



Fragmental Patterns in *let alone* Construction: A Corpus-Based Investigation*

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ABSTRACT

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The *let alone* construction is typically used after a negative statement to emphasize that the statement also applies even more to the referent of its complement. This paper reports a corpus investigation of the construction, investigating the licenser environments of the construction as well as its semantic and pragmatic scalarity conditions. The attested data show us a variety of the construction's syntactic peculiarities that general syntactic rules cannot predict and the importance of contextual information referring to the discourse structure in question. The attested data further indicate the pivotal roles of the contextual constraints with respect to the contextual scale and prominence between the antecedent and the situation evoked from the construction. Our corpus investigation suggests that a discourse-based approach of the construction is more feasible to account for its flexible distributions in real-life situations including dialogues.

KEYWORDS

let alone, fragment, focused sensitive item, coordination, scalarity

1. Introduction

The expression *let alone* appears to function as a kind of coordinator between two conjuncts containing two focused sensitive items which are in a contrastive focus relation (Fillmore et al. 1988, Toosarvandani 2008a, among others).

- (1) a. I wasn't sure you would remember me, let alone [help].
 b. The man can barely write out a grocery list, let alone [a letter].

As represented in (1), *let alone* indicates a negative statement with a bracketed complement XP remnant in the second conjunct, which is even more general than the preceding situation with its wavy-underlined corresponding correlate. The remnant explicitly or implicitly emphasizes a much lower possibility than the preceding correlate mentioned within the scope of negation, similar in meaning to *much less*, *not to mention*, or *never mind* (Carlson and Harris 2017). The focused remnant is understood as having a propositional meaning derived from its putative source in the first conjunct (Kim 2021, among others). Accordingly, it has been assumed to be a kind of ellipsis, similar to stripping (bare argument ellipsis) or right node raising (Fillmore et al. 1988, Hulsey 2008, Toosarvandani 2008a). Given this, a fragmental remnant and its corresponding correlate syntactically exhibit identical syntactic categories, and frequently used with a focus sensitive particle 'even' in the first conjunct (e.g., *you won't even walk again, let alone fly*).

The primary objectives of this paper are threefold. First, it aims to account for both the structural and contextual information of the *let alone* construction by examining distributional patterns derived from authentic corpus data. For this, the paper looks into the syntactic configurations and contextual variables that characterize the usage of *let alone*. Second, this paper investigates the licensing condition of the construction and its meaning composition. Lastly, this research examines the semantic and pragmatic scalarity between the antecedent clause and the *let alone* construction inducing a propositional meaning.

2. Some Fundamental Properties

2.1 Coordinate-like Structure

One distinctive property of the *let alone* construction is its coordination property: the construction allows two focused elements to be conjoined with *let alone*. Consider the following examples:

- (2) a. There wasn't enough money for [_{NP} bus fare], let alone [_{NP} books].
 b. Germany had not even been [_{VP} invaded], let alone [_{VP} occupied].

In (2a), an NP remnant *books* following an expression *let alone* evokes a propositional meaning under negation as 'there wasn't enough money for books' from the putative source containing its correlate *bus fare*. These two syntactically identical NPs are in a parallel and contrastive relation elicited by *let alone*. In (2b), this configuration is also observed, where the focused element functions as a VP complement, conveying the meaning under negation, as in the putative source 'Germany had not been occupied.' A remnant-correlate pair can occur not only with NPs and VPs but also with various other phrases, including sentence types. Also, both phrasal and lexical

remnants, as in (3) and (4) respectively, can be contrastively focused in relation to their correlates (Harris and Carlson 2016, Carlson and Harris 2017, Kwon and Kim 2022).

- (3)
- a. There's no way that a company can be [_{AP} progressive], let alone [_{AP} successful]. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 - b. I cannot function [_{AdvP} properly], let alone [_{AdvP} comfortably], without Archie Goodwin. (COCA 2002 TV)
 - c. She had no special purpose [_{PP} in Los Angeles], let alone [_{PP} in the entertainment industry]. (COCA 2012 FIC)
 - d. They believe that no Democrat has a legal or moral right to occupy the Oval Office for [_{DP} one] term, let alone [_{DP} two]. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 - e. So we're still at the stage where we don't even know if [_S it was a bomb], let alone [_S it was a bomb from ISIS]. (COCA 2015 SPOK)
 - f. None of the riders with them see [_{CP} that they know each other], let alone [_{CP} that they're conversing]. (COCA 2018 FIC)
 - g. We didn't know [_{Wh-clause} who we were], let alone [_{Wh-clause} who the other might be]. (COCA 1999 MAG)
- (4)
- a. Clinton won't [_V reduce, let alone withdraw], the troops.
 - b. Clinton won't withdraw [_{Quantifier} some, let alone all], of the soldiers. (Harris and Carlson 2016, pp. 1280)

In addition, the grammatical functions of the correlate and the remnant of *let alone* are also parallel:

- (5)
- a. It was no longer clear that existing nuclear reactors, let alone new ones, made economic sense. [Subject] (COCA 1994 NEWS)
 - b. Nobody would be shooting tear gas canisters at us, let alone rubber bullets. [Object] (COCA 2014 SPOK)
 - c. She never would have admitted this to Reid, let alone to Henry. [Oblique complement] (COCA 1994 FIC)
 - d. That doesn't sound very positive, let alone passionate. [Subject predicative complement] (COCA 2009 MOV)
 - e. I would never meet, let alone get to punch in the face. [Predicate] (COCA 1994 FIC)
 - f. He came to the course Saturday not knowing if he could finish one hole, let alone all 18. [Specifier]. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 - g. There isn't enough money in the world, let alone in the treasury of the United States. [Adjunct] (COCA 1994 MAG)

As shown here, the fragmental remnant of *let alone* shares a variety of grammatical functions with its correlate in the antecedent clause. In all these, *let alone* seems to coordinate conjuncts and require ellipsis within the scope of negation (Fillmore et al. 1988).

Nevertheless, the *let alone* construction behaves like but differs from typical coordination in several aspects. First, there are many cases where a remnant and its correlate have non-identical syntactic categories (Kwon and Kim 2022), which is distinct from typical coordination, as exemplified in the following corpus data.

- (6) a. There are no men allowed [PP on this campus], let alone [VP_[ing] having physical contact with our girls]. (COCA 2009 MOV)
 b. Nobody just walks [AdvP away], let alone [PP with the maps he carried]. (COCA 2019 TV)
 c. They never [VP_[en] seen a button], let alone [VP_[base] know how to push one]. (COCA 1999 MOV)
 d. A 12-month-old doesn't know [wh-argument what] he feels, let alone [wh-adjunct why]. (COCA 2009 MAG)

As observed in (6a) and (6b), the remnant and its correlate are of different syntactic categories. In (6c), they have different verb forms, and in (6d), the *wh*-words serve different functions.

Furthermore, while simple coordination forms a constituency of coordinated two elements with a connective, such string as '*x let alone y*' cannot form a constituent (Fillmore et al. 1988).

- (7) a. [Shrimp **and** squid], Moishe won't eat.
 b. *[Shrimp **let alone** squid], Moishe won't eat.
 c. It is [shrimp **and** squid] that Max won't eat.
 d. *It is [shrimp **let alone** squid] that Max won't eat. (Fillmore et al. 1988, pp. 515-516)

As in (7b) and (7d), the unavailability of constituency is demonstrated by the fact that the *let alone* construction neither allows topicalization nor appears in *it*-clefts (Fillmore et al. 1988). This suggests that although the *let alone* construction appears to be a form of coordination, it functions quite differently from simple coordination. To interpret the construction as a form of coordination, it becomes necessary to introduce additional *ad hoc* syntactic operations.

2.2 Elliptical Properties

Considering elliptical patterns in the *let alone* construction, it behaves more like stripping than coordination, as it allows a covert correlate (Harris 2016).¹

- (8) a. John didn't talk, let alone [to Sue]. (Harris 2016, pp. 74)
 b. John served dinner, but not [to his father]. (Nakao et al. 2012, pp. 273)

In (8a), the remnant PP's corresponding correlate is not explicitly expressed in the first conjunct. Rather, the context provides an implicit correlate, allowing the fragmental remnant to be understood as 'John didn't talk to Sue,' as does the stripping example with sprouting case in (8b). Both constructions share a similarity in that their corresponding variants without ellipsis are ungrammatical.

However, this does not suggest that *let alone* construction is a typical form of ellipsis. While VP ellipsis as a typical elliptical construction is permissible in ordinary coordination, it is generally not allowed in *let alone* constructions. Compare the following examples of VP ellipsis with its ungrammatical *let alone* equivalent:

- (9) a. Max won't eat shrimp **but** Minnie will.
 b. *Max won't eat shrimp **let alone** Minnie will. (Fillmore 1988, pp. 516)

¹ Chung et al. (1995) suggest that sluicing can occur without a corresponding indefinite phrase in its antecedent clause, referring to this phenomenon as "sprouting."

In both stripping and VP ellipsis, the non-elided counterpart is typically adjacent and anaphorically follows the antecedent clause. However, in *let alone* construction, the correlate does not need to be adjacent to the remnant (Kwon and Kim 2022). Consider the following authentic data:

- (10) a. You had to be just right, caring about your buddy as a person but not to the point of jealousy that he wanted to spend tomorrow with his other buddy, let alone [deep depression] because this person you cared about precisely the right amount was dying. (COCA 1994 FIC)
- b. Pegasus is such a sensitive spy tool NSO has to get approval before it can be licensed to any client, let alone [Saudi Arabia], from the Israeli Defense Ministry, as though it's an arms deal. (COCA 2019 SPOK)

In (10a), a relative clause modifying the correlate is inserted between a remnant and its correlate. Additionally, in (10b), the remnant does not follow its correlate in the antecedent clause but instead appears cataphorically. Given the positional flexibility, we may assume that *let alone* construction functions more like a parenthetical clause. However, while it can appear in sentence-medial or sentence-final positions, it is not allowed in the sentence-initial position. Consider the following examples from Harris and Carlson (2016)²:

- (11) a. The nicest nurse, let alone the meanest one, couldn't stand the patient.
- b. The nurse couldn't stand the nicest patient, let alone the meanest one.
- c. The nicest nurse couldn't stand the patient, let alone the meanest one.
- d. The nicest, let alone the meanest, nurse couldn't stand the patient. (Harris and Carlson 2016, pp. 17)
- (12) *Let alone the meanest, the nicest nurse couldn't stand the patient.

The construction can appear regardless of whether it is local or nonlocal to the correlate, when preceding the correlate within the sentence, especially as compared between (11b) and (11c). However, as illustrated in example (12), the *let alone* conjunct may not occur sentence-initially, except when it follows, rather than precedes, the correlate, as in (11d). More interestingly, the assumption that simple coordination exhibits no positional constraints and can appear in sentence-initial position suggests that while *let alone* may license ellipsis, it might not function as a typical coordinating connective.

2.3 NPI Properties

As mentioned earlier, *let alone* functions as a negative polarity item (NPI) within a negative statement (Fillmore et al. 1988). Within the scope of this construction, the construction requires an explicit or implicit negative licenser, or it must be in a downward entailment context, often accompanied by a focus-sensitive particle such as 'even', as can be observed in the following examples:

- (13) a. I *don't* know what is going to happen at dinner tonight, let alone in five years. (COCA 2004 MAG)
- b. There's *no* burglars out here, let alone humans. (COCA 2004 MOV)

² Harris and Carlson (2016) suggest that acceptability rates vary according to the positional condition with locality and finality. In the results, local final was the most natural, followed by local medial, nonlocal final, and local initial.

- c. I *never* imagined that I would share the stage with my idol, let alone a mentor and friend. (COCA 2013 TV)

In (13), since *let alone* construction conveys a propositional meaning, it is understood within the scope of a negative statement with explicit negators like *not*, *no*, or *never* as it functions as an NPI. Not only explicit negators but also implicitly negative expressions allow *let alone* construction in a downward entailment context (Kwon and Kim 2022). Consider the following authentic examples:

- (14) a. Imagine having *difficulty* walking, let alone exercising, because of pain and misshapen bones. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 b. I *doubt* the man's a human being, let alone a conservative. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 c. The sample size is *too* small to come to an annual conclusion, let alone a decadal conclusion. (COCA 2012 WEB)
 d. Hamdi was held in solitary confinement for two years *without* access to a lawyer, let alone the ability to challenge his detention. (COCA 2004 MAG)

In (14), the meaning of the *let alone* conjunct is constrained by the implicit negative expressions such as a noun *difficulty*, a verb *doubt*, an adverb *too*, or a preposition *without*, respectively. More specifically, in (14b), the main clause 'I doubt the man is a human being' entails the propositional meaning of *let alone a conservative* with the putative meaning as 'I doubt the man is a conservative.' In addition, quantifiers such as *few* or *most* also downward entails the negative meaning to the *let alone* conjunct, as follows:

- (15) *Few* cared whether the poor could eat, let alone read. (COCA 2015 MAG)

In (15), the quantified first conjunct allows the *let alone* conjunct with an implicit negative interpretation as 'few cared whether the poor could read.' Considering the two propositional meanings, the correlate and remnant exhibit a contrasting relation.

Furthermore, the downward entailment applies to the affirmative context. Consider the following cases:

- (16) a. Amanda will kill me, let alone marry me. (COCA 2017 MOV)
 b. Who would confess to a crime, let alone a murder, that he didn't commit? (COCA 2004 SPOK)
 c. Karl, if we go public with this, let alone marry, there will be serious consequences. (COCA 2009 TV)
 d. Try moving that many people on a Tuesday, let alone after an earthquake. (COCA 2014 MOV)

As in (16), the *let alone* construction occurs in non-assertive contexts, even where no overt negator appears, such as questions, conditionals, or commands, as well as the statements with modal verbs or intensional operators, which are assumed to be nonveridical (Toosarvandani 2008a). Note that this does not imply that non-veridical and non-assertive contexts are restricted to affirmative environments; they also occur in negative context with the use of polarity items.

2.4 Scalar Entailment

As indicated earlier, the two focused elements, a remnant of the *let alone* conjunct and its corresponding

correlate in the first conjunct, have a contrastive relation. Since both the fragmental remnant and its correlate convey propositional meanings, each has its own at-issue meaning from the salient element that involves an entailment relationship. In addition to this entailment, it is important to consider their scalar interactions concerning implicature. Consider the following two instances:

- (17) a. I wouldn't share a lift with, let alone a job. (COCA 2004 MOV)
b. Amanda will kill me, let alone marry me. (COCA 20197 MOV)

The meaning represented both in (17a) and (17b) suggest that *let alone* construction conveys a distinct proposition from that of the first clause which contains a contrastive correlate, as illustrated below:

- (18) a. $\neg \text{share}(i, \text{lift}) \wedge \neg \text{share}(i, \text{job})$
b. $\text{kill}(\text{Amanda}, \text{me}) \wedge \text{marry}(\text{Amanda}, \text{me})$

In other words, *let alone* construction and its antecedent clause are semantically understood in a scalar manner (Cappelle et al. 2015, Fillmore et al. 1988, Kwon and Kim 2022). In (18a), more specifically, the propositional meaning in the first clause denotes a stronger and more reliable situation where sharing a lift is unavailable, compared to the second conjunct, which involves the situation of sharing a job and is seen as more unrealistic under the speaker's circumstance. Furthermore, in (18b), given that the two contrasting propositional meanings are described without the use of any negative expressions, the scalar contrast within the entailment relation is maintained. From a pragmatic perspective, there is a scalar contrast in the entailment between the two clauses, where the remnant construction operates on a broader scale compared to the correlate clause, which generally prohibits violations. Thus, the first proposition is stronger and more informative than the second (Carlson and Harris 2017, Toosarvandani 2008b).

- (19) a. I wouldn't share a lift with, let alone a job.
b. $a \text{ lift} < a \text{ job}$
c. $\alpha = \neg \text{share}(i, \text{lift})$
d. $\beta = \neg \text{share}(i, \text{job})$
e. $\alpha \xrightarrow{\text{entail}} \beta$

- (20) #I wouldn't share a job with, let alone a lift.

As shown previously with the repeated example from (17a) to (19a), the focused elements within each conjunct α and β display scalar entailment in (19e). In the process, between the two focused elements, the expression *let alone* operates as a scalar connective that is linked to a set of alternatives. Therefore, the reverse entailment $\beta \xrightarrow{\text{entail}} \alpha$ in (20) leads to the infelicitous relation.

2.5 Relevance and Informativeness

Discussing further from a pragmatic perspective, Fillmore et al. (1988) propose that *let alone* construction interacts with Grice's maxims of Relation (relevance) and Quantity (informativeness), requiring both conjuncts to

be relevant to the ‘question under discussion (QUD)’ or ‘context proposition.’ Cooperative principle with those two conversational maxims apply to the meaning of the utterance of *let alone* construction, ensuring mutual understanding between speakers and listeners (Grice 1975). In some cases, however, the entailment relation does not always semantically follow from the first conjunct, which may require contextual entailment (see Hirschberg 1985). Consider the following question and its answer pair without *let alone* conjunct:

- (21) Q: Did Daniel become a full professor?
 α : Daniel didn’t become an assistant professor.

The answer α in (21) does not fully meet the expected answer to the question Q, as the focused element is not directly addressed but rather indirectly refers to another option. If we consider only the answer from the first conjunct α , excluding the *let alone* conjunct, it would violate the Maxim of Relevance, thereby lacking relevance according to the cooperative principle. Rather, it only satisfies informativeness by offering the hearer the level of information to make further inferences. The distinction is further exemplified in the following repeated question with its answer pair in which the proposition β is added to the *let alone* construction:

- (22) Q: Did Daniel become a full professor?
 α *let alone* β : Daniel didn’t become an assistant professor, **let alone** a full professor.

Specifically, as previously mentioned, the first proposition α satisfies the informative condition of Grice’s Maxim of Quantity, and the proposition β in the *let alone* construction satisfies Grice’s Maxim of Relevance by enabling the rejection of the contextual proposition derived from the evoked question. Put succinctly, by using *let alone*, a speaker can satisfy both the Maxim of Relevance and the Maxim of Quantity by conveying a more informative statement in the first conjunct (Toosarvandani 2009).

3. Corpus Investigation

3.1 Dataset

This study presents an analysis of real-time usage across seven genres in American English using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). By collecting 700 tokens randomly selected from two spoken and five written genres (100 instances each), we observed the syntactic and semantic patterns and variations that characterize distinct features of spoken and written language as they are used in various contexts. The genres included in this study are: spoken data such as spoken (SPOK) and TV/movies (TV/MOV) and written data such as general webpages (WEB), fictions (FIC), magazines (MAG), newspapers (NEWS), and academic journals (ACAD).³

³ Data from blogs were excluded from this study due to the frequent occurrences of incorrect text annotations in these sources.

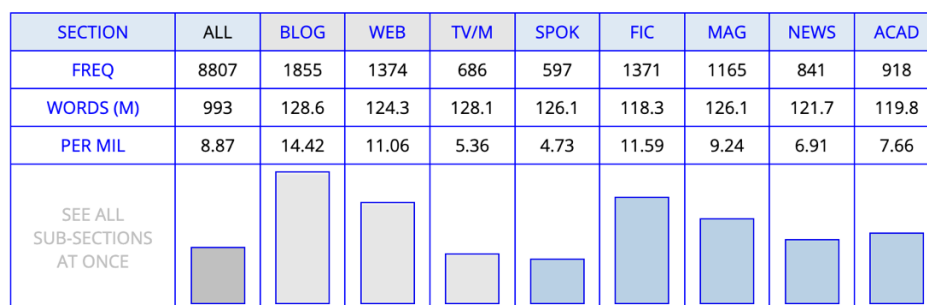


Figure 1. Frequency Chart of *let alone* Construction by Section in COCA

As illustrated in Figure 1, *let alone* construction is predominantly found in written formats as opposed to spoken formats, with its highest frequency of occurrence observed in general webpages and fiction genres.

As an initial process, we employed a straightforward search string designed to extract corpus examples by identifying instances where a punctuation mark precedes the *let alone* conjunct:

(23) PUNC *let alone* [8,522 tokens]

The tokens of the search string are the results after excluding those that appear at the beginning of a sentence, like an imperative, and the cases excluding punctuation marks that signify a new sentence, such as a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. Moreover, the search string at the beginning with a punctuation ensure that *let alone* was not misinterpreted as part of a verb phrase, as in the following example (24a) and (24b), respectively:

- (24) a. It is not your place even to have opinions of my acquaintance. *Let alone* express them. (COCA 2015 TV)
 b. The founding of Jamestown, the first permanent settlement on the American continent, is something. the myth-makers monitoring our popular consciousness would like *to let alone*. (COCA 2012 BLOG)

The next process includes annotations with certain variables to look into the coordinate-like structures and scalar relations, as suggested below:

- Syntactic categories of each remnant and its correlate
- Grammatical functions of each remnant based on the putative source
- Licensor type with the licensing environment to find out ellipsis triggering words
- Semantic/pragmatic scalarity between a remnant and its correlate

This process involves examining the syntactic categories of each remnant and its correlate, ensuring that their grammatical roles within the sentence are clearly identified. Additionally, the grammatical functions of each remnant are determined based on their putative source, which helps in understanding the underlying syntactic structure. Furthermore, identifying the licensor type and the licensing environment is crucial for pinpointing the ellipsis-triggering words, which are the elements that allow for the elided or unexpressed parts of the sentence. Finally, the semantic or pragmatic scalarity between a remnant and its correlate is analyzed to understand the scalar relationship between a remnant-correlate pair and the degree of emphasis or contrast conveyed.

3.2 Remnants and the Correlates

As described in the dataset processing section, we initially tagged the syntactic categories of a remnant and its correlate for each example. The following table outlines the distribution of remnant types across various registers.

Table 1. Syntactic Categories of Remnant in *let alone* according to Genre in COCA

		Spoken		Written						TOTAL
Remnants		TV MOV	SPOK	FIC	WEB	MAG	NEWS	ACAD	TOTAL	
Nominal	N	1	1	2	1	1		3	9	271 (38.7%)
	NP[FR]	2			2	2			6	
	NP	40	45	33	43	46	52	43	302	
Verbal [fin]	V	1				1		1	3	31 (4.4%)
	VP[pln]	3			1			1	5	
	VP[es]	1	1			1		1	4	
	VP[ed]	2	1						3	
	S		4				3	1	8	
	CP	1	2	1	2	3	2	1	12	
Verbal [nonfin]	VP[en]	5	7	10	7	5	7	12	53	231 (33%)
	VP[ing]	7	5	2	7	4	6	1	32	
	VP[bse]	24	20	30	19	18	17	17	145	
	VP[inf]	1	2	3		1			7	
	V	2	1	4	4	5	5	6	27	
	S			2			1	3		
Modifiers	PP	5	10	10	8	6	7	6	52	81 (11.6%)
	AdvP	1				1		1	3	
	DP	1		2	2	2		1	8	
	AP	3	1	1	4	1	2	6	18	
TOTAL		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	700	700(100%)

NP[FR] = free relative, VP[pln] = plain verb form, VP[es] = third singular present verb form, VP[ed] = past tensed verb form, VP[en] = past participle verb form, VP[ing] = present participle verb form, VP[bse] = base verb form, VP[inf] = infinitival verb form

As illustrated in Table 1, the categories with the highest frequency are NPs (38.7%) and nonfinite VPs (33%), followed by modifiers (11.6%) and finite verbal forms (4.4%). In the previous research, however, Harris and Carlson (2016) argue that in the *let alone* construction, the verb cannot be finite, as tense marking would be problematic, as suggested in (25).

- (25) a. John won't drink tea, let alone Mary sip on coffee.
 b. *John won't drink tea, let alone he drink coffee.
 c. *John won't drink tea, let alone Mary sips on coffee. (Harris and Carlson 2016, pp. 1281)

The presence of a finite verb in the second conjunct in (25c), as opposed to the gapping structure in (25a), indicates *let alone* induces a sentence-level coordination, making the structure ungrammatical as the modal *won't* only applies to the first conjunct. Interestingly, in our dataset, both finite verbs and clausal forms, as well as nonfinite ones, are present in the remnant-correlate pairs, as exemplified in (26).

- (26) a. It seems miraculous that a Fanon [VP[es] survives at all], let alone [VP[es] finds his voice]. (COCA 1994 ACAD)

- b. I didn't realize you [_{VP[ed]} knew where the library was], let alone [_{VP[ed]} had a card]. (COCA 1999 MOV)
- c. [_S I'm screwing up the Stones], which is like, for me, unforgivable, let alone [_S I'm screwing up my family]. (COCA 1994 SPOK)

In (26a) and (26b), the tensed verbs are coordinated with the correlate, which are within the scope of an embedded clause. Moreover, in (26c), two tensed clauses are freely coordinated, in which the second conjunct does not need to contain the smallest constituent required for the first conjunct to scope over it.

Furthermore, the syntactic category distribution of the correlate is found to be almost identical to that of the remnant. Only a small portion (4%) exhibits a mismatch between a remnant and its correlate, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mismatch Types with Rates between a Remnant and its Correlate in *let alone* Construction

Mismatch types	Spoken	Written	Row Total
Category	8	10	18
Verb form	5	2	7
Tense	1	0	1
Finiteness	0	1	1
Definiteness	0	1	1
Mismatch tokens	14	14	28 (4%)
Match tokens	186	486	672 (96%)
Total tokens	200	500	700 (100%)

Among the mismatch cases, the majority were category mismatches. Additionally, verb form mismatches between a remnant and its correlate were the next most observed, as each element of the pair can possess its own tensed or tenseless verb, as described in (26). Illustrative examples are provided in (27a) and (27b), respectively.

- (27) CATEGORY MISMATCH:
 a. The sheer size of a wide-screen TV can be [_{VP[ing]} overwhelming], let alone [_{AP} hard to decorate around]. (COCA 2012 WEB)
- VERB FORM MISMATCH:
 b. They've probably never [_{VP[en]} seen a button], let alone [_{VP[bse]} know how to push one]. (COCA 1999 MOV)

Based on a statistical z-test, the observed mismatch proportion (28 out of 700) does not significantly deviate from the expected proportion. Thus, the total number of mismatches is not statistically significant within the overall sample of 700 tokens, which supports the parallel structure within a remnant-correlate pair. This suggests that, despite the mismatches, the correlate of a remnant in *let alone* constructions is contrastively related and provides a putative source for remnant interpretation. One point that needs to be addressed is that, nonetheless, if we observe the frequencies of mismatch tokens for spoken and written registers, it indicates that the proportion of mismatch tokens in spoken data (14 tokens out of 200, 7%) is significantly different from the proportion in written data (14 tokens out of 500, 2.8%). This suggests that mismatches occur significantly more frequently in spoken data than in written data (p-value = 0.016).

3.3 Grammatical Functions

The parallel syntactic categories of a remnant and its correlate pair provide the putative grammatical function to the remnant site in *let alone* constructions. Based on the putative sources in the first conjunct, the most frequently observed types of the remnant's grammatical functions are shown to be objects as an argument and predicates, predominantly verb phrases, as suggested in (28) with the following Table 3 for the overall distributions.

- (28) a. We had no pasture land, no barn, and no money for either, let alone bucks for saddles, tack, feed, or vet bills. ⟨object⟩ (COCA 1994 MAG)
 b. The other catches every minute of *The Late Late Late Show* and can barely open his eyes, let alone carry on a conversation, before 9 A.M. ⟨predicate⟩ (COCA 1999 MAG)

Table 3. Distributions of Grammatical Functions of the Remnant in *let alone* Construction

	Spoken		Written				
	TV MOV	SPOK	FIC	WEB	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
Subject	3	3	2	3	0	7	9
Object	28	23	21	19	21	22	13
Predicate	44	28	36	34	26	25	31
Specifier	1	0	2	2	1	0	1
Modifier	6	12	13	6	6	12	18
(Subcategorized) Complement	18	32	26	36	45	34	28
Proposition	0	2	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Additionally, various subcategorized complements are observed, including subject or object predicative complements, AP/NP/VP complements, and prepositional complements. This indicates that the remnants are not construed independently as separate clauses but rather dependently denote within the scope of the preceding conjunct.

- (29) a. I don't think that's a good business model for anyone, let alone a radio group in these times. ⟨subject. predicative complement⟩ (COCA 2014 NEWS)
 b. He didn't expect them to even look him in the eyes, let alone say, "Excuse me" to him. ⟨object. predicative complement⟩ (COCA 2009 NEWS)
 c. Turning that concoction into something safe, let alone tasty, requires a lot of science. ⟨NP complement⟩ (COCA 2009 SPOK)
 d. Todd would be able to go to work, let alone to an amusement park. ⟨VP complement⟩ (COCA 2009. SPOK)
 e. It's tough enough to read a politician's mind, let alone to know what's in his heart. ⟨AP complement⟩ (COCA 1994 SPOK)
 f. We're well past the moment when audiences, young or old, are turned off by seeing music attached to television commercials, let alone television shows. ⟨prepositional complement⟩ (COCA 2009 NEWS)

Another finding that stands out from the distribution is that not only the predicate part including objects, modifiers,

and verb phrases, but also subjects appear as the remnant, which shows the remnant's functional flexibility within different syntactic roles.

- (30) The word 'food' is not even mentioned in the document, let alone food security. ⟨subject⟩ (COCA 2012 WEB)

Looking into the registers found with subject, more frequencies were found in the written forms with written usages such as newspapers and academic articles.⁴

3.4 Licensing Environment

The *let alone* construction is generally permitted in negative contexts, questions, or situations that imply pragmatic adversity, showing a distribution similar to that of negative polarity items (Fillmore et al. 1988, a.o.). To classify the licensing environment, the licensors are divided into three types: explicitly expressed negatives such as negators, implicit negatives like negative predicates, adverbials, or certain quantifiers, and no negative licensors. With the no negative type, non-veridical and non-assertive contexts in downward entailing interpretations are classified as licensors of *let alone* construction. The following table suggests the corresponding licensors for each environment and their examples.

Table 4. Types of Licensing Environment and the Examples

Licensing environment		Licensors	Examples
Explicit negatives	Negators	<i>not, never, no, ...</i>	<i>We don't have enough rations for three days, let alone 23.</i> (COCA 2019 TV)
Implicit negatives	Negative predicates or adverbials	<i>incapable, barely, less, bad, difficult, refuse, ...</i>	<i>The man can barely write out a grocery list, let alone a letter.</i> (COCA 1999 MOV)
	Quantifiers	<i>few, most, ...</i>	<i>Few cared whether the poor could eat, let alone read.</i> (COCA 2015 MAG)
No negatives	Non-veridical context	modals, intensional context	<i>Amanda will kill me, let alone marry me.</i> (COCA 2017 MOV)
	Non-assertive context	interrogatives, imperatives, conditionals, comparatives, ...	<i>Who would confess to a crime, let alone a murder, that he didn't commit?</i> (COCA 2004 SPOK)
	No licensor	—	<i>In the South, it was just the people for him to get into the theater, let alone perform.</i> (COCA 2019 SPOK)

Note that when categorizing the environment, there was one group that could not be associated with any explicit licensor, identified as "no licensor," as illustrated in the table, in which we classified the group as a type of non-negative environment. The following chart displays the observed distributions with raw frequencies for each type

⁴ In corpora, although fictions and general webpages are categorized as written registers rather than spoken ones, they include certain non-spontaneous spoken elements, such as official statements, dialogues, and transcriptions.

of licenser.

Table 5. Licensing Environment in *let alone* according to Genre in COCA

		Spoken		Written					TOTAL	TOTAL
Licensing environment		TV MOV	SPOK	FIC	WEB	MAG	NEWS	ACAD		
Explicit negatives	Negators	74	57	66	46	50	60	52	405	405 (57.85%)
Implicit negatives	Negative predicates or adverbials	13	14	18	26	33	26	24	154	163 (23.3%)
	Quantifiers	1	2	0	1	1	0	4	9	
No negatives	Non-veridical context	3	8	7	11	6	4	5	44	132 (18.85%)
	Non-assertive context	3	5	4	6	1	0	4	23	
	No licenser	6	14	5	10	6	10	11	65	
TOTAL		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	700	700(100%)

Not surprisingly, over half of the frequencies correspond to explicit negative cases with negators, while approximately a quarter account for the implicit negatives in the overall data. Considering the high number of explicit positive cases, however, this indicates that the observed frequencies significantly differ from what would be expected if the *let alone* construction were generally licensed in the scope of negative contexts. Therefore, the frequency of 132 “no negatives” cases is statistically significant from the overall total of 700 (p -value < 0.001). It also suggests the need for further investigation to comprehend the contextual understanding with licensing environment. To elaborate further, “no negatives” type accounts for a high proportion of 18.85% of the total, with 9.3% of these cases having no licenser. The significantly higher frequency of “no negatives” cases in the “no licensers” context, compared to the other two negative types, suggests that the absence of any overt licensers shows idiosyncratic environment that favors explicit expressions of positivity. These results provide further support for the observation that *let alone* construction need to be analyzed within pragmatic contexts.

Another further observation from Table 5 relates to the difference between spoken and written formats. As can be observed in the following Table 6, statistical analysis using chi-square tests of the difference between two proportions in explicit negatives shows that the observed frequency for spoken is slightly higher than expected frequencies (the numbers in parentheses), and for written is slightly lower than expected, suggesting a slight preference for the spoken form, though the difference is not significant.

Table 6. Observed and Expected Frequencies of Licensing Environment in *let alone* Construction

	Spoken	Written	Row Total
Explicit negatives	131(115.71)	274(289.29)	405
Implicit negatives	30(46.57)	133(116.43)	163
No negatives	39(37.71)	93(94.29)	132
Mismatch tokens	200	500	700 (100%)

The implicit negatives, however, show clear preference for the written form in that the observed frequency for spoken is much lower than expected, and for written is higher than expected. This indicates a preference for the

written form over the spoken form for implicit negative cases, which is significantly different from the overall proportion ($p\text{-value} < 0.01$). Contrary to previous observations of preference, the most unexpected finding is from the “no negatives” category, as it does not display any significant preference between spoken and written forms. The chi-square results are very low, indicating that explicit positive cases are very close to the expected frequencies. The observed frequencies for both spoken and written formats are almost equal to the expected, which suggests no significant preference between spoken and written forms for “no negatives” cases ($p\text{-value} > 0.5$).

3.5 Scalar Relations

In the previous section, we acknowledged the need to interpret the absence of overt negatives as licensors within a pragmatic context. To understand the pragmatic idiosyncrasies, we considered the scalar relations between a remnant and its correlate, generally assuming that the *let alone* conjunct denotes a more general or stronger scalarity, as suggested in the following authentic data:

- (31) a. There’s no [burglars] out here, let alone [humans]. ⟨more general⟩ (COCA 2004 MOV)
 b. He shouldn’t have been able to [take another breath], let alone [fire another 500 shots]. ⟨stronger⟩ (COCA 2009 SPOK)

Another variable found to be associated with semantic scalarity is “reverse” cases, where the remnant in the *let alone* conjunct has a narrower and more specific scale, distinct from general cases. Compare the scales of a remnant and its correlate from the following examples:

- (32) a. Donham said, ROTC is a big commitment for [any student], let alone [a student-athlete]. (COCA 2014 NEWS)
 b. No other writer’s ever had that [many centuries], let alone [four of the most popular one’s]. (COCA 2009 MOV)

In (32a), since the interpretation of the *let alone* construction, wherein the ROTC commitment is limited to an athlete student, may not represent a stronger or more general case compared to *any student* in the first conjunct, it must be classified as the “reverse” case. If we assume that the opposite direction of scalarity is attributed to a positive interpretation without a negator, then a similar case in a negative context, involving the negator *no*, in (32b), may not be dismissed.

More surprisingly, we found additional cases that could not be semantically controlled. We classified these as “relevant” cases without any scalar difference within a pragmatic scale, as follows:

- (33) If it became imperative to do so, they could be crushed in short order in a manner that would never be feasible if they were the equivalents of [Britain or France], let alone [China, Russia, or the United States itself]. (COCA 2006 MAG)

In example (33), it is challenging to determine the stronger or more general scale within a remnant-correlate pair. However, upon pragmatically understanding the military and foreign-policy relations based on the given context, it becomes evident why the writer or speaker mentions European countries in the first conjunct and then other major nations in the *let alone* construction. As argued in Cappelle et al. (2015), even though there is no logical

entailment between the remnant and its correlate, they must be relevant and informative, which supports our suggestion that an additional variable is needed to account for the scalarity, especially when semantic scalarity is not preserved. Not only that, there are numerous deviant cases where the semantic scale may not adequately explain the contextual accommodation between a remnant and its correlate:

- (34) Prentice knew they couldn't yet be accurately described [as friends], let alone [as buddies]. (COCA 2009 FIC)

In (34), it is difficult to comprehend the comparative scale of the remnant *as buddies* without the pragmatic context, as it represents a more familiar expression of the correlate *friends*. As such, in pragmatic scalar relations, many relevant cases show that their scalarities are not preserved from the correlate, which includes more specific information with details or contrastively opposite relation between a remnant and its correlate. To categorize all the suggested scalar types into semantic and pragmatic scales, the distribution of raw frequencies for each type can be found in Table 7.

Table 7. Scalarity Environment in *let alone* according to Genre in COCA

		Spoken		Written					TOTAL	TOTAL
Scalarity		TV MOV	SPOK	FIC	WEB	MAG	NEWS	ACAD		
Semantic scale	More general	36	34	55	33	60	59	24	301	549
	Stronger	49	18	18	27	13	14	20	159	(78.4%)
	Reverse	9	9	8	27	10	14	12	89	
Pragmatic scale	Relevant	6	39	19	13	17	13	44	151	(21.6%)
TOTAL		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	700	(100%)

Closer inspection of Table 7 shows that the “more general” type has the highest proportion at 43% in the overall scalar relation, and the “stronger” type accounts for 22.7%, ranking second. What is interesting about the data in the table is that the proportion of the pragmatic scale “relevant” type is comparable to the “stronger” type and is almost twice as high as the “reverse” type, both of which are the semantic scalarity types. More specifically, we employed a chi-square test for independence and found a statistically significant difference in the observed frequency of the “relevant” category compared to the expected frequency based on a uniform distribution of the four scale types ($p\text{-value} < 0.0001$). From the data, it is apparent that the “relevant” scale exhibits specific patterns in how it is actually used in discourse compared to other categories.

Further statistical tests show the preferences of each scale type between spoken and written registers:

Table 8. Observed and Expected Frequencies of Scalarity Environment in *let alone* Construction

		Spoken	Written	Row Total
Semantic scale	More general	70(86)	231(215)	301
	Stronger	67(45.43)	92(113.57)	159
	Reverse	18(25.43)	71(63.57)	89
Pragmatic scale	Relevant	45(43.14)	106(107.86)	151
Column Total		200	500	700

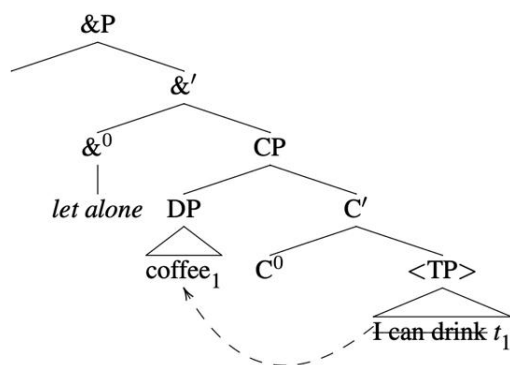
The “more general” and “reverse” categories in semantic scales are less frequently used in spoken formats and

more frequently used in written uses, suggesting a preference for these types in structured or formal written contexts. Conversely, the “stronger” category is more commonly used in spoken formats and less frequently in written forms, likely due to the need for emphasis in verbal communication. Meanwhile, the pragmatic “relevant” category is used with approximately the same frequency in both spoken and written forms, both of which are favored in usage and found to have similar expected frequencies with stronger cases in semantic scale. To sum up, this analysis supports the understanding that while pragmatically controlled cases like the “relevant” scale may stand out from semantically scalar contexts, they blend more closely with contexts in certain informative scales.

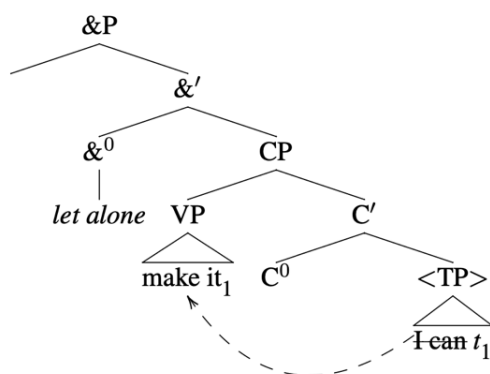
4. Data Discussions for Theoretical Implications

In previous analyses, the relationship between the fragmental remnant in the *let alone* construction and its corresponding correlate has been analyzed as clausal derivations, as suggested in the following structures:

- (35) a. I can't drink tea, let alone coffee.



- b. I can't drink tea, let alone make it. (Harris 2016, pp. 74, (17))



Especially, Harris (2016) and Harris and Carlson (2019) propose that in *let alone* construction, the second constituent, within an &P (*and*-phrase) for coordination, invariably includes an elided TP (or vP or CP) with a remnant that is moved to a focus position via topicalization. Several lines of evidence support this move-and-delete analysis based on coordination-like properties and the propositional meaning derived from the remnant in the *let alone* construction. However, this raises a doubt: if *let alone* is assumed to convey a negative meaning, the non-elided counterpart of the fragmental remnant becomes ungrammatical. Consider the following repeated example

when the elided part is reconstructed:

- (36) *They couldn't be described as friends, *let alone* they could be described as buddies.

In (36), not only does it repeat the redundant elements in the second conjunct without omission, but also the negation in the first conjunct cannot extend its scope to the *let alone* conjunct without involving the process of ellipsis. To make clear, it does not seem to present a clausal coordination problem; rather, a semantic resolution based on the structure is required.

Additionally, there are some instances where an explicit negative licensor appears after the *let alone* construction:

- (37) The instances of players attaining those milestones in [the same season], *let alone* [the same game], are rare. (COCA 1999 NEWS)

If an alternative hypothesis suggests that the negative meaning is derived from the licensor *rare* rather than from *let alone* itself, the example in (37) would also be problematic. According to Harris and Carlson (2019), it seems to necessarily involve a move-and-delete operation. However, although the extensive research has been carried out on the structure of *let alone* construction, an alternative analysis is required to comprehend the underlying negative meaning. In this section, we aim to identify and address some related potential issues that may not be accounted for by the previous analyses for further theoretical implications.

4.1 Syntactic Dependencies in Remnants

As a prominent syntactic dependencies, the connectivity effects seem to support the argument that the remnant complement has an identical syntactic structure to the putative source clause, such as the case with preposition identity.

- (38) a. We don't understand the details of, even *on* the earth, *let alone on* mars. (COCA 2010 TV)
b. Can't see this place *in* the day, *let alone at* night. (COCA 1994 MOV)

In (38a), not only does the remnant PP require the same preposition as its correlate based on its putative source from the first conjunct, but even when the preposition differs from that of the correlate, in (38b), the required preposition is determined by the putative source in which the correlate appears.

Furthermore, the remnant can be indicated as a reflexive pronoun, required by Binding Condition A, which stipulates that the reflexive pronoun must be bound within its clause, originating from the remnant's putative source.

- (39) He can barely sit up, *let alone* protect *himself* and his family. (COCA 2004 FIC)

Therefore, the parallelism in preposition pairings and obeying binding conditions seems to support the move-and-delete operations proposed in previous analyses. However, some remnants show a preposition stranded outside the scope of the correlate, which is not expected to appear in the remnant site, as follows:

- (40) While Dean is on his quest to help a vampire (that is just so hard to [write] *let alone* [think *about*]) Sam is back at their motel. (COCA 2012 WEB)

In (40), the vampire story mentioned in parentheses is described as something being written about and thought about, using the preposition ‘about.’ This interpretation is only comprehensible with the background understanding of why this construction is expressed in parentheses, providing additional information to the readers. In addition, there are numerous instances where an unexpected prepositional phrase appears as a sprouting case⁵:

- (41) It’s not every day you win a war, *let alone* against the American devils. (COCA 2014 MOV)

In (41), the corresponding remnant PP is not expressed overtly in the first conjunct. Instead, it is understood by pragmatically adding the remnant PP as an adjunct within the antecedent to convey more precise or useful details to the reader or listener, making the overall sentence more informative.

In the meantime, locality effects impose constraints that influence the realization of connectivity effects. Nonetheless, there are instances frequently found in the corpus data where the remnant violates some island constraints, which should be governed by island boundaries, such as complex noun phrases or relative clauses.

- (42) a. I do know that I just got my heart ripped out by this boy that I didn’t even know I [knew], *let alone* [loved]. (COCA 2009 MOV)
 b. The original complaints argue that Internet users are unlikely to be aware [such labels are being routinely stuck on them], *let alone* [how widely their personal data is being shared with third parties participating in programmatic ad auctions that rely on scale as a core function]. (COCA 2019 MAG)

In (42), both the remnant VP in (42a) and the embedded *wh*-interrogative in (42b) exhibit multiple embedding within the relative clause, where one clause is recursively embedded within another. If a remnant is extracted from such an island by movement and deletion, it violates island constraints, leading to ungrammaticality.

Now, let us consider another potentially problematic case concerning locality effects.

- (43) a. BRADLEY: Have you found cases since 9/11 where people were involved in misconduct and were not, *let alone* [reprimanded], but were even [promoted]?
 ROBERTS: Oh, yes, absolutely. (COCA 2004 SPOK)
 b. She could not but follow suit, so she used to get home at nine-thirty - with the result she had no time [to see], *let alone* [to get to know her children]... (COCA 1994 FIC)

In (43a), the remnant VP’s correlate follows rather than precedes it; moreover, in (43b), the complement of the correlate appears in the remnant site. These configurations may potentially pose challenges due to locality constraints, such as the Minimal Link Condition and Subjacency, which restrict the distance over which dependencies can be established.

The positional flexibility observed in cases with negative licensors, cataphoric correlates, and sprouted remnants may suggest that a syntactic structure with semantic resolution alone cannot fully account for this construction. Rather, this indicates the need of adopting a pragmatic resolution.

⁵ The term ‘sprouting’ is borrowed from Chung et al. (1995).

4.2 Assigning the Negative Meaning

From the assumption assigning a negation meaning to *let alone*, as previously discussed, it is plausible to infer that *let alone* interacts with its hypothesized clausal source (Harris 2016, a.o.). Particularly in instances where a negator is present within the remnant site, assigning additional negation to the construction would result in redundancy, as demonstrated by the following authentic examples:

- (44) a. I do believe “closing time” by Semisonic should be top 40, let alone *not* even on the list! (COCA 2012 WEB)
b. Recognizing the bullshit, let alone *not* buying into it, means you know politics. (COCA 2012 WEB)

In each example, the remnant itself contains a negator, thereby generating a negative statement, not from the preceding context. This suggests that it is not plausible to assign a negative meaning to *let alone*. In addition, when the negative licenser appears implicitly within the remnant site, it further complicates the assignment of a negative interpretation to *let alone*. Consider the following case:

- (45) The sheer size of a wide-screen TV can be [overwhelming], let alone [*hard* to decorate around]. (COCA 2012 WEB)

This idiosyncratic presence of an implicit negative expression *hard* within the remnant site indicates that it inherently induces negation, thereby excluding the need for *let alone* to convey additional negation. Such configurations highlight that the empirical data reveal the semantic contribution of negation is adequately fulfilled by elements within the remnant itself pragmatically, independent of the syntactic licenser (Kim and Nykiel 2020, Park et al. 2024). Consequently, empirical evidence indicates that syntactically derived structures alone are inadequate to explain the ellipsis within the *let alone* construction.

4.3 Contextual Information

The direction we pursue here relies on contextual information referring to the discourse structure in question. Consider that the *let alone* construction is often used in real-time dialogues:

- (46) a. Considering that it consistently carries enough grease to lube your drivetrain, it’s a wonder anyone gets past [it] (let alone [age 40]). But this isn’t Denny’s, and you can’t just cover it with a napkin and call for the check. (COCA 1994 MAG)
b. WILLIE-GEIST: That’s a different level of unselfishness—and sacrifice, though, to [give up your dream].
AL ROKER: It really is.
NATALIE-MORALES: What would you do for a sibling?
WILLIE-GEIST: I don’t know. I don’t know if I would do that.
NATALIE-MORALES: Not that.
AL ROKER: I don’t even share my dessert with my siblings, **let alone [do that]**.
NATALIE-MORALES: They did compete together in Torino. (COCA 2014 SPOK)

In (46a), the remnant's correlate refers to a contextually provided situation by employing a deictic pronoun, which refers to the current situation. Additionally, in (46b), to comprehend the interpretation between the closely positioned remnant and its correlate as a pair, it is essential to understand a far distant context in which the wavy-underlined VP refers to the remnant. As such, it is essential to refer to the discourse structure contextually evoked by the preceding sentence. Essentially, this approach relies on the contextual discourse structures rather than requiring a strict syntactic identity between remnant-antecedent pairs, thereby permitting island insensitivity. It theoretically implies that only two parallel situations with contrasting focus expressions are needed, rather than parallel syntactic structures. As a result, it does not necessitate a precise syntactic match between the ellipsis and its antecedent, thus allowing for syntactic mismatches and island insensitivity observed in real-life usage.⁶

5. Conclusion

As we have seen in the paper, the corpus data support the observations that the *let alone* construction displays a variety of syntactic as well as semantic/pragmatic peculiarities that cannot be predicted from general grammatical rules Fillmore et al. (1988). The corpus data also demonstrate semantic peculiarities pertaining to the scalar entailment. The scalar entailment also involves pragmatic and contextual contributions that align with Grice's Maxims of Relevance and Quantity. The data examined in this corpus study support the notion that the use of the *let alone* construction is highly context-dependent, rather than being strictly motivated by syntactic considerations. Such findings confirm the importance of considering contextual and pragmatic factors in the analysis of linguistic phenomena, highlighting the intricate interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in natural language use.

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⁶ As per the reviewer's suggest, additional explanation is provided to account for deep anaphora in ellipsis, emphasizing reliance on contextual discourse structures over strict syntactic identity. This allows for syntactic mismatches and island insensitivity, focusing on parallel situations rather than syntactic structures (see Hankamer and Sag (1976) and Kim and Nykiel (2020) for more).

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary