



1-1-2005

# From causality to concessivity: The story of just because

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# From Causality to Concessivity: The Story of *just because*

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## 1 Introduction

This paper explores the grammaticalization of the English phrase *just because* into a concessive connector. I demonstrate by means of corpus analysis that the development is a very recent one. By concessive usages of *just because* I refer to examples such as these:

- (1) Just because you play guitars it doesn't mean you've got soul.
- (2) Just because the data satisfy expectations does not mean they're correct.
- (3) You can't leave your parents just because you want to.

I take it as an uncontroversial fact that those examples mean roughly the following:

- (1') Although you play guitars, that does not mean you've got soul.
- (2') Although the data satisfy expectations, they need not be correct.
- (3') You can't leave your parents although you might want to.

Whereas *just because* in the above examples has concessive meaning, this is not always the case. Example (4) illustrates a perfectly causal usage of *just because*.

- (4) Utopias lead to disappointment just because they are utopias.

In the remainder of this paper, Section 2 introduces the database used for this study. Four corpora are combined into a 650 million word database, which is grouped into four diachronic periods. Section 3 explores the semantics of constructions with *just because*. The prototypical meaning of these constructions involves the denial of an invalid inference. Section 4 outlines different construction types that are found with *just because*. Concessive *just because* is shown to occur prototypically in sentence-initial position. Section 5 tracks the diachronic development of different constructions with *just because* over the past 350 years. The first concessive usages occur around 1850 in sentences where a negative matrix clause is followed by *just because*.

## 2 The database

The database consists of 2062 instances of *just because*. These are taken from four corpora which cover partially overlapping time spans. I deal exclusively with written data, since there is not enough spoken data available that dates back far enough for my purposes.

Of the examples, 1038 are from the written component of the British National Corpus (BNC).<sup>1</sup> The texts in the BNC consist of about 75% 'informative' and 25% 'imaginative' prose, all examples are post-1960, ranging up to newspaper texts from 1993.

The corpus that spans the longest time is the Literature On-line resource (LION), which is made up of 350,000 works of English prose, poetry and drama from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the year 2000.<sup>2</sup> The LION corpus contains 658 instances of *just because*.

Another on-line resource, the Modern English Text Collection at the University of Michigan (METC), contains poetry and prose from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>3</sup> The works do not overlap with those of the LION resource, which makes it a suitable complement. There are 85 instances of *just because* in that corpus.

Finally, the London Times Digital Archive (TIMES) provides a wealth of electronically searchable text.<sup>4</sup> The 'Feature' subset in the time from 1900-1950 contains 281 instances of *just because*.

Table 1 gives an overview of the sizes, genres and covered time spans of the corpora.<sup>5</sup>

	BNC-written	LION	METC	TIMES
WORDS	90 million	420 million	22 million	121 million
EXAMPLES	1038	658	85	281
TIME	post-1960	600-2000	1800-2000	1900-1950
GENRES	prose	prose, poetry drama	imaginative prose	informative prose

Table 1: The corpora

<sup>1</sup>Leech 1993.

<sup>2</sup><http://lion.chadwyck.com>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/p/pd-modeng>

<sup>4</sup><http://web1.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw>

<sup>5</sup>The sizes of LION, METC and TIMES are calculated on the basis of the absolute frequencies of twenty high-frequent function words such as *and, of, the, to,* and others.

I make the assumption that these texts are broadly comparable in style and genre. However, I am not going to compare the corpora against each other. To track down the development of *just because*, I assigned each example the year of its usage and ordered the complete database into four periods. Table 2 shows this organization of the examples.

	1651-1850	1850-1900	1900-1950	1950-2000
BNC	-	-	-	1038
LION	106	367	55	132
METC	1	44	29	11
TIMES	-	-	281	-
TOTAL	107	411	365	1181

Table 2: Four periods

The table shows the distribution to be uneven in two respects. First, the sub-corpora are not of the same size; there are many more examples for the latest period than for the first. Second, the corpora are not equally represented in the four periods. BNC and TIMES each cover only one period.

### 3 The Semantics of *just because*

Examples like (1) have been shown to serve the discourse function of *inference denial* (Hirose 1991; Bender and Kathol, to appear). Sentences of the form *just because X it does not mean Y* state that Y is not a valid inference from the fact X.

This relates *just because* to a distinction made by Jespersen (1949:399), who distinguishes *causal* and *inferential because*. Consider (5) and (6).

- (5) Mary loves John, because he typed her thesis.  
 (6) John loves Mary, because he typed her thesis.

Whereas (5) states that John's typing caused Mary to love him, nothing analogous can be said of (6). Here *John loves Mary* is an inference that is drawn from the observation *he typed her thesis*. Note that this inference can be canceled by way of *just because*. This points to the fact that the *because* in *just because* instantiates Jespersen's *inferential because*:

- (6a) Just because John typed Mary's thesis doesn't mean he loves her.

A collocation of evidence confirms that concessive *just because* typically is about inference denial. A concordance of all examples with sentence-initial *just because* with a negative matrix clause brings to light that most verbs in these matrix clauses are semantically related to inferencing. Table 3 lists the main verbs that occur in all strings of the form *just because X (it) (AUX) not VERB* from the database.

VERB	TOKENS	PERCENTAGE
<i>mean</i>	182	63,86%
make	14	4,91%
<i>assume</i>	8	2,81%
<i>follow (logically)</i>	4	1,40%
give somebody the right to do sth	4	1,40%
<i>think</i>	4	1,40%
<i>be a reason</i>	4	1,40%
Be	3	1,05%
<i>expect</i>	2	0,70%
have to	2	0,70%
<i>imagine</i>	2	0,70%
stop	2	0,70%

Table 3: Matrix clause verbs of *just because X (it) (AUX) not VERB*

First of all, Table 3 shows the high entrenchment of the formula *just because X (it) doesn't mean Y*, which accounts for about 64% of the data.<sup>6</sup> The verbs in italics, which all relate to inferencing, augment this figure to 72.3%. This goes to show that the construction is prototypically used to cancel out a possible but invalid inference.

This empirically confirms conclusions made by Hirose (1991:16) and Bender and Kathol (to appear). However, there are instances of *just because* that go beyond the meaning of the prototype.

- (7) Just because I happen to be the CEO I don't play the Great White Chief.
- (8) And just because you're cutting down on time, you don't have to cut down on performance.

<sup>6</sup>Bender and Kathol (to appear) report 85% for *mean* and 6% for *make* in their study.

- (9) Courts should not exclude evidence just because it is not accepted wisdom.
- (10) Wouldn't it be helpful to have a bank that wasn't shut just because it's closed?

It is probably inaccurate to force these sentences into the meaning of inference denial. Compare example (7) to example (2), repeated here for convenience.

- (2) Just because the data satisfy expectations does not mean they're correct.

Whereas the correctness of the data is a straight-forward inference from their expectedness, *playing the Great White Chief* is a more peripheral component in the concept of a CEO. Despite this peripherality, example (7) makes sense because bossy behavior can easily be construed as a property of a CEO. Examples like (7) and (8), which involve propositions that are less clearly related than the ones in (2), provide evidence that the meaning of *just because* generalizes from inference denial to concessivity.

Examples like (9) and (10) deviate not only semantically but also formally from the prototype. Here, *just because* occupies a sentence-medial position. Bender & Kathol (to appear) suggest several semantic subtypes of the general theme of inference denial. Besides predicates of *inference*, they attest predicates of *evidence*, *justification* and *making* besides some residual cases. While I am sympathetic to their enterprise, the data leads me to posit generalization rather than specification into coherent subtypes.

#### 4 Syntactic environments of *just because*

The phrase *just because* occurs in a number of syntactic environments which are associated with different semantic functions. Table 4 (next page) presents thirteen construction types that emerge from the data. A broad distinction can be drawn between sentence-initial *just because* (types 1–7) and sentence-medial *just because* (8–13).

Concessive meaning significantly correlates with sentence-initial *just because*. Most construction types with sentence-initial *just because* code concessive meaning. However, consider type 5, in which the matrix clause is positive. Here we get a causal reading. Likewise, the exclamative construction in type 7 does not always convey concessive meaning.

Conversely, most construction types with sentence-medial *just because* allow only a causal interpretation. However, type 8 comprises both causal and concessive examples.

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STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE
1 Just because X it doesn't mean Y.	Just because you play guitars it doesn't mean you've got soul.
2 Just because X doesn't mean Y.	Just because data satisfy expectations does not mean that they are correct.
3 Just because X NEG-CLAUSE.	Just because you donate an egg, that does not make you a parent.
4 Just because X NEG-VP.	Just because it's a Number One doesn't make it a better record.
5 Just because X POS-CLAUSE.	"Just because he won a few stupid car races," she went on, "he seems to think he rules the world!"
6 Just because X POS-VP.	Just because he's got a black belt means nothing.
7 Just because X !	Just because she's never had a proper job.
8 NEG-CLAUSE just because X.	You cannot leave your parents just because you want to.
9 POS-CLAUSE just because X.	Utopias lead to disappointment just because they are utopias.
10 POS-CLAUSE not just because X.	"We had a very good season," Walsh reflects, "not just because we've won something, but because you learn in the process."
11 POS-CLAUSE just because of X.	A total of 37 in every 100 women believe that bankers treat them differently just because of their sex.
12 POS-CLAUSE not just because of X.	Clients were also causing headaches, and not just because of fees.

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13 NP is just; because CLAUSE.	The Lords of Earth presume to think Their Actions just, because we please to wink.
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Table 4: Syntactic environments of *just because*

#### 4.1 *Just because X it doesn't mean Y*

For several reasons types 1 and 2 are of particular interest. First, they instantiate the semantic prototype of inference denial. Second, they show that a negated form of the verb *mean* is by far the most frequent collocate of *just because*.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.2 *Just because X doesn't mean Y*

While types 1 and 2 are identical in meaning, type 2 drops the dummy subject *it* of the matrix clause, which gives us a totally different syntactic structure. Instead of two coordinated clauses, there is now just one matrix clause with a sentential subject. Today, type 2 outranks type 1 in terms of frequency.

#### 4.3 *Just because X NEG-CLAUSE*

Most examples of this construction type have the meaning of inference denial, but some are better characterized as being mere concessives. The negative matrix clauses of type 3 contain a diverse set of verbs. The 81 examples in the data occur with 48 different verbs. The top collocates are *assume* (7), *make* (5), *follow* (4), and *think* (4). While three of these are semantically related to inferencing, the diversity in this type provides evidence for the generalization of *just because* into a concessive marker.

#### 4.4 *Just because X NEG-VP*

Much like type 2, this type integrates a subject clause into the matrix clause. The type is quite infrequent. Again, the verb *make* shows up, this time as the top collocate. Nine examples out of the total 21 are of the form *just because X doesn't make Y Z*. Another three are of the form *just because X doesn't give Y the right to Z*. So contrary to type 3, usages of type 4 center around a few central collocates.

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<sup>7</sup>The gloss *doesn't mean* is meant to include plural and past forms, as well as non-contracted forms, throughout this paper.

#### 4.5 *Just because X POS-CLAUSE*

Type 5 is the only construction with sentence-initial *just because* that does not normally allow for a concessive interpretation. An interesting if infrequent exception of this type is found with matrix clauses that are questions. These are interpreted as rhetorical questions. In (11), *just because* indicates that a given cause to do something is less well-founded than it should be.

- (11) Just because the SAS drive everywhere, must we always copy them?

#### 4.6 *Just because X POS-VP*

This type is highly infrequent and could in fact be regarded as a systematic gap in the paradigm of possible constructions with *just because*. The only two examples in the whole database are given below.<sup>8</sup> Note that in both cases, even though it is formally positive, the meaning of the VP is essentially negative.

- (12) But just because I didn't learn to sail as a kid seemed a poor reason for not having a go now.
- (13) Just because you had the good fortune to pay nothing for your very expensive university education does little to justify a system of higher education which, at the same time, excludes 85 per cent of your age group from the privileged position you evidently enjoyed.

#### 4.7 *Just because X!*

Type 7 is a heterogeneous category, because it contains exclamatives (14), cut-off sentences (15), and answers to questions (16) that look alike formally. While all exclamatives in the database have causal meaning, it is possible to construct concessive examples such as (17).

- (14) Nutty fetched the cloth and mopped up the table. "It's not fair. Just because it's me—"
- (15) Sally felt that it was useless to tell why, and so said—Oh! just because—
- (16) And why? Just because she was playing with a feather she found on the floor.

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<sup>8</sup>The 'black belt' example in Table 4 is from Bender and Kathol (to appear).

(17) Just because he's got a black belt!

#### 4.8 *NEG-CLAUSE just because X*

Type 8 comes in two semantic variants. See example (18) and the analogously constructed example (19). Whereas (18) is concessive, (19) has only a causal interpretation.

(18) You cannot leave your parents just because you want to.

(19) You cannot leave your parents just because you are only five years old.

The contrast arises through a difference in negation scope. In (18), the negator ranges over matrix clause and subordinate clause. In (19), the negator has only the matrix clause within its scope. The subordinate clause gives a reason why the matrix clause is negated. In other words, (18) conveys '*That's not a good reason!*' whereas (19) conveys '*That's why!*'

(18')  $\neg$  [You can leave your parents just because you want to.]

*That's not a good reason!*

(19')  $\neg$  [You can leave your parents] just because you are only five years old.

*That's why!*

#### 4.9 *POS-CLAUSE just because X*

Type 9 always expresses a causal relation between matrix clause and subordinate clause. There are no examples in the data that convey concessive meaning.

#### 4.10 *POS-CLAUSE not just because X*

This type is isomorphic to type 9 with the difference that *just because* is preceded by *not*. However, much as type 8, where *just because* is in the scope of a negator, this construction type is used to downplay the validity of an invoked reason. Often a more significant reason is given later in the sentence in a subordinate clause with *but*, as in (20):

(20) I think she's glad to see me, not just because I give her treat food, but because she's lonely.

#### 4.11 *POS-CLAUSE just because of X*

Even this type is similar to type 9, except for the fact that *just because* is followed by *of*. Like type 9, the construction is used to convey a causal relation between two clauses.

#### 4.12 *POS-CLAUSE not just because of X*

Analogous to types 8 and 10, the negated counterpart to type 11 expresses that some causal relation does not hold between two propositions. As in type 10, examples with an ensuing subordinate clause with *but* are very frequent.

#### 4.13 *NP is just; because CLAUSE*

In type 13, *just* is not used adverbially but as an adjective meaning 'fair.' I did not exclude these examples from the database, because I consider it more adequate to work with unedited data, and because the collocation is very frequent in earlier data.

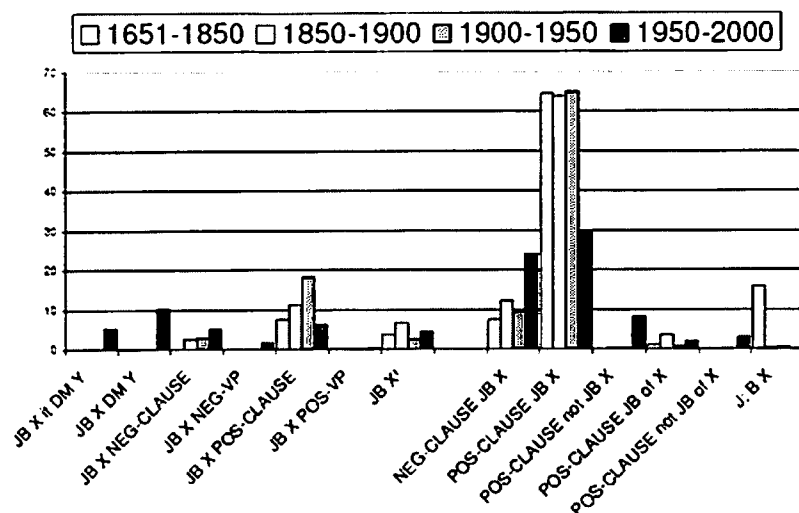
Taking these constructions as a starting point, we can now assess their development in terms of relative frequency.

### 5 The History of *just because*

Figure 1 shows how the construction types developed from the earliest examples in 1651 to the year 2000. Before we address the most decisive construction types in turn, it should be noted that sentence-initial *just because* is substantially less frequent than sentence-medial *just because*. However, it has gained momentum. From 11% in period I, it has reached 35% in period IV.

#### 5.1 *Just because X (it) doesn't mean Y*

The most recent development is the one of types 1 and 2. These types appear only after 1950, occupying 5% and 10% respectively. The variant without the subject pronoun thus clearly outranks its companion. The sudden appearance of these types is highly significant. For both of them the chi-square values are  $p < 0.0001$ .

Figure 1: Construction types with *just because*

### 5.2 *Just because X NEG-CLAUSE*

This type has steadily increased in frequency, going from 2.4% to 5.2%. This tendency turns into a success story if one considers types 1, 2 and 4 subtypes or derivatives of it. But even the development as is achieves a chi-square value of  $p < 0.0001$ . Some of the oldest concessive usages of *just because* are found in this category. Example (21) is from 1854.

(21) Just because I said you were the prettiest girl in town, and the wittiest—that's not flattery.

### 5.3 *Just because X NEG-VP*

Alongside with types 1 and 2, type 4 only occurs in period IV. Even then, it is very infrequent, ranging at 1.8%. The top collocates *make* and *give somebody the right* suggest that this type has a more general concessive function than mere inference denial.

### 5.4 *Just because X POS-CLAUSE*

The development of type 5 in terms of frequency is startling. We observe a sharp rise over periods one to three, followed by an even sharper decline to

period four. Again, chi-square judges the distribution to be highly significant ( $p < 0.005$ ). A first approximation to this phenomenon is the analysis of top collocating verbs in the matrix clause.

1651-1950		1950-2000	
be	36,84%	be	32,88%
give	3,51%	think	12,33%
think	3,51%	become	8,22%
call	1,75%	assume	2,74%
hear	1,75%	know	2,74%
run	1,75%	arise	1,37%
speak	1,75%	ask	1,37%

Table 5: Collocating verbs of type 5

The table shows that while ordinary predications with *be* remain constant, the fourth period shows an increase of epistemic verbs. Besides *think*, which gains about 9%, *assume* and *know* enter the scene. These examples have matrix clauses that are formally positive, but carry negative meaning. Their discourse function is to denounce a given cause to do something as wrong, as in (22).

(22) Just because she owns the house I'm living in, she thinks she can patronize me.

### 5.5 *Just because X!*

Type 7 is semantically too heterogeneous a category to show any coherent development. Even though there appear to be fluctuations in the relative frequency, the distribution over the four periods is not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### 5.6 *NEG-CLAUSE just because X*

In the distribution of type 8 we observe a sharp rise from period I to period IV. Period III does not follow this trend, but since it stays on the same level as period II, it does not disrupt the trend either. The distribution is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The relative frequency starts out with 7.5% in period I and goes up to 24% in period IV.

In section 4.8 I argued for the distinction of two semantic subtypes, one being causal, and the other one the rebuttal of a possible reason. Table 6 shows the distribution of these two meaning types over periods two to four.

	1850-1900	1900-1950	1950-2000
That's not a good reason!	27 (58.7%)	23 (74.2%)	257 (95.9%)
That's why!	19 (41.3%)	8 (25.8%)	11 (4.1%)

Table 6: *That's not a good reason!* vs. *That's why!*

The development indicates that the second meaning is being more and more replaced by the first one. In the fourth period data, '*That's not a good reason!*' has taken over 96% of all examples. This suggests that construction type 8 is no longer just ambiguous, but that the construction as such is associated with the discourse function of discrediting something as an insufficient reason. The chi-square value of this development is  $p < 0.0001$ .

### 5.7 POS-CLAUSE *just because X*

In all four periods, this type is the most frequent one. However, whereas the percentage remains constant at roughly 64% over the first three periods, we see it drop below 30% in the fourth period.

On the initial hypothesis that *just because* grammaticalizes into a concessive marker, we would even expect constructions that cannot conform to this meaning shift to gradually disappear. For two reasons the drastic decline of this construction type cannot be easily dismissed as a sampling effect of the corpus. For one thing the sub-corpora partially cut across the periods and should thus balance sampling effects to a certain degree. Second, we observe regularities in development over the four periods in types 3, 5, 7, and 8. These regularities speak in favor of the reliability of the database. To discredit the development in type 9 as accidental would entail that these regularities be artifactual as well. So whereas types 3, 5, and 8 undergo internal changes in meaning or collocation, type 9 stays the same, at the cost of a drastic decline.

## 6 Conclusions

Diachronic corpus analysis shows that *just because* currently grammaticalizes into a concessive marker by way of the discourse function of inference denial. Construction types that code concessive meaning gain in relative frequency while in ambiguous construction types the concessive variant wins out over the causal variant. The most frequent causal construction type has remained stable until 1950, only to plummet to half of its relative frequency after that. These drastic shifts over short periods of

time suggest that the pace of grammaticalization can be fairly rapid. New grammatical constructions may evolve over the course of a single generation.

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