from the following website. [<https://www.ctvnews.ca/procrastinate-much-how-20-seconds-could-help-keep-you-on-task-1.2544393>, date of access: 2.3.2018]

Both *sarcastic much?* and questions are performative speech acts, and neither has the primary function of making a statement, so that both should be ruled out in syntactically subordinate contexts.

Differences between *sarcastic much?* and questions concern the notions of answerability and recoverability. Whereas (non-rhetorical) questions are generally answerable, expressions such as *procrastinate much?* can be seen as borderline cases, and examples such as *broken record much?* are clearly not answerable. With regard to recoverability, the data from the GloWbE show a continuum from examples that can be literally expanded into a full question to examples where such an expansion requires considerable interpretation. The examples in (16) illustrate this continuum, starting with the most literal expansion and ending with the most problematic one.

- (16) Enjoying your police state much? Are you enjoying your police state much?  
 Double standards much? Do you have/adopt double standards much?  
 Hormones much? Am I influenced by my hormones much?  
 Broken record much? Do you repeat yourself much?  
 Stupid Much? You are stupid!

To summarize the points made in this section, *sarcastic much?* and questions share a number of features on several levels of structural organization, notably prosody, pragmatics, and syntax. Examples such as *procrastinate much?*, which allow for a hybrid interpretation, suggest that the structural overlap is sufficiently strong for speakers to maintain links between the two construction types. Yet, the construction types show differences with regard to answerability and recoverability. Not all instances of *sarcastic much?* can be said to be elliptic, since there are cases that cannot easily be expanded into an ordinary question.

### 3.2 Variation in the anaphoric judgment of *sarcastic much?*

Up to now in this paper, we have restricted ourselves to discussing qualitative aspects of the examples we retrieved from the GloWbE. Table 1 below offers a quantitative perspective on our data and shows the most frequent elements that are found in the anaphoric judgment slot of the *sarcastic much?* construction.

It is obvious that the construction is typically used with a negative semantic prosody. Nearly all of the items in Table 1 are inherently negative. Those elements that deviate from this tendency nonetheless convey highly critical meanings in the construction. A comment such as *Read much?* implies that the addressee does not read enough. In the data, we observe two different kinds of anaphoric judgment elements that are not inherently negative. The first of these is illustrated by

**Table 1.** Frequencies of anaphoric judgment elements in *sarcastic much?*

Adjectives	n	Nouns	n	Verbs	n
jealous	30	hypocrite	15	project	7
bitter	19	double standards	13	overreact	6
paranoid	17	hypocrisy	11	generalize	5
desperate	10	troll	6	hate	3
angry	9	hidden agenda	5	read	3
excited	8	straw man	4	exaggerate	3
hypocritical	5	coincidence	4	obsess	3
creepy	5	stereotype	4	projecting	3
rude	5	partisan	4	fail	2
defensive	5	racist	4	judge	2

elements such as *Dumbledore*, which features in Example (7). As with *read*, there is nothing inherently negative about *Dumbledore*, but the element evokes, and stands for, an antecedent that is viewed critically. Examples of this kind can thus be labeled metonymically negative. Example (17) below offers another illustration.

- (17) It irks me the most when the characters are suppose[sic] to be Japanese but they have a Chinese cast (familiar much?) or when the film have [sic] German characters, they have an all-American cast muttering German here and there (familiar much?).

In this example, the writer takes issue with the representation of Japanese movie characters by Chinese actors and implies that this is commonly done. The adjective *familiar*, which by itself is not negative, thus combines with the construction to yield a non-compositional negative meaning.

Another type of anaphoric judgment that we need to distinguish is neither inherently negative, nor evoking a critical meaning. In Examples (18–21), we see uses of the construction that serve other pragmatic functions. Examples (3) and (4) are repeated here for convenience as (18) and (19).

- (18) Still I kept at the classic literature because it was important to me that others respect my intelligence (damaged by high school much?: -P). Naturally when I decided to write a novel, it came out as literary fiction.
- (19) We have a few fixed points: a dinner here, a soccer football game there. Christmas in southern Germany, New Year's in Paris (jealous much?!). But apart from that it's all pretty wibbly-wobbly.

- (20) Both my mom and sister gave me this book on the night I went into labor with Emmy. Oh my goodness ... I read it and was crying my eyes out. (Hormones much???) But it is such a sweet book and would make a perfect gift to bring to the hospital for someone.
- (21) I will be keeping you up to date in the run up to Fashion Week ... and then will be slap bang in the middle of the action during the event so that I can give you all the behind the scenes gossip and an idea of what goes on during a Fashion Week Event! EXCITED MUCH?! :o)

These examples have three traits in common. First, all of them have been produced in monological settings, more specifically in the context of a blog entry. The text is thus directed at a readership that is not co-present in the speech situation. Second, the anaphoric judgment refers to the writer's own actions, and not to someone else's. Third, in all examples, the *sarcastic much?* construction is orthographically off-set from the rest of the text, either through parentheses or capitals. This reflects the meta-textual function that these examples have. The respective authors comment on themselves; their comments range from self-reflection to self-deprecation and even mild bragging. Examples of this kind have, to the best of our knowledge, not been discussed by previous analyses of the construction. The examples above align with more canonical examples in that their antecedents are judged to be excessive on a scale that is contextually determined. For instance, the writer of Example (20) mocks herself for being overly tearful in response to a children's book. The distinction between inherently negative anaphoric judgments, metonymically negative ones, and meta-textual ones will be taken up again in Section 3.4, in which we discuss the development of *sarcastic much?* towards an alignment-seeking function.

### 3.3 From dialogical to context-free

The examples of *sarcastic much?* that have been discussed up to now have in common the fact that the speaker or writer is reacting to an external event that we have termed the antecedent. The antecedent is framed by the construction as a behavior that is open to criticism or mockery. We have discussed different types of antecedent, including events that are associated with the addressee (i.e. making inappropriately rude comments), events that relate to a third party (pandering to potential voters), and events that pertain to the speaker or writer (crying over a children's book). We have argued that the presence of an antecedent in the prior linguistic context is a necessary and obligatory part of the construction. This argument could be challenged on the basis of examples of *sarcastic much?* that we present in this section. Contrary to what we have been arguing so far, the construction can be used to initiate a linguistic interaction, as is evidenced by uses of the construction

in the headlines of blog posts, the titles of online forum discussions and YouTube videos, and even episode titles in TV series. The example in (22) is a microblog post that features, below the main text, photographs of an actress and a male athlete. The actress is wearing an evening gown; the athlete is shown with a bare torso.<sup>8</sup>

- (22) Title: Double standards much?  
Text: Both subjects are Mormon. One was villified [sic] for their choice of clothing (or lack thereof) on social media. The other one, [sic] was not given a second thought. Can you guess which is which?

The use of *sarcastic much?* in discussion-initiating contexts is parasitic on the typical, dialogical use in that it invites the reader to think of a possible antecedent. In the example above, the use of the construction is directly followed by a description of the antecedent and the visual material that prompted it. The construction is thus not dependent on a prior context, but it can invoke that prior context and make it relevant for discussion. The writer's critical attitude towards the antecedent is not expressed in the main text, but solely in the title.

Another example that works in this way is shown in (23) below, which consists of the title of a YouTube video and the first sentence that is spoken in the video.<sup>9</sup>

- (23) Title: Presumptuous much??  
Text: Hi! I always answer without listening to questions.

The video goes on to describe the narrator's presumptuous behavior in a self-deprecating way. This behavior does not have any prior relevance to the viewer of the video, who thus cannot know *a priori* what the title *Presumptuous much??* reacts to. Yet, the title succeeds in leading the viewer to expect that its antecedent will be revealed in the upcoming discourse. The expressions *Double standards much?* and *Presumptuous much?* fall squarely within the typical usage of the construction and are thus easily recognizable as critical reactions towards an offensive behavior. This makes them particularly suitable for uses that do not depend on a prior context, but that rather select and set up a new topic for discussion. Since these examples are not in need of a shared antecedent, we use the label *context-free* to describe them. An extreme *context-free* example, in which the construction is used in the episode title of a cartoon TV series, is shown below.<sup>10</sup>

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8. The example has been retrieved from the following website: [<https://imgur.com/RBAXhPg>, date of access: 8.3.2018].

9. The example has been retrieved from the following website: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3O1tcqVYU&t=16s>, date of access: 8.3.2018]

10. The example has been retrieved from the following website: [[http://totallyspies.wikia.com/wiki/Evil\\_Ice\\_Cream\\_Man\\_Much%3F](http://totallyspies.wikia.com/wiki/Evil_Ice_Cream_Man_Much%3F), date of access: 8.3.2018]

- (24) Title: Evil ice cream man much?  
 Text: An evil ice cream man, enraged that his family business has been driven to bankruptcy by customers' changing tastes in dessert [sic], makes a special ice cream that contains fero-acko and can freeze anyone or anything it touches.

The viewers of the episode do not have any prior knowledge of its contents, and so they can only infer from the title that someone will take offence at the behavior of an ice cream vendor. As in the previous example, the construction serves to spark curiosity about a topic rather than to provide a response to a known antecedent.

What these examples show is that the interpersonal dynamics of *sarcastic much?* has conventionalized to such a degree that writers can exploit it for rhetorical purposes. Traugott (2010: 35) defines markers of intersubjectivity as forms that “encode meanings centered on the addressee”. We argue that context-free *sarcastic much?* conveys such intersubjective meaning. The addressee is prompted to look for an element in the discourse that could have led the writer to produce an instance of the *sarcastic much?* construction.

### 3.4 From confrontation to solidarity

A second issue relating to the intersubjective nature of the *sarcastic much?* construction concerns the writer's attitude towards the addressee. As has been illustrated above, this attitude is quite often very critical. In our data, however, we observe uses with a different intersubjective function, in which the writer does not aim for confrontation, but is seeking the solidarity and alignment of the addressee. Gutzmann & Henderson (2018: 40) comment on this issue and offer the following (constructed) example as an illustration of how *sarcastic much?* can solicit the alignment of the hearer.

- (25) [A man across the street is yelling at a cab as it pulls away.]  
 A: Angry, much?  
 B: I know, right!?

In the words of Gutzmann & Henderson (2019: 128), speaker B's response indicates “agreement with the first speaker, not just in truth-conditional terms [...], but also in expressive terms, i.e., the use of the exclamation is expressively correct in the context”. What is crucial here is that *sarcastic much?* is still used to express criticism, which however is directed at a third party, with the intention of prompting the agreement of an addressee. Speaker A in (25) solicits moral support from speaker B, who then provides it.

A real-life example of this type of intersubjective use of the construction has been presented in Example (6) above, which is repeated as (26) here for convenience.

- (26) When your job is to try to relate to people? You know, when your job is to try to come off as honest and ... and forthcoming, and this is me, like I'm levelling with you and I'm gonna be your leader, uh-but in order for you to trust me, I have to be honest with you at who I am?  
 I just feel like it's ... it's so disingenuous ... to wear an everyman watch.  
 If we saw Donald Trump tomorrow, in Timberlands and and jeans, and a ... and a dirty white shirt, you know, and a G-Shock in a coal-mining town, we'd be like c'mon, y-you know really ... Pander much, jerk-off?  
 You know, so ... a-and ... so that principle kind of

As in Gutzmann & Henderson's example, the speaker is not talking to the party that is criticized, but rather, he is talking to an audience. A closer look at the transcript reveals that in the lines leading up to *Pander much, jerk-off?*, the speaker switches from a first person singular perspective (*I just feel like*) to a first person plural perspective (*If we saw Donald Trump tomorrow, we'd be like*). This is in line with the interpretation that the speaker invites the audience to become complicit in his critical assessment.

Based on this observation, we would like to take Gutzmann & Henderson's argument one step further. Once the intersubjective function of seeking alignment has been established as a conventionalized meaning of *sarcastic much?*, the subjective component of the speaker's critical attitude can actually fade from its meaning. The primary function here is the writer's attempt to connect with the addressee. Example (27), which is a comment on a YouTube video, offers an illustration of this.<sup>11</sup>

- (27)  bleeddean1989 1 day ago  
 Steve Vai much? Lol  
 👍 3 🗨️ 🍷 REPLY  
 Hide replies ^  
 Cameron Cooper 1 day ago  
 Oh yeah! :)  
 👍 🗨️ REPLY

The video shows a musician playing a difficult piece on an electric guitar. The comment *Steve Vai much? Lol* points out that the playing is done in the style of

11. The example has been retrieved from the following website: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzszXr\_7F4E, date of access: 8.3.2018]

Steve Vai, a well-known guitar player. The comment is actually a tightrope act between compliment ('You can play like Steve Vai') and mockery ('This is a poor attempt to sound like Steve Vai'), it could be understood as either. The second interpretation would be more in line with most examples that have been discussed in this paper. Yet, the musician's reactions, i.e. liking the comment and adding a positive reply, make it clear that the first interpretation wins out. The commenter and the musician bond over their shared expertise.

Similar to (27), the examples in (18) to (21) that were presented above merit a second look in the context of the intersubjective function of alignment-seeking. Example (21) is repeated as (28) here for convenience.

- (28) I will be keeping you up to date in the run up to Fashion Week ... and then will be slap bang in the middle of the action during the event so that I can give you all the behind the scenes gossip and an idea of what goes on during a Fashion Week Event! EXCITED MUCH?! :o)

Given that the writer comments on herself, the construction could be construed as an act of self-deprecation here. What is more likely, however, is that the writer uses the construction as a means of engaging the audience, thereby making her own excitement more intersubjective.

To summarize this section, we observe examples of *sarcastic much?* that populate a continuum of different intersubjective functions, ranging from uses that express biting sarcasm to uses that prompt solidarity. How did the construction manage to evolve from one meaning to another that is completely opposed to the first? We argue that examples such as *Pander much, jerkoff?* in (28) serve as bridging contexts. In contexts where speaker and addressee bond over a criticism that is directed at a third party, the intersubjective function, i.e. solidarity between speaker and addressee, can hold sway over the formerly central subjective function, i.e. a negative attitude on the part of the speaker. Once solidarity is established as a conventional meaning, the construction can expand into contexts in which criticism is no longer at issue.

#### 4. Constructional change in *sarcastic much?*

This section will draw together our empirical observations from the previous sections and relate them to the notions of constructionalization and constructional change. Constructionalization, the emergence of new constructions in a constructional network, is defined as follows by Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 22): "Constructionalization is the creation of form<sub>new</sub>-meaning<sub>new</sub> (combinations of) signs. It forms new type nodes, which have new syntax or morphology and new coded meaning, in the linguistic network of a population of speakers."

Based on the discussion in this paper so far, it would seem that the *sarcastic much?* construction is a clear case of a new form-meaning pair that differs both with regard to morpho-syntax and with regard to meaning from other generalizations that exist in the grammar of English. What is less clear is at which point in its development the *sarcastic much?* construction can be said to have undergone constructionalization. Börjars et al. (2015: 27) point out that determining the moment at which a new form-meaning pair comes into being is more of a subjective choice than an objective discovery. The observation that a given linguistic unit differs in structure and meaning from another, pre-existing unit involves choosing that pre-existing unit as a reference for comparison. Hilpert (2018: 28) illustrates this point with the semantic and syntactic development of the English verb *confirm*, and argues that processes of constructional change can yield the appearance of constructionalization, so that constructional change and constructionalization are rendered indistinguishable. To see whether and how the notions of constructional change and constructionalization can be applied to the development of *sarcastic much?*, the following paragraphs will sketch the steps that have given rise to the current observable usage of the construction.

The question whether expressions such as *angry much?* ultimately derive from full-fledged questions is not one that we will comment on in this paper. What we have pointed out is that *sarcastic much?* and questions share several functional and formal features, which motivates the idea that speakers entertain cognitive links between the two construction types. Ordinary questions can be elliptical and they can be used with the pragmatic function of challenging or teasing the addressee, so regardless of the actual historical development of *sarcastic much?*, a present-day speaker might parse the expression *angry much?* as an elliptical question, which would then not be a new construction but, rather, a construct that instantiates an existing generalization.

The moment at which *sarcastic much?* is demonstrably different from other existing constructions is when the critical attitude of the speaker has become a conventionalized part of its meaning pole. We have described this process above with reference to the notion of subjectification (Traugott 2010). Evidence for the idea that the speaker's critical attitude has become part of the constructional meaning is provided by expressions such as *Dumbledore much?*, which we have called metonymically negative. The words in such expressions are not inherently negative. The negative attitude is conveyed by means of the construction's non-compositional meaning. While examples of this kind clearly reflect an innovation, they do not allow the conclusion that constructionalization has occurred. In fact, Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 22) point out that “[f]ormal changes alone, and meaning changes alone cannot constitute constructionalization”. This means that some formal change would need to be attested before it can be established that *sarcastic much?* has undergone constructionalization.

A development that in our view qualifies as a formal change is the process that we have described in Section 3.3 above, namely, the emergence of examples that do not react to an antecedent in the prior context but that set up a topic for discussion. We referred to this change as a development from dialogical to context-free uses of the construction. Importantly, this change is not a change in the morphosyntactic or phonological structure of an utterance such as *double standards much?*, and so it might not be regarded as a formal change if a narrow sense of that term is adopted. However, if we seriously engage with the proposal to make construction grammar more sensitive to dialogical structure (Brône & Zima 2014; Imo 2015), it would seem that this is an innovation that alters the formal side of the construction. If this change is viewed as pertaining to language form, we would now be in a position to assert that constructionalization has taken place.

Another substantial change in the meaning of *sarcastic much?* that we have discussed reflects its progressive intersubjectification (Traugott 2010), specifically its development towards uses with an alignment-seeking function. We have argued that the subjectified meaning of a critical attitude can recede in such contexts. In Traugott and Trousdale's framework, this development could be seen as a post-constructionalization change (2013: 27). However, we note that alignment-seeking uses of the construction only occur in response to antecedents in the prior context. In other words, if it cannot be established that confrontational *angry much?* is a new construction and if that same expression can be used in a new context to seek alignment with the addressee, then we might be simply dealing with a chain of two sequential meaning shifts.

These observations give further weight to the argument of Börjars et al. (2015), who discuss the difficulty of selecting the appropriate reference point for a subsequent analysis of constructionalization. The problems of distinguishing between constructionalization and constructional change are compounded when the observable changes concern different aspects of the construction, so that some innovations occur in mutual isolation of each other. In the case of *sarcastic much?*, the emergence of context-free uses and the emergence of alignment-seeking uses illustrate such different developments.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Construction Grammar has been challenged to pay more attention to dialogical structures. Aiming to address this challenge, this paper has offered a qualitative corpus-based analysis of the *sarcastic much?* construction. We have discussed the formal and functional characteristics of the construction with the specific goal of analyzing its usage with regard to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Data from the

GloWbE indicate that changes are underway that can be analyzed in terms of inter-subjectification (Traugott 2010). The construction has been extended from confrontational uses, which have been documented in the literature (Lieberman 2010; Adams 2014; Gutzmann & Henderson 2019), to uses that we call alignment-seeking.

The wider implications of our study relate to the question of how changes in dialogical characteristics of linguistic units should be accounted for in Diachronic Construction Grammar. Traditionally, the focus of studies in Diachronic Construction Grammar lies on changes in form and meaning. The importance of interpersonal meanings has been recognized for a long time, notably in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), from which important lessons have been incorporated into constructional research. With regard to form, the focus in most studies is still firmly on morphosyntax. A broader perspective, which includes aspects of interaction under the umbrella of linguistic form, has been called for in order to incorporate aspects such as multimodality, prosody, and interactional routines (Imo 2015). Phenomena such as the development of *sarcastic much?* can only be fully understood if these aspects are taken into account. There are many more constructions that deserve to be studied with regard to their interactional specificities. Given the wide availability of dialogical data through video recordings or computer-mediated communication, studying these constructions on a larger scale has become a realistic objective that construction grammar should take on squarely in the years to come.

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