

## A CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH TO AS FAR AS NP IS CONCERNED

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The construction *as far as NP is concerned* has two functions in English: as a marker of contrastive topic and as an evidential. Due to its homophonous nature, this construction illustrates how meaning is not always a function of semantic compositionality. Thus, it is problematic for syntactic theories that have only compositional means to account for semantic and syntactic relationships. However, a constructional approach, viz. Construction Grammar, is useful for analyzing ambiguous constructions because it makes use of conventions which distinguish pragmatic functions and allows meaning to be attached to syntactic forms.

1. INTRODUCTION. The construction in focus in this paper is *as far as NP is concerned*, exemplified in 1:

- (1) a. But as far as the country is concerned, I think the important point is...(CGS 11/5/95)
- b. As far as the voiceless nasals  $\emptyset$ , how do I know when to write... (MLG 11/95)
- c. As far as John is concerned, Mary left. (MLG 10/95)

This construction is found in two distinct contexts, and one of these functions allows for formal variation. An earlier study on this phrase, conducted by Rickford, Mendoza-Denton, Wasow and Espinoza 1995, was limited to one function of this phrase, as a topic restrictor, and a diachronic analysis of its variants in this use. In the present analysis I am concerned with both functions of this phrase and the theoretical implications of its homophony, as far as syntax is concerned. The data used in the analysis consists of personally collected examples and over 100 excerpts from television and radio transcripts.<sup>1</sup> From these data I argue that the *as far as* construction is not a case of constructional polysemy, but one of constructional homophony of two different functions.

Returning to the examples in 1, 1a and 1b can be paraphrased as 'in reference to' or 'in regard to'. The function of the *as far as* phrase in these uses is to limit the remainder of the sentence to the scope of the NP present. On the other hand, example 1c is paraphrased as 'according to John' or 'in John's opinion'. The ambiguity present between 1a and 1b and 1c is pragmatic in nature. Although externally this construction looks polysemous, consider 1b again. This example has the same functions as 1a, but the forms are not identical. Moreover, 1b cannot be understood as 'according to voiceless nasals', the paraphrase of 1c. If this were a case of polysemy, there should be two meanings for one form and this should hold true for any variants of that form. This is clearly not the case. The construction in 1a and 1b, the contrastive topic, is distinct from 1c, an evidential construction. Each have their own form, function and constraints.

Polysemous and homonymous constructions both provide evidence that meaning is not always semantically compositional. This is problematic for compositional theories of syntax because they do not have the means to account for violations of Strictly Categorical Determination. Zwicky (1994:1) notes that "...any framework for syntactic description that intends to both cover the syntactic details of a language and to associate meanings with syntactic forms systematically must posit some locus of association between those details and those meanings." Construction Grammar does provide a locus of association between meanings and forms. These are constructions.

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<sup>1</sup> Data collected personally are marked MLG. Data from the Lexis/Nexis database come from the following source transcripts: NPR, CNN, Talk Back Live, WGBH Specials (PBS), Nightline ABC News, Larry King live, The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, Capitol Gang Sunday (CGS), Official Kremlin Int'l News Broadcast, FDCH Political Transcripts, and the Federal News Service (FNS) (White House Briefing and Capitol Hill).

In this paper, I provide analyses of the two distinct functions of the *as far as* NP *is concerned* phrase, found in §2 and §3, respectively. In §4, I offer motivation for employing a constructional approach to the syntactical analysis of this phrase. I illustrate how, by the conventions of Construction Grammar, constructions themselves, through associations between semantic, pragmatic and syntactic details, have meaning. I argue that because constructions have meaning, Construction Grammar can account for differences in meaning and functions of seemingly identical forms by having the means to account for pragmatics. I demonstrate that these phrases are motivated by what Zwicky 1994 calls the Degree 2 construction. From this, I posit a metaphorical extension and an constructional analysis for each function of this phrase.

**2. THE CONTRASTIVE TOPIC CONSTRUCTION.** This section deals with those *as far as* constructions that have the pragmatic function of contrastive topic, such as in 2:

- (2) a. ...the Presidents approval rating has rarely been higher. He's doing very well, thank you very much, as far as--as far as public opinion seems to be going. (Nightline 11/2/95)
- b. as far as the country is concerned, I think the important point is, will this tragedy bring Israel together... (CGS 11/5/95)
- c. we're pretty much at the end of the day, as far as the hearings on Ruby Ridge are concerned. (FDCH Political Transcripts 11/2/95)

I first consider the notion of topic. Intuitively, topics are referents already active in the discourse. Ellen Prince 1981 illustrates that in order for an NP to be a topic it must be referential and must already be invoked in the discourse or be in a salient set-relation to some entity already invoked in the discourse. Lambrecht (1994:1310) uses the following definition of a topic: "a constituent is a topic expression if the proposition expressed by the clause with which it is associated is pragmatically construed as being about the referent of this constituent." This is clearly the case with the *as far as* ... construction in 2. But there seems to be more going on in these cases.

Lambrecht asserts that pragmatic relations, such as topic and focus, can have contrastive functions. A form has a contrastive function when it is selected from other possible candidates of the same set. This is nicely illustrated by the form in 2a. This is the *goes* variant of the verb phrase (see below). From the context it is clear that 'he' refers to the President. To say that 'he is doing very well' could refer to any number of things: his health, his personal life, his financial status, etc. In order to narrow the set of possibilities, the speaker has added *as far as public opinion seems to be going*. The addition of the *as far as* phrase contrasts public opinion from all other aspects that the President might be doing well, thus narrowing the proposition 'he's doing very well' to the topic 'public opinion'.

Rickford et al. 1995 call this function of *as far as* the topic restrictor function. However, the use of 'contrastive' captures the notion that in these cases there is generally more than one topic available in the discourse. In short, a topic is an available referent in discourse; a contrastive topic is the activation of one of a set of possibilities that are available. The *as far as* NP *is concerned* phrase has a contrastive topic function.

**2.1 CONTRASTIVE TOPIC VARIABILITY.** The form of the contrastive topic function has variability in regard to the form of the verb phrase:

- (3) a. And as far as the international operation is concerned... (FNS 11/2/95)
- b. ...the Presidents approval rating has rarely been higher. He's doing very well, thank you very much, as far as--as far as public opinion seems to be going. (Nightline 11/2/95)
- c. ...now we have to face the situation...as far as the agreement ø. (FNS 11/2/95)

The three variations in 3 are (1) *as far as NP be+concerned*; (2) *as far as NP goes*; and (3) *as far as NP*  $\emptyset$ . In the data collected, variant (1) was by far the most frequent, appearing almost twice as often as the other two. The  $\emptyset$  variant (3) was more frequent than the *goes* substitution of (2), again by almost 2:1. All three variants were found in sentence initial, medial, and final position, with the medial occurrences only slightly less frequent than the other two. There was no predictable environment for the variance nor any change in function or meaning. These variants all serve the contrastive topic function. They limit the matrix sentence to one of the active topics.

The *goes* and the verbless variants are newer forms of this construction (see Gregory in progress and Rickford et. al.). One explanation for the possibility of variant forms for this function is that by virtue of being a contrastive topic construction, the important and necessary information is in the noun phrase within the construction. The verb in this construction serves only as part of the construction, it itself does not have any content. Thus, replacement the verb with a semantically bleached form, or even its deletion, does not change the function of the construction.

There is also variation with respect to the co-indexation of the NP. In some cases, the NP is co-indexed with a pronoun in the matrix clause and in others it is not:

- (4) a. As far as John<sub>i</sub>  $\emptyset$ , we'll help him<sub>i</sub> out
- b. as far as world peace  $\emptyset$ , Israel needs to honor the agreement. (CNN 11/4/95).

As can be seen from 4b, a linking between the NP in the *as far as* phrase to the NP in the matrix clause is not a constraint of this construction although it does occur frequently.

**2.2. THE SPECIAL CASE OF PRONOUNS.** Pronouns can be found in the NP of this construction with some constraints. It seems that when a pronoun is present the verbless variant is not possible:

- (5) a. \*As far he  $\emptyset$ , we'll help him out.
- b. \*As far as it, we'll go to the vet.
- c. As far as he goes/is concerned/\* $\emptyset$ , we'll help him out.
- d. As far as the dog  $\emptyset$ , we'll go to the vet.
- e. As far as John  $\emptyset$ , we'll help him out.
- f. As far as it having fleas  $\emptyset$ /is concerned/goes, we'll go to the vet.

Rickford et al. provide two possible interpretations of pronoun distribution in these phrases. One is to dismiss all pronominal cases with their so-called 'perspective' cases (cf. §3). Their alternative interpretation of this restriction is to attribute the licensing of the variants to the weight of the NP, which would only account for forms with heavy NP's, such as 6f.

Clearly pronouns do occur in the contrastive topic function, as illustrated in the examples in 5. Because of this, they should not be categorized with the evidential cases in §3. But, there are restrictions regarding the form of the variable VP when the NP is realized as a pronoun. I propose that it is not necessarily a function of NP weight that allows for the combination in 5f. An alternative analysis is based on the observation that it is not the pronoun that is being pulled out from available referents as the topic in these cases, but rather that the pronoun acts as an anchor for activation of the additional information. As mentioned above, the contrastive topic *as far as* ... construction makes active a topic from a set of possible topics. In other words, when a referent is already active (which is the nature of a pronoun) it seems contrary to reactivate it. Instead, what is being activated is what is being said about the pronoun. For example, in 5f the 'it' is not what is being pulled from the discourse for a topic but rather that it has fleas, as opposed to what we are going to do with it this weekend and what we are going to do about it digging holes under the fence, etc.

In regard to forms such as 5b and 5c, it is not clear why the verbless variant is not permitted with the use of pronouns. One possibility is a consequence of the construction's information structure (cf. Lambrecht 1994). The stress on the NP in this construction is due to what Lambrecht 1994 has labeled topic activation stress. Pronouns do not occur in stressed positions, since they necessarily already have active referents. As discussed above, the pronoun acts as an anchor for the information given about the pronoun. In these cases, the information is simply 'x is a topic' as opposed to 5f, where specific details concerning x are introduced. Regardless of the nature of information given about the pronoun, pronouns can only act as pivots in this construction.

In addition, note the interesting case *as far as him*  $\emptyset$ , *we'll help him out*. This is a very restricted variant. The accusative form of the pronoun cannot occur with a verb. It also only seems possible in the presence of a the referent of *him*. This is a rare and specialized form that requires further study. Although I am not positing a concrete conclusion here for the special restrictions in the case of pronouns, they do clearly occur in the contrastive topic function and should not be dismissed with the forms discussed in §3.

3. THE EVIDENTIAL USE OF AS FAR AS NP IS CONCERNED. Another function of the construction *as far as NP is concerned* is that of an evidential, exemplified by 6:

- (6) a. ...as far as Israel is concerned they were bookends... (CGS 11/5/95)
- b. as far as John is concerned, Mary left . (MLG 10/95)

As noted earlier, a paraphrase of the construction in question would be 'according to NP' or 'in the opinion of NP'. Rickford et al. label this use 'perspective' because the *as far as* clause represents the point of view of the referent of the NP rather than restricting the topic of discussion to that NP. They noted that in these cases the verbless variant is not possible, nor is the variant with *go*. They point out that only a human or a personification can occur as the NP in the case of perspectives. Additionally, they note that the verb *be concerned* in these cases has some semantic work to do, which accounts for the impossibility of its deletion.

I agree with Rickford et. al. that *be concerned* in the cases of 6 is distinct from the examples illustrated in §2. However, I am claiming that these are two distinct constructions. I am arguing that this *as far as NP is concerned* construction functions as an evidential because it is a variant of an evidential construction. Consider the forms in 7, of which I collected thirty five total:

- (7) a. as far as we know... (CNN 11/4/95)
- b. ...as far as I can tell... (CNN 11/4/95)
- c. as far as we're aware... (Morning Edition NPR 11/3/95)
- d. ...as far as I can see... (Larry King 11/3/95)
- e. as far as I remember... (FDCH Political Transcripts 11/2/95)

All of these forms serve as some type of evidential. Even though the semantics of the verb involved have varying epistemic contents, they seem to serve the same evidential function. One could argue that *know*, *am aware*, *can tell* and *remember* involve evidentiality, where as *be concerned* involves opinion. However, opinion is evidential in that it has epistemic meaning by referring to belief states. Most of the epistemic data collected have first person pronouns as the NP. This is consistent with the evidential analysis, because one is more apt to purport his own belief state than speculating about the belief states of others. In addition, the forms in 7 are similar to the forms in 6 in that they only allow humans or personifications to occur as the NP and they also are not variable in the same way as the contrastive topic function with respect to the verb, as 3 shows:

- (8) a. as far as I'm concerned/\* $\emptyset$ /\*go, we've won. (Rickford et al. 1995:108)  
 b. as far as she was concerned/\* $\emptyset$ /\*go, that was the end of the story. (Rickford et al. 1995:108)  
 c. as far as she knows/\*goes/\* $\emptyset$ , we are leaving.

The construction exemplified in 6, 7 and 8 requires an epistemic verb but is variable in its specific representation. The variation in the verb phrase in this construction is very different from the variation found with the contrastive topic function. I am arguing that the *as far as NP is concerned* construction found in 6 and 8 is only a variant of the broader evidential construction, of which other examples are found in 7. It should be noted that *be concerned* does not imply opinion outside of this construction. Clearly the evidential function of *as far as NP is concerned* construction is not semantically compositional. This suggests, for reasons that will become clear in §4, that it is the construction that carries the evidential function, not merely the lexical items involved.

I have illustrated in §2 and §3 two functions of the *as far as NP is concerned* phrase. While these two functions superficially have the same form, the preceding analysis has shown that they serve distinct pragmatic functions. In addition, each function employs its own variations and constraints. Thus, these should be analyzed not as one construction with two meanings, but rather, as two distinct constructions. The contrastive topic construction and the evidential construction each have a variant whose form overlaps with a variant of the other construction. It is in this way the *as far as NP is concerned* construction is homonymous. While most syntactic theories do not have the means to account for the distinct functions of these seemingly identical constructions, Construction Grammar does. The next section provides the motivations for employing a constructional approach to the analysis of this phrase.

4. A CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH. I have shown that the *as far as NP is concerned* construction is noncompositional. This is problematic for some theories of syntax because it violates an underlying principle of these theories, the notion of Strictly Categorical Determination: "The category of expression (a) entirely determines its external syntax and (b) is entirely determined by its internal syntax" (Zwicky 1995:1). If categorical determination held, then there could never be more than one meaning associated with a given form. If syntactic strings are not merely a function of their semantic composition, the syntactic strings must have meanings themselves. Goldberg 1995 argues that constructions themselves carry meaning independent of the words of which they are comprised. A constructional approach to syntax can account for distinctions between identical strings of words. This is accomplished by the notion of constructions, which account for not only semantic and syntactic relations among strings of words (to which a Principle and Parameter approach is limited), but also pragmatic relations.

In addition to carrying meaning, constructions have relationships to other constructions. They can invoke the use of other constructions. For example, the S-P (subject-predicate) construction requires the use of an NP construction as well as a VP construction. Constructions can also be extensions of other constructions. It seems that the two constructions in question are a metaphorical extension of a basic level construction, namely the *as...as* S-P Degree construction as argued by Zwicky 1994.

The S-P Degree construction is important for the present purpose for two reasons. First, it is in itself an illustration of the need for a constructional approach. The Degree 2 construction is also a violation of the Strictly Categorical Determination principle. It has the external properties of an adjective phrase but this function is not a result of its internal make-up. Simply put, it is realized syntactically as an adjective phrase, but it functions as a degree marker. Second, this construction is the base construction for both the evidential and contrastive topic constructions. Both of these constructions are motivated by a metaphorical mapping from the Degree 2 construction.

The Degree 2 construction is illustrated in Figure 1. This very abbreviated version of the Degree 2 construction is intended to demonstrate the conventions of Construction Grammar as put

forth by Fillmore and Kay 1995. The lexical items in the string *as far as Harry went*, denoted individually as 'lfm' (lexical form) in each of the interior boxes, has been included for demonstrative purposes only. The Degree function of this construction is reflected in the outer most Sem (semantic) value. This value also indicates that the extent semantics of #1 is equivalent to the extent semantics of #2. The first extent marker, *as*, requires *far* as its complement. The second requires a full S-P (subject predicate construction), with syntax SRS+, as its complement. As is noted by the outermost value of Syn (syntax), the external syntax is that of an adjective phrase (AP).

Note that this construction can involve actual distance or involve a metaphorical distance. Thus, *As far as Harry went* could mean 'in his practical jokes', etc. The notion of distance can be applied to non-spatial concepts. This is how the value of Extent comes to denote the function of Degree in this construction. Building on the Degree 2 construction, a metaphorical and constructional analysis of the *as far as NP is concerned* constructions are given in §3.1 and §3.2.

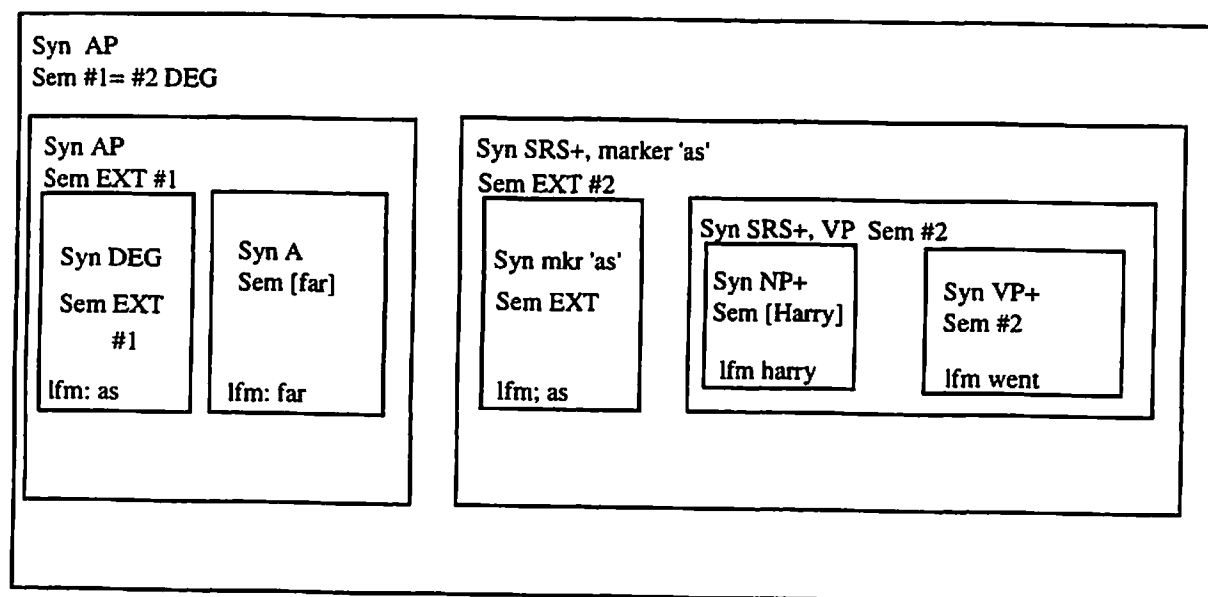


FIGURE 1. The Degree 2 construction for the phrase *as far as Harry went*.

### 3.1. METAPHORICAL MAPPING OF THE CONTRASTIVE TOPIC CONSTRUCTION.

Construction Grammar can account for metaphorical links between constructions by providing the means to show that constructions are related to one another. The metaphorical mapping of the contrastive topic construction and the Degree 2 construction is as follows. *Far* refers to actual distance in the source construction, and when this applied to non-spatial concepts, such as *be concerned*, it denotes extent, the abstract space being provided by *be concerned*.

The difficulty with the metaphorical mapping of the contrastive topic construction is that it is not a one-to-one mapping. Thus far the mapping produces *to the extent of concern*. But this is not the *concern* of the NP present in the construction, as a one-to-one mapping should produce. It is concern ABOUT the NP present in the construction on the part of the speaker. Through conventionalized conversational implicature (Traugott 1989) this meaning extended further, to concern about the NP as a *topic*, not an individual. This is an idiomatic use of the Degree 2 construction. The idiomatic function is reflected in the Sem values of figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that the adjective phrase *as far* is the head of the construction, as it is in the Degree 2 construction. The notation 'inht Deg 2' indicates that this construction inherits the Degree

2 construction. The inheritance of the Deg 2 construction and the change in Sem value capture the metaphorical link between the two constructions. The pragmatic function of contrastive topic is indicated by the Sem value of CT (Contrastive Topic). The Sem value of [null] for the VP (Verb Phrase) indicates that the semantics of the verb do not contribute to the function. Note that this is a possible explanation for why the contrastive topic construction can vary or omit the verb phrase all together. TOP+, ACT- indicate that the NP is an available topic that is not yet active. The NP in this position gets activated as a result of entering this construction.

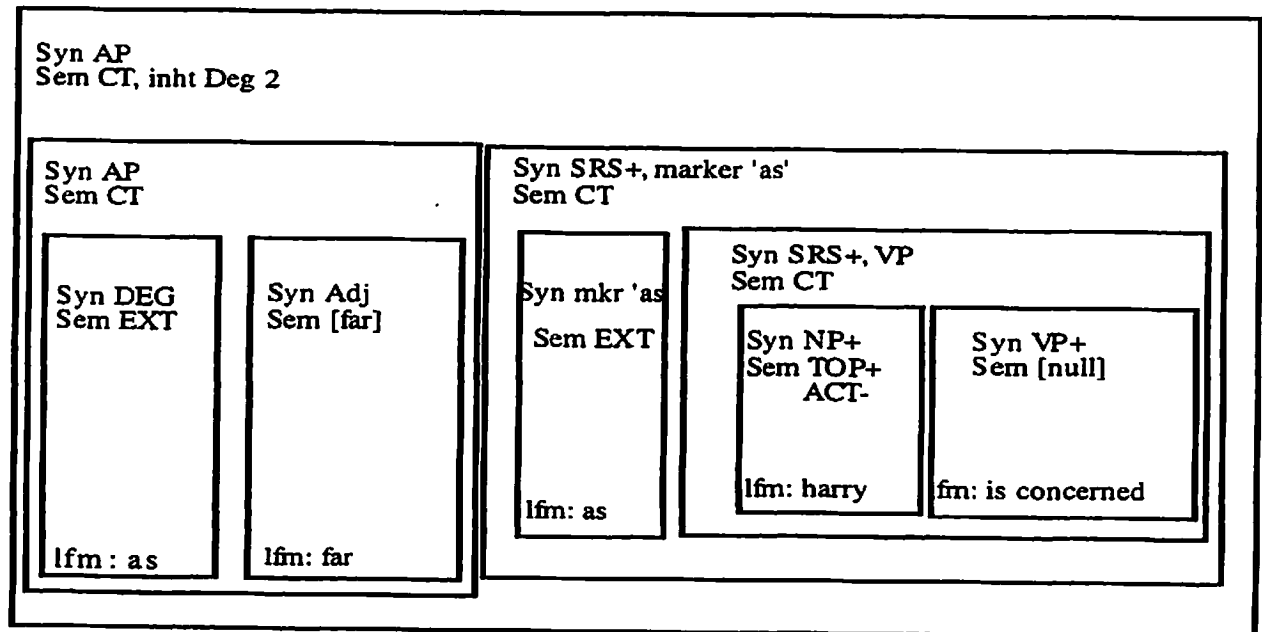


FIGURE 2. The Contrastive Topic construction for the phrase *as far as Harry is concerned*.

**3.2. METAPHORICAL MAPPING OF THE EVIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION.** The metaphorical mapping between the Degree 2 construction and the evidential construction is straightforward. The literal meaning of the Degree 2 construction denotes actual physical distance, the space between point A and point B. The metaphor is the notion of movement within physical space applied to concepts that do not involve physical space. As mentioned earlier, distance applied to these concepts, such as knowing, etc., is mapped as extent. The metaphorical space is the extent or degree of knowledge, or any other epistemic verb found in this position. While the literal meaning involves movement within the space, the motion involved in the metaphor is to the outermost limits of the epistemic space. The Evidential construction is illustrated in Figure 3.

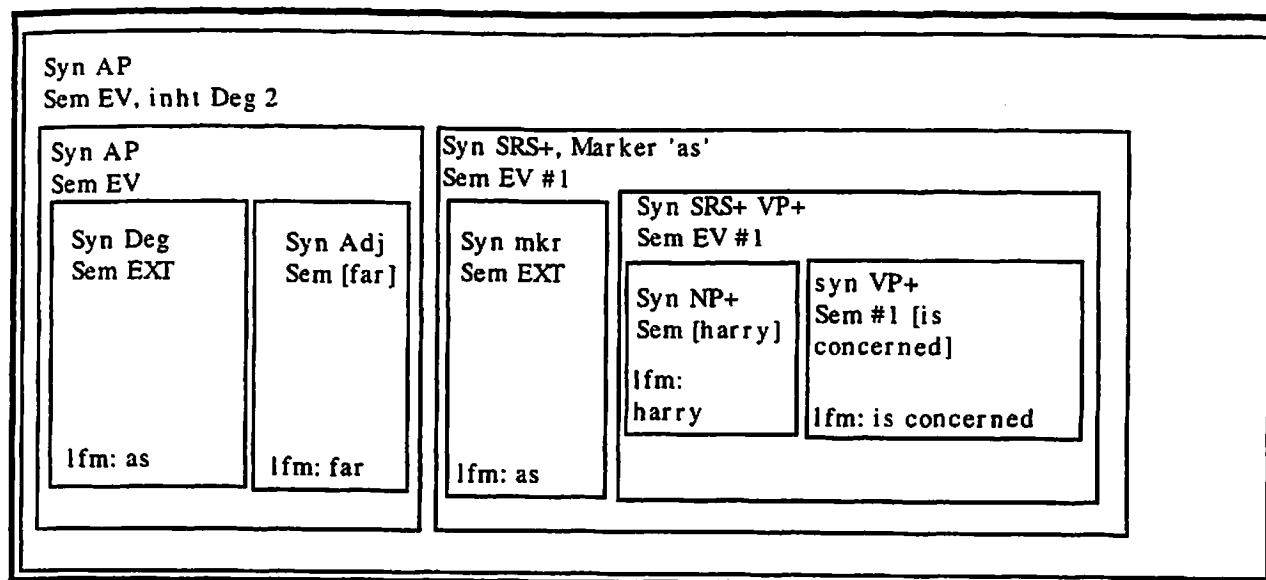


FIGURE 3. The Evidential construction for the phrase *as far as Harry is concerned*.

Again, the value AP reflects that this construction is externally an adjective phrase. Its Sem value EV, however, reflects its idiomatic pragmatic function of an evidential. An important difference between this construction and the Contrastive Topic construction is the Sem value for the VP. Here the Sem value is the value of the semantics of the verb involved. This value will also be reflected in the Sem value of the complement S-P, marked SRS+. This indicates that the degree of evidentiality is dependent on the semantics of the epistemic verb used, and thus the verb cannot be omitted from this construction. This construction also inherits the Degree 2 construction.

The constructional analysis in this section illustrates the conventions of Construction Grammar that enable it to capture the differences in meaning and function of identical forms. Idiomatic, or noncompositional functions, can be accounted for by Construction Grammar because constructions have meaning. I have illustrated the connection between the Degree 2 construction and the Contrastive Topic and Evidential constructions. This connection is useful because it demonstrates that these constructions are metaphorical extensions of the same source, thus explaining how two constructions can be identical in form but serve distinct functions.

**5. CONCLUSION.** In this paper I have offered an analysis of the *as far as NP is concerned* phrase. This analysis distinguishes between two distinct uses of this phrase, the evidential function and the contrastive topic function. Discussion of these constructions is important in terms of syntactic theories because of its homophonous nature. These constructions violate an underlying principle employed by most syntactic theories, that of Strictly Categorical Determination. Following Zwicky, I have illustrated, through analyses of these constructions, that external syntax is not always a result of internal syntax. In addition, Michaelis (1994:65) notes the limitations of theories in which meaning arises only from semantic composition, "if the meaning of a grammatical construct is solely a function of the meaning of constructional subparts, no more than one meaning should be calculable for any complex expression." Because identical forms can have more than one meaning, it is useful to employ a syntactic theory, such as Construction Grammar, that can clearly reflect these differences. The *as far as NP is concerned* phrase is not one construction with two meanings, but the homophonous variant of two distinct, though derivationally related, constructions, each with its own set of constraints.



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