Title	Speech acts of the Incredulity Response Construction
Author(s)	Mori, Hideki
Citation	OUCCL(Osaka University Papers in Comparative Contrastive Linguistics). 2025, 2, p. 91-102
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/103062
rights	
Note	

Speech acts of the Incredulity Response Construction

Hideki Mori[*]

Abstract   This paper discusses the Incredulity Response construction (IRC), which is characterized by the non-standard combination of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate in English. The speaker uses this construction to express doubt in response to the addressee's utterance. Previous studies have associated the IRC with other forms, such as imperatives (Akmajian 1984) and topic-comment constructions (Lambrecht 1990). However, studies have not fully explored the IRC's semantic relation with imperatives or the reason for the juxtaposition of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate. Hence, as a new approach, this paper examines semantic similarities and differences between the IRC and imperatives in terms of Mori's (2024) three-way classification of imperatives. In addition, considering Szcześniak & Pachoł's (2015) idea of iconic separation and cognitive dissonance, this paper argues that the IRC's illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are to express cognitive dissonance and cancel the subject-predicate predication, respectively. To perform these acts, the iconic separation between the subject and predicate of the IRC is classified into two: a grammatical strategy by case disagreement in English and a lexical strategy by forced disconnection in other languages. Finally, this paper considers Japanese non-canonical imperatives in the IRC context and argues for the involvement of the speaker's and addressee's viewpoints, suggestive of an intersubjective strategy of iconic separation. The findings strengthen the body of knowledge about the IRC and theoretically contribute to IRC and imperative research.

Keywords   Incredulity Response Construction (IRC), predication, cognitive dissonance, perlocutionary act, non-canonical imperatives

1. Introduction

This study aims to offer a new analysis of the idiomatic expression called the Incredulity Response Construction[1] (IRC), demonstrated by speaker B's utterance in the following conversation:

(1)   Speaker A: I hear John may cook dinner tonight.
        Speaker B: Him cook dinner?! He can't even boil an egg.

Here, both subject and predicate have a rising intonation, but, more importantly, as shown by "Him" and "cook dinner," the English IRC is best characterized by the subject's objective case and the predicate's non-finiteness. This combination deviates from standard English grammar, in which the predication between John and his cooking dinner must be expressed as in (2):

---

[1] The term "Incredulity Response Construction (IRC)" is based on Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor (1988:511). The term varies in the literature, e.g., "Mad Magazine sentences" (Akmajian 1984) and "Incongruous Relation Construction" (Szcześniak & Pachoł 2015).

(2)　　He cooks dinner.

In (2), the subject and the verb are a nominative case and a finite form unlike speaker B's utterance in (1). The use of the IRC instead suggests that speaker B doubts that John would cook dinner for speaker A, which is why studies have referred to this construction as an "incredulity response."

　　This study explores why the English IRC allows objective case subjects and non-finite predicates. Other languages use functionally similar expressions; however, these are syntactically different from the English IRC in terms of using a nominative case subject, inserting a conjunction between subject and predicate, and only using a distinct intonation. This paper argues that the English IRC, or the combination of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate, serves as an expression of cognitive dissonance and cancels the subject-predicate predication of the preceding utterance in the discourse.

　　This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews how the IRC has been analyzed in previous studies, summarizing the construction's idiosyncrasies. Section 3 argues that the construction's speech act can be characterized by expressing cognitive dissonance and canceling predication. This characterization helps to clarify that using an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate is a structural or grammatical strategy for the English IRC and implies that other languages may implement different strategies. Section 4 applies the IRC's discussion to the seemingly peculiar use of *wh*-words in Japanese imperatives. Section 5 concludes this study.

2. Previous studies

2.1. Characteristics of the IRC

　　This section focuses on the characteristics of the IRC outlined by Akmajian (1984), in which constructions are labeled "Mad Magazine sentences." Perhaps the most noticeable feature is its use of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate that leads to various emotional responses, such as surprise and disbelief:

(3)　　a.　　What, me worry?
　　　　b.　　What! John get a job! (Fat chance.)
　　　　c.　　My boss give me a raise?! (Ha.)
　　　　d.　　Him wear a tuxedo?! (Sure.)

(Akmajian 1984:2)

(3d) juxtaposes the objective case pronoun *him* and the non-finite verb phrase *wear a tuxedo* instead of *He wears a tuxedo*. With this relation, Akmajian illustrates several syntactic properties:

(4)　　a.　　What! *She call me up?! Never.
　　　　b. * Him gets a job?!
　　　　c. * Her {might / will} call me up?!
　　　　d.　　What! * Her unfortunately lose her job!
　　　　e.　　What! * That trash novel, us read by tomorrow?!

(ibid.:3)

The ungrammaticality in (4a–e) shows that the IRC does not allow nominative case subjects, tensed verbs, modals, sentential adverbs, or topicalization.

　　Besides verb phrases, the subject can also be followed by an adjective, noun, and preposition phrase:

(5) a. What! Bronsky *clever*?! Ha.
     b. What! Larry *a doctor*?! What a laugh!
     c. What! Mary *in the army*?! It can't be.

<div align="right">(ibid.:5; italics original)</div>

While these expressions can co-occur with the copula *be*, its use results in "a fixed interpretation of willful control on the part of the subject of the sentence, or the speaker" (ibid.:6). The states in question are to be realized as well. However, without the copula, (5a–c) express these states as either unrealized or realized, leaving the control interpretation open.

   Finally, (6) and (7) demonstrate that dummy subjects are not allowed and that the anaphoric *it* cannot appear as the subject, respectively:

(6) a. What! * There (be) no more beer?!
     b. What! * It rain again?! Oh, no.
(7) Speaker A: At last I see the book$_i$ — it$_i$'s on the table.
     Speaker B: Oh? * It$_i$ (be) on the table?! We must be blind.

<div align="right">(ibid.:7–8)</div>

Akmajian argued that these restrictions on the subject, as well as those on topicalization in (4e), can be explained in terms of intonational factors:

(8) a. MMs [=Mad Magazine sentences] may have one, and only one, intonation center preceding the verb phrase.
     b. If there is an overt subject, the subject must form the intonation center.

<div align="right">(ibid.:10)</div>

The subjects of the IRC in (6), (7), and (4e) clearly cannot serve as exclamations on their own, suggesting their failure to form the intonation center.

2.2. Approaches to the IRC

   This section reviews how studies have examined the IRC, discussing this construction in terms of imperatives (Akmajian 1984), topic-comment constructions (Lambrecht 1990), and incongruousness or cognitive dissonance (Szcześniak & Pachoł 2015; Szcześniak 2016).

   Akmajian (1984) argued that the IRC (termed "Mad Magazine sentences" in his study) and imperatives share several grammatical properties and are generated by the same general rule. Similarities include optional subjects, the subject's intonational center, the lack of tense and modals, incompatibility with the perfective *have*, restrictions on topicalization, control interpretations for examples using the copula, and fixed irrealis interpretations. According to Akmajian, the IRC and imperatives are "constructions based on the same formal syntactic structures, with the proviso that pragmatic principles for the use of imperatives will in fact limit imperatives to a subset of the structures in question" (Akmajian 1984:14).

   Lambrecht (1990) interpreted the construction as a "formal idiom" (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988) or a syntactic pattern that is not produced by general phrase structure rules and is called a "constructional idiom" in terms of construction grammar (Taylor 2003). Showing that the IRC is not limited to English, he provided examples from German:

(9) a. Ich   und mir   Sorgen machen?
         I-NOM and me-DAT worries make-INF[2]

---

[2] The abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: ACC (accusative), COMP (complementizer), COP (copula), DAT (dative), FEM (feminine), INF (infinitive), MASC (masculine), NOM (nominative), NOMN (nominalizer), QUOT (quotation marker), Q (question marker), and SP (sentence-final particle).

      'Me worry?'

  b.   Mein   Chef und mir   eine   Gehaltserhöhung geben?
       my-NOM-MASC boss and me-DAT a-ACC-FEM raise   give-INF
       'My boss give me a raise?'

  c.   Der   und einen   Smoking anziehen?
       that.one-NOM and a-ACC-MASC tuxedo   put.on-INF
       'Him wear a tuxedo?'

<div align="right">(ibid.:219)</div>

German is different from English in its use of the nominative case subject and its insertion of the conjunction *und* ('and'). Unlike Akmajian (1984), Lambrecht (1990) proposed that the construction should be associated with a type of topic-comment construction instead of imperatives. In (10), the pronoun *Der* conjoined with the VP *einen Smoking anziehen* forms a topic, whereas the sentence *Du hast sie wohl nicht alle* indicates the speaker's judgment, functioning as a comment about the topic:

(10)   Der und einen Smoking anziehen? Du hast sie wohl nicht alle!
       'Him wear a tuxedo?! You must be crazy!'

<div align="right">(ibid.:221)</div>

Under this proposal, topic phrases assume non-argument positions, where English pronouns are in the accusative case as a default or unmarked case. Moreover, the English IRC's tenseless predicate results from the fact that the speaker's response is targeted to the subject-predicate linkage alone but not when the event or state happens.

    Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015) and Szcześniak (2016) pointed out that the IRC expresses not only incredulity but also other emotional reactions, such as envy, amusement, and anger, leading them to assert that the construction represents a more general meaning of incongruousness or cognitive dissonance. Considering that the accusative case is default or unmarked in English and that the IRC's predicate is atemporal, they argued that the construction is "more transparent, predictable, and semantically compositional than the popular belief suggests" (Szcześniak & Pachoł 2015). The English IRC is not an unpredictable idiom; its subject's objective case and non-finite predicate are not as peculiar as they seem. Additionally, the above studies provided more examples of the IRC from Germanic and Slavic languages, including German, Dutch, Czech, and Russian, which show that a conjunction separates a nominative case subject from a tenseless predicate.

2.3. Issues surrounding the IRC

    Illustrating the features of the IRC, Akmajian (1984) revealed its syntactic parallels with imperatives. At a syntactic level, the IRC and imperatives may have the same surface structure, but at a semantic level, the differences between them should be examined to better understand the construction. It would be counter-intuitive to treat the non-finite predicate as a regular imperative. Besides syntactic similarities between the IRC and imperatives, their semantic similarities and differences should be clarified in a pre-theoretical sense.

    Lambrecht (1990) discussed the entire discourse for the IRC, that is, the preceding context and the follow-up utterance, and analyzed it as a topic-comment structure. While this approach clarified the IRC's semantic and pragmatic features to some extent, its association with imperatives remains unexplored. As Akmajian (1984) showed, the IRC undoubtedly shares several syntactic features with imperatives. Proving the total irrelevance of the two forms should be more challenging than disproving it while seeking their semantic linkage.

Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015) first emphasized that the IRC is more compositionally and predictably composed of the subject and the predicate than previously discussed, challenging the view that the IRC is a constructional idiom or an idiosyncratic, unpredictable form-meaning pairing. No less importantly, they maintained that irrespective of the language, the IRC represents iconic separation based on cognitive dissonance. From this standpoint, the speaker's utterance of the IRC reflects his or her cognitive dissonance, but why does the speaker express cognitive dissonance by uttering the IRC? Although Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015) argued that the construction conveys various meanings, the relation between these meanings and the concept of cognitive dissonance should theoretically be explored.

Finally, the subject's case in the English IRC requires careful consideration, especially in the argument that English is a default-accusative language; hence, the unmarked accusative case is used for the subject if the predicate is non-finite. Such logic is found in Lambrecht (1990) and Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015) may be consistent with Schütze's (2001) claim that the default case in English is accusative and that topicalization is an environment for the default case. However, Caha (2024) provides an alternative analysis in that the default case in English is nominative. Based on this analysis, the IRC's subject can be considered nominative because the subject's case is analyzed as a strong form of pronouns syncretic with the weak accusative. Whether the accusative case or a strong form, the subject-predicate linkage in question is unique to the English IRC. The issue to address in IRC research is not which case the IRC's subject requires when the predicate is non-finite but rather why the English IRC juxtaposes an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate.

3. Cancelation of predication

As an alternative analysis, this paper discusses the IRC in terms of predication cancelation while also revealing semantic similarities and differences between the IRC and imperatives. In line with the three issues discussed in section 2, section 3.1 examines the semantic link between the two forms based on Mori's (2024) classification of imperatives, section 3.2 connects the idea of cognitive dissonance with the IRC's speech act, and section 3.3 explores the reason for the juxtaposition of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate in the English IRC, classifying how the construction achieves iconic separation, which varies depending on the language.

3.1. Relation to imperatives

Akmajian (1984) argued that the IRC and imperatives are generated by the same rule and are associated with each other. However, the IRC is semantically different from typical imperatives, such as commands and requests. To fill this gap, consider how the IRC can be semantically related to imperatives using Mori's (2024) classification of imperatives.

To establish a systematic understanding of the similarities and differences between types of imperatives, Mori (2024) focused on the realization of the propositional content of imperative expressions and classified types of imperatives in terms of (i) possibility of realization, (ii) attitude toward realization, and (iii) preparedness for realization. For example, consider four types of imperatives for contrast:

(11) a. Open the door.
      b. Move and I'll shoot.
      c. Kinou   koi-yo.
          yesterday   come.IMP-SP
          'You should have come yesterday. (Lit.) * Come yesterday.'
      d. Uso-o   tsuke.
          lie-ACC tell.IMP

'Don't talk nonsense. (Lit.) Lie.'

(11a) is a typical imperative that functions as a command or a request. Regular imperatives are classified as (i) possible, (ii) positive, and (iii) prepared. In (11a), the propositional content '(you) open the door' can be realized by the addressee. The speaker wants the content to be realized, suggesting his or her readiness for such realization in the immediate future with a positive attitude. (11b) shows what is generally called conditional imperatives because the imperative form can function as an *if*-conditional clause. The difference from (11a) is (ii) negative. The speaker does not want the propositional content '(you) move' to be realized.

Despite the imperative form, (11c) and (11d) are non-canonical imperatives used in Japanese. (11c) is classified as (i) impossible, (ii) positive, and (iii) prepared. The deviance from (11a) is (i) impossible. It is too late to realize the propositional content '(you) come yesterday' as the addressee did not come yesterday. (11d) is used just after the addressee talks nonsense or fools around; this type is classified as (i) possible, (ii) negative, and (iii) unprepared. Although the propositional content '(you) talk nonsense' can be realized, the speaker's attitude toward its realization is negative, as shown by the English translation. More importantly, the speaker has no prepared mind for such realization. The speaker's lack of a prepared mind causes an emotional reaction to the addressee's preceding utterance.

If imperatives are limited to the forms with which the speaker causes the addressee to do something, (11b–d) are not imperatives and cannot be discussed in reference to imperatives. However, the proposed three-way classification facilitates a proper understanding of semantic similarities and differences across a wide range of imperative expressions as summarized in the following combination:

(11') a. (i) possible, (ii) positive, (iii) prepared
       b. (i) possible, (ii) negative, (iii) prepared
       c. (i) impossible, (ii) positive, (iii) prepared
       d. (i) possible, (ii) negative, (iii) unprepared

In this framework, the IRC is classified as (i) possible, (ii) negative, and (iii) unprepared, which is the same as (11d). The propositional content (i.e. the subject-predicate predication) may be realized, but the speaker holds an incredulous, or negative, attitude toward such realization. This incredulity and emotional reaction at the discourse site suggest that the speaker is unprepared for the realization. Both the IRC and (11d) clearly lack a transitive causative aspect implied by typical imperatives as the speaker does not drive the addressee to take action. The two expressions are used when the addressee says something that makes the speaker feel incredulous and leads him or her to make an incredulous response to the preceding utterance.

Importantly, though, a crucial difference in use can be observed between the two expressions. (11d) is used when the speaker thinks that the addressee made an incredulous utterance, such as unreliable statements and information that lacks evidence. By contrast, the IRC is used when the speaker assumes that the addressee made an incredulous connection between the subject and the predicate in his or her utterance. Depending on the speaker's judgment, counterparts to (11d) are used in English, and the IRC is chosen in Japanese. Whereas an English speaker would say, "Don't talk nonsense" or "You are kidding," when he or she thinks that the addressee made an incredulous utterance, a Japanese speaker would use the IRC when he or she thinks that the addressee made an incredulous subject-predicate connection in the preceding utterance.

Thus, an analysis of the IRC in terms of the proposed imperative classification reveals semantic similarities and differences between the IRC and types of imperatives. Besides their

syntactic parallels described in Akmajian (1984), the IRC's semantic similarities to imperatives (particularly to 11d) have become clear. This finding indicates that the IRC can safely be considered in relation to imperatives and that the two are syntactically and semantically relevant to some degree.

3.2. Illocutionary and perlocutionary acts

Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015) adopted a cognitive dissonance perspective to examine the subject-predicate combination of the IRC. This general concept can cover various meanings of the IRC in a given context (Szcześniak & Pachoł 2015). Although these researchers did not explicitly mention the IRC's speech act, their idea is assumed to pertain to the IRC's illocutionary act or function, i.e., to express the speaker's sense of cognitive dissonance.

Generally, a locutionary act refers to the act of saying something, an illocutionary act is a certain act done while speaking, and a perlocutionary act refers to an utterance's effect on the addressee (cf. Austin 1962). The claim that the IRC's speaker is expressing his or her cognitive dissonance while speaking can be taken one step further: what is the IRC's perlocutionary act?

Recall that the utterance of the IRC is made in a dialogic context in which someone else triggers such an utterance. Exclamatory utterances, by contrast, do not necessarily require an addressee; the speaker can utter an exclamation even when nobody is present at the scene. This contrast highlights an interactive aspect of the IRC and a pragmatic difference between the IRC and exclamative sentences. The presence of the addressee strongly suggests that the speaker uses the IRC on the premise of some perlocutionary act.

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), people are motivated to reduce cognitive dissonance. Similarly, the IRC's speaker should want to diminish the cognitive dissonance caused by the association that the addressee established in his or her utterance. If so, the perlocutionary act of the IRC is to cancel the subject-predicate predication of the preceding utterance.

To differentiate the IRC's perlocutionary act from its illocutionary act, consider how the conversation in (1) can unfold:

(12)   Speaker A: I hear John may cook dinner tonight.
       Speaker B: Him cook dinner?! He can't even boil an egg.
       Speaker A: Oh, I didn't know that. Maybe I'm misinformed.
       Speaker B: I think so.

Speaker A's utterance clearly triggers speaker B's utterance of the IRC. Speaker A establishes the subject-predicate relation between John and cooking dinner, but John's cooking of the dinner conflicts with speaker B's knowledge. Such cognitive dissonance is expressed in the IRC as an illocutionary act. One can observe here that with the following statement "He can't even boil an egg," the IRC functions as an utterance that induces speaker A to disqualify what he or she said. As if responding to the IRC, speaker A in (12) loses confidence in what he or she said. At this stage, speaker B's cognitive dissonance is reduced or resolved as implied by his or her last utterance "I think so."

The IRC's speech act has not received enough scholarly attention. However, examining this construction in light of its illocutionary and perlocutionary acts clarifies the semantic and pragmatic interplay between its context-bound specific meanings (e.g., disbelief, surprise, etc.), its general meaning (i.e., an expression of cognitive dissonance), and its effect (i.e., canceling the subject-predicate predication). Studies have overlooked this point.

3.3. Strategies of iconic separation

The IRC is morpho-syntactically different across languages. This section argues that as approaches of iconic separation to express the speaker's cognitive dissonance and cancel the preceding utterance's subject-predicate predication, the English and German IRCs adopt grammatical and lexical strategies, respectively. The former resorts to case disagreement between subject and predicate, whereas the latter employs forced disconnection of the two elements using a conjunction.

In English, a subject is in the objective case and is juxtaposed with a non-finite predicate with no conjunction. The subject is essential for the IRC as the construction's perlocutionary act is to cancel the subject-predicate predication of the preceding utterance. Akmajian (1984) mentioned the optional subject omission:

(13)   Speaker A: Why don't you get a respectable job?
         Speaker B: (Me) get a respectable job! What do you think I am?

(Akmajian 1984:4)

However, Lambrecht (1990) asserted that the subject cannot be omitted in cases where the preceding utterance includes a tensed verb form:

(14)   Speaker A: I hear you got a respectable job.
         Speaker B: *? Get a respectable job! What do you think I am?

(Lambrecht 1990:224)

Unlike (13), the subject is essential because of the tensed verb "got" in speaker A's utterance. The contrast between (13) and (14) indicates that the English IRC consists of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate. Lambrecht (1990) claimed that these two elements are mutually dependent and that any grammatical sentence without the subject does not belong to the IRC. Recall the IRC in (1), repeated here in (15a):

(15)   [As a response to the preceding utterance "I hear John may cook dinner tonight."]
         a.   Him cook dinner?!
         b.   Cook dinner?!

While (15b) is a well-formed response, incredulity focuses more on the action of cooking dinner rather than the connection between John and cooking dinner. Thus, the IRC requires both subject and predicate.

No less importantly, the juxtaposition of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate exemplifies case disagreement functioning as a grammatical strategy of iconic separation in the English IRC. In English, a verb must change forms when a nominative case subject is the third-person singular used in the simple present tense. This concordance is case agreement. When the subject is the third-person singular and the verb is non-finite, their combination leads to case disagreement; when the subject is plural, the non-finite predicate does not result in case disagreement. Consider (16a) and (16b), where the subject is in the nominative case:

(16)   a. * He cook dinner?!
         b.   They cook dinner?!

(16a) is ungrammatical as an IRC or a normal sentence; meanwhile, (16b) is ungrammatical as an IRC but grammatical as a regular sentence. In (16a), case disagreement deviates from the standard rule of English. In contrast, the subject and predicate in (16b) forms a

regular grammatical structure with which (16b) cannot achieve iconic separation or function as an IRC. Therefore, the nominative case is not chosen for the IRC's subject. When a subject is in the objective case, case disagreement occurs regardless of the subject's number as in the following:

(17) a. Him cook dinner?!
      b. Them cook dinner?!

(17a) and (17b) show that the verb is not in concord with the subject, whether singular or plural. This case disagreement ensures the IRC's iconic separation in English. Thus, the juxtaposition of an objective case subject and a non-finite predicate always leads to case disagreement, which grammatically accomplishes iconic separation to express cognitive dissonance and cancel the subject-predicate predication.

   With this relation, consider a lexical approach. As Lambrecht (1990) demonstrated, the German IRC uses a nominative case subject and a non-finite predicate combined by a conjunction. Similarly, according to Szcześniak & Pachoł (2015), the IRCs of other languages, such as Dutch and Russian, insert a conjunction between subject and predicate. In these languages, the use of a conjunction might be regarded as "an iconic analogue of the sense of iconic separation between the information conveyed by the subject and the predicate" (Szcześniak & Pachoł 2015). With no conjunction in between, the subject-predicate linkage could assume the configuration of an ordinary declarative sentence. In contrast with a grammatical strategy in the English IRC, forced disconnection through a conjunction between subject and predicate is a lexical strategy to express cognitive dissonance and cancel the otherwise predication.

4. Japanese IRC and non-canonical imperatives

   This section discusses the Japanese IRC (or its counterpart), which uses neither case disagreement nor forced disconnection. It uses the nominative case for the subject followed by a predicate with no conjunction. The English IRC in (1) can be translated into Japanese as in (18a):

(18) a. Kare-ga   yuushoku-o tsukuru?!
          he-NOM   dinner-ACC   cook
          'Him cook dinner?!'
      b. * Kare-o / ni   yuushoku-o tsukuru?!
           he-ACC / DAT dinner-ACC   cook

The contrast between (18a) and (18b) clearly shows that the subject takes the nominative case but not the accusative or dative case, which is not unusual. Simply put, without a rising intonation, (18a) would be considered not as an IRC but as an ordinary subject-predicate connection, which functions as a declarative or interrogative sentence.[3] To cancel predication, does the Japanese IRC solely adopt a phonological strategy? If the answer is positive, nothing needs to be resolved. The phonological strategy is indisputable; however, this section situates Japanese imperative responses in the IRC context to observe how a discussion of the construction can be related to non-canonical imperative expressions.

   Imperatives are generally incompatible with *wh*-words. The following examples demonstrate that types of *wh*-words are not acceptable:

---

[3] Unlike English, (18a) does not necessarily require two rising intonations for the subject "Kare-ga" and the predicate "yuushoku-o tsukuru," and the latter always needs a rising intonation.

(19) a. {Mado-o / * Nani-o} akero.
    window-ACC / what-ACC open.IMP
    'Open the window. / * Open what.'
  b. {John-ni / * Dare-ni} kike.
    John-DAT who-to ask.IMP
    'Ask John. / * Ask who.'
  c. {Osaka-e / * doko-e} ike.
    Osaka-to where-to go.IMP
    'Go to Osaka. / * Go where.'

Imperatives can be used as a response, too. Take (19a) for instance:

(20) Speaker A: Mado-o akero.
        window-ACC open.IMP
        'Open the window.'
    Speaker B: Ha? Watashi-{ni / ga} mado-o akero ({da to /
        huh I-DAT / NOM window-ACC open.IMP COMP QUOT /
        to iu no ka})?!
        QUOT say NOMN Q
        'Huh? You want me to open the window?!'

Speaker B's imperative form in (20) functions as a rebellious response to speaker A's command. Consider speaker B's utterance in terms of the IRC context here. Speaker B talks back, expressing incredulity regarding the predication established by speaker A, or the connection between the covert subject (speaker B) and the predicate ('open the window'). This way, speaker B's utterance can be situated and understood in the IRC context; in fact, speaker B's response can also be translated into the English IRC "Huh? Me open the window?!"

An analysis of imperatives in terms of canceling the subject-predicate predication helps to understand the removal of restriction on the use of *wh*-words in imperatives. As already demonstrated in (19), imperatives cannot occur with *wh*-words. However, this restriction is dismissed when imperatives are situated in the IRC context as in (20).[4] In such a context, consider (21), which uses a *wh*-word:

(21) Speaker A: Mado-o akero.

---

[4] Note that the *wh*-imperatives at issue are different from interrogative imperatives with a *wh*-word. The underlined question in (i) is translated into a Japanese interrogative imperative, such as (ii):

(i)   Speaker A: Well, sir, and <u>what do you wish me to do</u>?
       Speaker B: To answer a few questions, if you don't mind.
                                                    (*The Cask*; underline added)
(ii)   Speaker A: Sorede, <u>watashi-ni nani-o seyo</u> to ossharu no desu-ka?
                  well I-DAT what-ACC do.IMP QUOT say NOMN COMP-Q
       Speaker B: Ikutsuka shitsumon-ni kotaete itadaki tai no desu.
                  a few question-DAT answer receive want NOMN COP
                                                    (*Taru*; underline added)

Speaker A is Mr. Gordon. Just before this utterance, Speaker B, Inspector Burnley, visited Mr. Gordon and finished introducing himself. With no idea what to do, Mr. Gordon asks the inspector using the underlined utterance. To differentiate *wh*-imperatives from interrogative imperatives with a *wh*-word, this study uses "?!" for the former's end and "?" for the latter's end. For historical data and discussions of imperative forms that occur with *wh*-words, see Nakamura (1997a, 1997b).

window-ACC open.IMP
'Open the window.'

Speaker B: Ha? Watashi-{ni / ga} nani-o {akero / shiro} ({da to /
huh I-DAT / NOM what-ACC open.IMP / do.IMP COMP QUOT /
to iu no ka})?!
QUOT say NOMN Q
'Huh? What do you want me to open/do?!'

Speaker B's imperative responses in both (20) and (21) are characterized by the juxtaposition or contrast in viewpoints between speakers A and B. Using the quotation marker *to* in speaker B's responses means quoting the imperative utterance expressed from speaker A's viewpoint. The imperative form quoted from speaker A's utterance reflects that speaker's viewpoint, which is embedded in speaker B's utterance. The covert subject of speaker A's imperative is *anata/kimi/omae* ('you'), while the subject of the quoted imperative in speaker B's response is *watashi/boku/ore* ('I'). This opposition indicates a viewpoint shift.[5] Also, speaker A does not use a *wh*-word in his or her utterance, but in (21), speaker B explicitly uses a *wh*-word expressing a rebellious attitude from his or her viewpoint. Thus, imperative responses in the IRC context, such as (20) and (21), include the viewpoints of both speaker and addressee.

Although the imperative forms using *wh*-words are not canonical imperatives, the aforementioned dual perspectives explain the seemingly peculiar use of the *wh*-word and the first-person subject in (20) and (21). Notice also that contrasting the viewpoint of the addressee with that of the speaker in non-canonical imperatives can be considered a type of iconic separation based on cognitive dissonance. This characterization implies a parallel with the IRC.

Recall this paper's proposal: as a perlocutionary act, the IRC cancels the subject-predicate predication that the addressee established in the preceding utterance. Imperative responses also focus on the subject-predicate predication established from the addressee's viewpoint; the perlocutionary act is to cancel the predication as a result of utterance. Juxtaposing or contrasting perspectives between addressee and speaker may be considered an intersubjective strategy of iconic separation as multiple viewpoints are involved. Given data limitations, however, it remains premature to conclude that the Japanese IRC employs such an intersubjective strategy for iconic separation, as well as a phonological approach. This section only raised the possibility that this study's analysis of the IRC could strengthen one's understanding of Japanese non-canonical imperatives.

5. Conclusion

The key findings are summarized in four points. (i) Semantic similarities and differences between the IRC and imperatives can be analyzed and classified in terms of propositional content realization, i.e., the possibility of, attitude toward, and preparedness for realization. (ii) The IRC's illocutionary act is to express the speaker's cognitive dissonance due to the subject-predicate predication that the addressee established in the preceding utterance, while its perlocutionary act is to cancel predication to eliminate cognitive dissonance. (iii) As a grammatical strategy of iconic separation to express cognitive dissonance and cancel predication, the English IRC uses case disagreement by juxtaposing an objective case subject and

---

[5] Compatibility with the nominative case marker *-ga* seems acceptable in (21) but only marginally acceptable in (20). A close analysis of this difference is beyond this study's scope. Regarding the imperative subject, imperatives can co-occur with a subject other than the second-person when it is contrasted with others. For this purpose, third-person subjects are available as well.

a non-finite predicate. As a lexical strategy, the IRC in other languages resorts to forced disconnection by adding a conjunction between subject and predicate. (iv) Japanese imperative responses are utterances targeting the predication established from the addressee's viewpoint. Contrasting this perspective with the speaker's viewpoint might be regarded as an intersubjective strategy of iconic separation. This observation implies that the IRC's analysis helps to explain the occurrence with *wh*-words that co-exist with imperative responses used in the IRC context.

These findings complement those of other studies. This study examined issues that have remained unexplored and promoted a fuller understanding of the IRC from a new perspective. Regarding the realization of propositional contents, semantic similarities and differences between the IRC and imperatives were clarified. Linking the idea of cognitive dissonance to the IRC's speech act and non-canonical imperatives, this study situated and analyzed the construction in broader theoretical contexts. The suggested tripartite division (i.e., grammatical, lexical, and intersubjective) pertains to the typology of iconic separation strategies in languages. Research must further investigate whether a strategy type correlates with a language type, which is a topic of great interest and importance to linguistic typology.

References

Akmajian, Adrian. 1984. Sentence types and the form-function fit. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 2. 1–23.

Austin, John L. 1975. *How to do things with words*. Second edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Caha, Pavel. 2024. A default theory of default case. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 9(1). 1–43.

Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fillmore, Charles J., Paul Kay & Mary Catherine O'Connor. 1988. Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: The case of let alone. *Language* 64(3). 501–538.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1990. "What, me worry?" – 'Mad Magazine sentences' revisited. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. 215–228.

Mori, Hideki. 2024. Characteristics of the X *ie* imperative expression: Three criteria for the classification of imperatives. *Journal of Japanese Linguistics* 40(1). 31–57.

Nakamura, Yukihiro. 1997a. Futeigo ni tsuzuku meireikei ni tsuite (jyo): Doko e ike to iu no ka. *The Journal of Kokugakuin University* 98(8). 1–11.

Nakamura, Yukihiro. 1997b. Futeigo ni tsuzuku meireikei ni tsuite (ge): Doko e ike to iu no ka. *The Journal of Kokugakuin University* 98(9). 30–41.

Schütze, Carson T. 2001. On the nature of default case. *Syntax* 4(3). 205–238.

Szcześniak, Konrad & Małgorzata Pachoł. 2015. *What? Me, lie?*: The form and reading of the Incredulity Response Construction. *Constructions* 10.

Szcześniak, Konrad. 2016. *What? You and me get together?*: The place of the Incredulity Response Construction in the lexicon-syntax continuum. In Grzegorz Drożdż (ed.), *Studies in lexicogrammar: Theory and applications*, 121–142. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Taylor, John R. 2003. *Linguistic categorization*. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sources

Crofts, Freeman Wills. 1920[2016]. *The Cask*. London: HarperCollins. [Translated by Yoshiaki Shimojima. 2013. *Taru*. Tokyo: Tokyo Sogensha.]