

# Inverted English Concessive Constructions: A Construction-Based Approach\*

Chung Chan and Jong-Bok Kim  
cchung@dongseo.ac.kr, jongbok@khu.ac.kr

December 14, 2009

## Abstract

Recent developments in construction grammar have turned our attention from core to peripheral constructions. One of the main interests in construction grammar is how core and construction-specific peripheral grammar interact each other. In this paper, we examine grammatical properties of inverted English concessive constructions like *young as he is* and see how the peripheral properties of the constructions in question contribute to the understanding of the core grammar of English.

Keywords: concessive construction, fronting, circumstantial, construction, HPSG

## 1 Introduction

In English, concessive constructions are used to concede a given point in an argument and canonically introduced by conjunctions such as *though*, *although*, *even though*, *while*, and *even if*:<sup>1</sup>

---

\*This work was supported by the Korea Research Foundation (Grant No. A00065).

<sup>1</sup>Concessive constructions can be also introduced by expressions like *nevertheless*, *regardless*, *anyway*, *still*, *despite* or a special inversion construction like (ib):

- (i) a. He has opposed the military option, despite its reluctant support for sanctions against Iran.
- b. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.

Interesting though these inverted ones are, the scope of this paper exclude the discussion of these constructions.

- (1) a. Though he was old, he could run as fast as the other men.  
 b. Although it was raining, he went out without an umbrella.  
 c. Even if she swore it, I wouldn't believe her.  
 d. Whoever told you that was liar.

As noted by Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002), concessive clauses in the subordinate clause indicate that the event denoted by the matrix clause is 'contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause.' For example, in (2a) his running fast is contrary to the expectation from his being old.

These concessive clauses can appear at the beginning, internally, or at the end of the sentence.

- (2) a. Though it seemed impossible, I tried hard to complete the task.  
 b. I tried hard to complete the task though it seemed impossible.  
 c. I tried hard, though it seemed impossible, to complete the task.

One further intriguing property of the constructions is that the complement of the main verb in the concessive clause can be fronted as illustrated in (3) (Quirk et al. 1985):<sup>2</sup>

- (3) a. [Genius] though she was, she was quite unassuming.  
 b. [Naked] as I was, I braved the storm.  
 c. [Fail] though I did, I would not abandon my goal.

As noted here, the inverted element is canonically adjectival or nominal, but it can be even a verbal element as in (3c). Since the inverted element is the complement of the copula or the auxiliary in the clause, we can say that the inverted concessive clause has the template of 'complement + *as/though* + subject + copula'.

Just like canonical concessive clauses, the inverted concessive clause can appear in the sentence middle or final position too, though the initial position is preferred:

---

<sup>2</sup>There seem to exist cases where a modifier is fronted as in *Much as I like you, I will not marry you* (cf. Quirk et al. 1985). However, one can argue that this modifier is base-generated in the sentence initial position.

- (4) a. Difficult as those years will be, the whole system will not halt within two years.
- b. The whole system will not halt within two years, difficult as those years will be.
- c. The whole system will not, difficult as those years will be, halt within two years.

In all these three variants, we have two events (or facts) against the background of a certain conflict or incompatibility. That is, two propositions are instances of classes of propositions normally considered incompatible.

The inverted concessive construction can appear in the embedded clause too (cf. Culicover and Jackendoff 1999):

- (5) That was why [weak as we were] they had invited us in.

This means that the inverted concessive construction is not a pure root phenomenon.

In this paper, we first examine the grammatical properties of such inverted concessive constructions, focusing on their character and distribution from a functional point of view. We then try to offer a construction-based analysis that can license such inverted concessive constructions in English.

## 2 Basic Grammatical Properties

### 2.1 Syntactic Aspects

Inverted concessive constructions display many peculiar grammatical properties not observed in core or canonical constructions.

As we noted earlier, the inverted concessive construction can be introduced only by a limited set of subordinating conjunctions like *as* or *though*: subordinating conjunctions like *although* or *even though* do not allow the inversion in the concessive construction (Quirk et al. 1995, Huddleston and Pullum 2002):

- (6) a. \*Genius although/\*even though she was, she was quite unassuming.
- b. \*Naked although/\*even though I was, I braved the storm.

The most common conjunctions used in the inverted constructions are *though* or *as*, but the complementizer *that* can be used too:

- (7) a. Celebrities as/that they were, they expected a crowd at their hotel.
- b. Poor as/that they were, they gave money to charity.
- (8) a. \*That they were celebrities, they expected a crowd at their hotel.
- b. \*That they were poor, they gave money to charity.

One of the well-known restrictions in English is the so-called ‘double-filled COMP position’ constraint that bans an extracted element from co-occurring with an overt complementizer in the same CP domain (e.g., Chomsky and Lasnik 1977 and Kathol 2001):

- (9) \*I don’t know [to whom] [that] Bill gave the book.

The construction under discussion is peculiar in that it allows such sharing of the position under the assumption that the subordinators *though*, *as* and *that* are taken to be a complementizer. For example, under this assumption (7a) will have a structure something like the following:<sup>3</sup>

- (10) [[[Celebrities]<sub>i</sub> [as/that]] they were \_\_ <sub>i</sub>], she was quite unassuming.

Even if we take the subordinators in the construction to be a conjunction or preposition introducing an adjunct clause, the inverted concessive construction contrasts the traditional wisdom that no element can be extracted out of an adjunct clause:

- (11) a. Though she met the students yesterday, she wants to meet them again.
- b. \*The students though she met \_\_ yesterday, she wants to meet them again.

---

<sup>3</sup>The so-called English comparative correlative construction is similar to the inverted concessive construction in the sense that the comparative phrase precedes the complementizer *that* (Culicover and Jackendoff 1999, Borsley 2004):

- (i) The more books that I read, the more that I understand.

This suggests that the concessive construction is not the only construction that requires the doubly-filled COMP position.

- c. The students she wants to meet \_\_ again, though she met them yesterday.

The extraction in the inverted concessive construction is thus peculiar in the sense that it appears to override the canonical adjunct island constraint.

The concessive subordinating clause is canonically headed by the copula *be*, but it can include an auxiliary or an auxiliary complex as illustrated in (12):

- (12) a. Important as they may be to the birds and trout, they can be very annoying to humans. (BNC)  
b. Simple as they may have appeared, it is not easy to solve. (BNC)

The fronted phrase can be adjectival or nominal complement. We have also noticed that it can be even a nonfinite base VP complement of an auxiliary verb:

- (13) a. [Change your mind] as you will, you will gain no additional support.  
b. [Try] as I might, I could not life it.  
(14) a. \*[Changed your mind] as you will, you will gain no additional support.  
b. \*[Trying as I might], I could not life it.

The fronted VP here cannot be a non-base VP since the auxiliary *will* and *might* select a base VP as its complement (cf. Kim 2002).

Canonically, the fronted element is the complement of the copula, but it can also be the complement of linking verbs such as *seem* or *sound*:

- (15) a. Strange as it may sound, compulsive shoppers very often don't even wear their look. (BNC)  
b. It was clear, incredible as it may seem , that there was a criminal at large on Ward 4. (BNC)

However, it appears that the fronted element cannot be the complement of a transitive or complex transitive verb:

- (16) a. \*Happy as/though they made her, she left.  
 b. \*Intelligent as/though they thought him, he didn't pass the exam.

The fronted element cannot be a nominal complement (or object) of a transitive verb or preposition, either:

- (17) a. \*(A) gentleman as she loved, she was mistreated.  
 b. \*(A) great teacher as he learned from, he was not satisfied.

The fronted element in the concessive construction syntactically matches with the putative gap in the concessive clause (cf. Borsley 2004, Sag et al. 2004):

- (18) a. Excellent though they both are \_\_ , they may not be enough.  
 b. \*Excellence though they both are \_\_ , they may not be enough.

However, when the fronted element is a nominal, the indefinite article can be optional:

- (19) a. [Hero] though he was \_\_ , he shuddered at the sight.  
 b. [Genius] though she was \_\_ , she was quite unassuming.  
 c. [Fool] though he was \_\_ , he managed to evade his pursuers.  
 (20) a. [A hero] though he was \_\_ , he shuddered at the sight.  
 b. [A genius] though she was \_\_ , she was quite unassuming.  
 c. [A fool] though he was \_\_ , he managed to evade his pursuers.

As we can notice in the following, the putative source sentences require the indefinite article: the non-fronted versions are all ungrammatical when the nominal occurs in the gap position without the determiner.

- (21) a. Though he was \*(a) hero, he shuddered at the sight.  
 b. Though she was \*(a) genius, she was quite unassuming.  
 c. Though he was \*(a) fool, he managed to evade his pursuers.

The fronting of the complement in the concessive clause seems to be long-distance dependent. Observe the following:

- (22) a. Old as he was \_\_ , he ran fast.  
b. Genius she was \_\_ , she failed the test.  
c. Fail as I did \_\_ , I would not give it up.
- (23) a. ?Old as we thought he was \_\_ , he ran fast.  
b. ?Genius as we believed she was \_\_ , she failed the test.  
c. ?Fail as they said I did \_\_ , I would not give it up.

Even though the long distance dependency examples in (23) are less natural than those in (22), they seem to be acceptable with proper context.

## 2.2 Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects

There are at least two types of subordinate clauses with respect to their functional uses: concessive and circumstantial (reason or casual) clauses.

- (24) a. Although he was old, he could run as fast as the other men.  
b. Because he was old, he could not run as fast as the other men.

(24a) is a concessive one while (24b) is a circumstantial one. In (24a), the concessive clause contrasts with the event denoted by the matrix clause, whereas in (24b) the event in the matrix clause is according to the expectation described by the subordinate casual clause (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Vergaro 2008).

Notice that ‘complement-*as*’ clauses can be ambiguous in these two functional uses. Observe two different examples, first:

- (25) a. Old as he was, he could run as fast as the young.  
b. Old as he was, he could not run as fast as the young.

The subordinate clause in (25a) is concessive, indicating that his fast running event is contrary to the expectation expressed by the subordinate clause. Meanwhile, the one in (25b) is a circumstantial clause expressing the reason for fulfilling the event in the matrix clause. As noted by Kjellmer (1992), these two readings can reside in the same sentence:

(26) Tired as he was, he watched the news programme on TV.

This can mean something like either ‘Since he was tired, he watched the programme’ to relax or ‘even though he was tired, he decided to watch the important news program’. This indicates that the interpretation of ‘complement-*as*’ constructions is dependent on context.

However, note that ‘complement-*though*’ constructions do not induce such ambiguities:

(27) Tired though he was, he watched the news program on TV.

This concessive sentence has only the concessive reading: there exists no circumstantial reading. This difference in reading possibilities is due to the lexical properties of *as* and *though*. That is, *though* has only the concessive reading, while *as* is canonically inducing a circumstantial reading, but adds the concessive reading only in the inverted construction.

### 3 Analysis

#### 3.1 Syntax and Semantics of the Concessive Constructions

As we have noticed, the inverted concessive construction displays peculiar constructional properties though they also share certain properties with more general constructions. Within the framework of construction grammar (developed by Fillmore 1999, Croft 2001, Goldberg 2006, among others), a grammar consists of a repertory of constructions which form a network connected by links of ‘inheritance’. We recognize grammatical generalizations by showing the ways in which this concessive construction is elaborations of other related constructions. We show that the inverted concessive construction inherits the properties of more general constructions, indicating that it shares all of the conditions that these general constructions carry while adding some of its own.

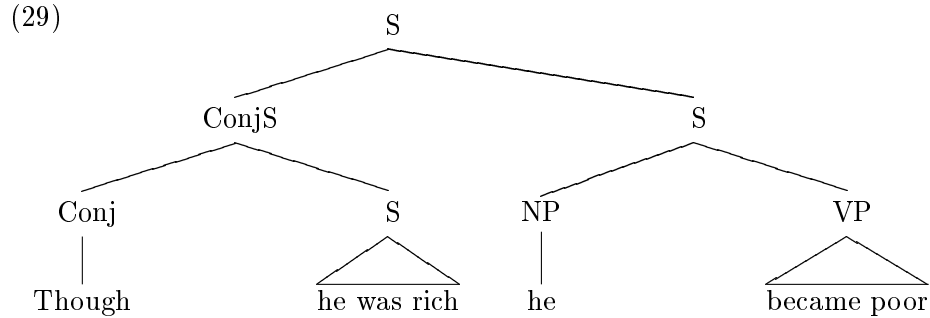
Let us consider canonical concessive constructions first.

- (28) a. Though he was rich, he became poor.  
b. Though they may not succeed, they will still try.

In both cases here, the concessive clause is introduced by the subordinating conjunction *though*. In the present analysis, we take this subordinating



conjunction to function as the head selecting a finite sentential complement as represented in (29):<sup>4</sup>



As noted here, the subordinate clause *Though he was rich* is modifying the main clause. We take this modifying function is originated from the conjunction *though*. In addition, the subordinating conjunction is required to combine with a finite sentence:

- (30) a. Though they know the war is lost, they continue to fight.  
 b. \*Though that they know the war is lost, they continue to fight.  
 c. \*Though for them to know the war is lost,...  
 d. \*Though them to know the war is lost,...

Also noted earlier, in terms of meaning it is the conjunction marker *though* introduces a concessive semantic relation between the subordinating and main clause. That is, *though* expresses a contrast relation between the subordinate clause and the main clause. In general, the truth of the subordinate clause leads us to expect the false of the main clause.

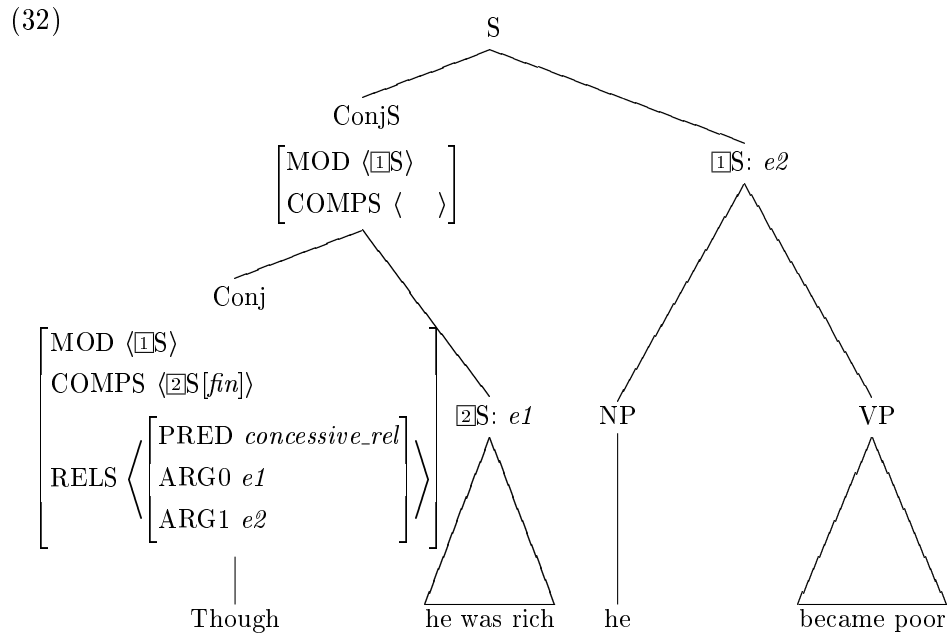
Based on these observations, we can posit the following lexical entry for the concessive conjunction *though*, represented in the feature structure of HPSG (Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar):<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Following Emonds (1976), we could treat the subordinating conjunction as a preposition. Since the categorial status of the conjunction does not change the arguments of the present analysis in essence we use the traditional category 'conjunction' and give the name 'ConjS' to the sentence projected from a subordinating conjunction. We of course can treat the conjunction as a complementizer projecting a CP. However, one clear difference between ConjS and CP is that only the former can have a modifier function.

<sup>5</sup>See Sag et al. (2003), Kim and Sells (2008).

$$(31) \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{POS } conj \\ \text{MOD } \langle S: e2 \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{VAL} | \text{COMPS } \langle S[fin]: e1 \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{SEM} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{IND } s1 \\ \text{RELS } \left\langle \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{PRED } concessive\_rel \\ \text{ARG0 } e1 \\ \text{ARG1 } e2 \end{array} \right] \right\rangle \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

The lexical information specifies that the conjunction *though* selects a finite sentence denoting an event  $e1$  and modifies a matrix sentence denoting an event  $e2$ . The conjunction links these two events with the semantic relation *concessive\_rel*. With this elaborated lexical information, the structure will now have the following enriched syntactic and semantic structure for (28a) (cf. Kim and Sells 2008):



As represented in the structure, *though* forms a head-complement construction with its complement clause *he was rich* referring to  $e1$ . This subordinate clause then modifies the matrix S denoting the event  $e2$ . The Semantic Principle allows us the concessive relation of *though* to be composed as the

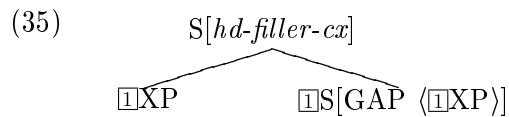
sentence meaning.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 Syntax and Semantics of the Inverted Concessive Constructions

One main property that distinguishes the inverted from the canonical one is that the inverted one forms a head-filler construction. That is, the inverted expression in a sense forms a filler to the putative gap.

- (33) a. [Fido], [Tom believes Mary likes \_\_].  
b. [What] [did Mary think Tom ate \_\_]?
- (34) a. [Weary] [though I was \_\_], I tried it hard.  
b. [Friends] [though he was \_\_], he didn't help us.

Just like canonical head-filler constructions in (33) where the filler in the sentence initial position matches with the putative gap in the head sentence. The common properties of these are that they are bi-partite constructions, consisting of a head and filler, as represented in (35) (cf. Bouma et al. 2001, Kim and Sells 2008):

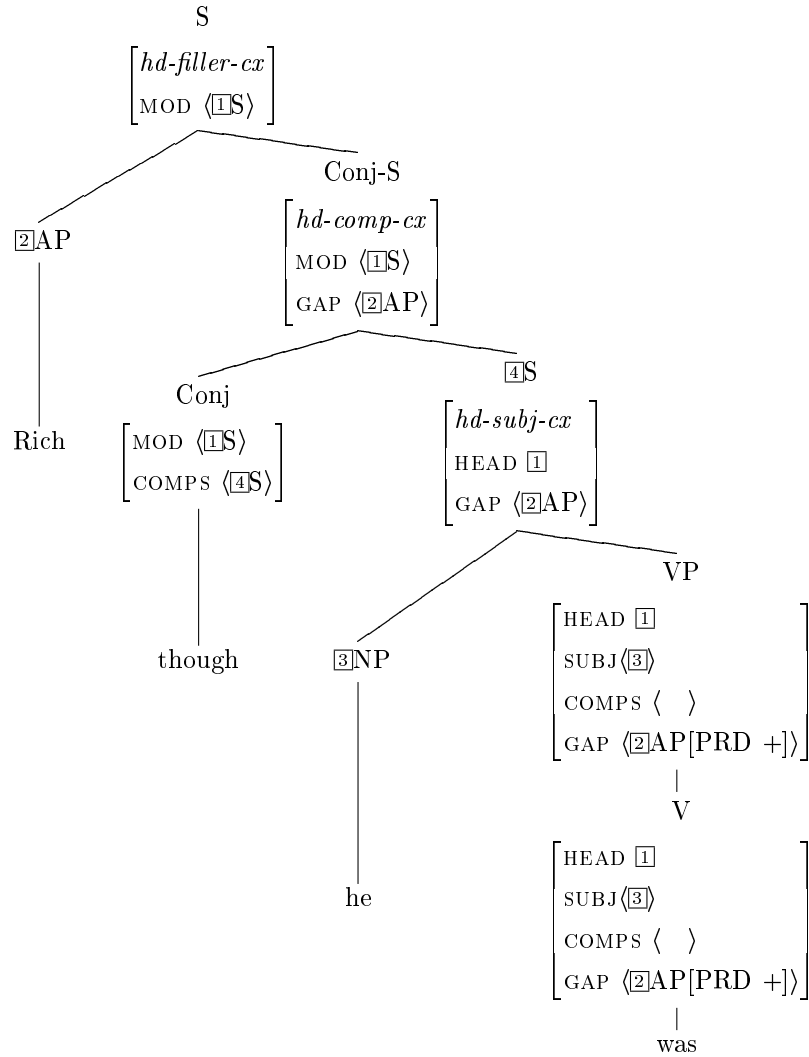


As the structure represents, the GAP value in the head S matches with the filler. The inverted concessive basically forms such a head-filler construction as represented in the following:

---

<sup>6</sup>The Semantic Composition Principle basically specifies that the RELS value of the mother is the union of the daughters' RELS value. See Sag et al. 2003 and Kim and Sells 2008.

(36)



Note that the copula *was* selects an AP as its COMPS value but this AP is realized as the GAP value. This nonlocal GAP value is inherited to its mother VP and S again. This value is percolated up to ConjS where it meets its filler value *rich*. Meanwhile *though*, as used in the canonical concessive construction, combines with the gapped clause *he was* and inherits to its MOD value to the mother. The final S is thus a head-filler construction, looking for its modifier S.

As we have seen, the general properties of the head-filler construction are inherited to the inverted concessive construction. However, the inverted con-

struction adds its own constructional properties which cannot be predicted from its supertype constructions.

For example, unlike canonical concessive constructions, *as* and *that* can also participate in the inverted constructions. As noted earlier, even though *as* and *that* do not have any concessive function, they do in the inverted construction. One important constraint is that *as* and *that* have a concessive meaning only when they occur in the inverted construction:

- (37) a. As he was tired, he went to bed.  
 b. Tired as he was, he went to bed.

The subordinate clause (37a) has no concessive reading: it just has a circumstantial reading while (37b) has only a concessive reading. *That* is also similar in this respect: it can have a concessive reading only in the inverted construction. To reflect these, we assume the following lexical entries for these three elements:

- (38) a. 
$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle \textit{though} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \langle \text{S}[\textit{fin}] \rangle \\ \text{SEM } \textit{concessive\_rel} \end{array} \right]$$
 b. 
$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle \textit{as} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \left\langle \text{S} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{fin} \\ \text{GAP } \langle \text{XP}[\text{PRD } +] \rangle \end{array} \right] \right\rangle \\ \text{SEM } \textit{concessive\_rel} \end{array} \right]$$
  
 c. 
$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle \textit{that} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \left\langle \text{S} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{fin} \\ \text{GAP } \langle [\text{N } +, \text{PRD } +] \rangle \end{array} \right] \right\rangle \\ \text{SEM } \textit{concessive\_rel} \end{array} \right]$$

All these elements have a concessive reading. However, note the difference in COMPS value. The complement of *though* requires a finite S whereas that of *as* or *that* needs to have a GAP value with the positive PRD value. This also implies that *though* can appear in both the canonical and the inverted concessive one, while *as* and *that* are not. Also note that *that* requires its GAP value to bear the [N +] feature, to capture the constraint that the fronted element in the *that* introduced concessive construction can be only an NP or an AP:

- (39) a. Old that he was, he ran fast.

- b. Hero that he was, he wasn't welcome.
- c. \*Fail that he did, he was determined to try it again.

One additional difference is that the filler in the inverted concessive one is limited to the complement of a linking verb including *be*, *seem*, *sound*, whose data we repeat here:

- (40) a. Rich as he seemed \_\_ , he had no money.
- b. \*Happy as John made her \_\_ , she left him.

How can we differentiate these? As a way of differentiating these two, we classify PRD expressions into subject predicate and object predicate as represented in the following:

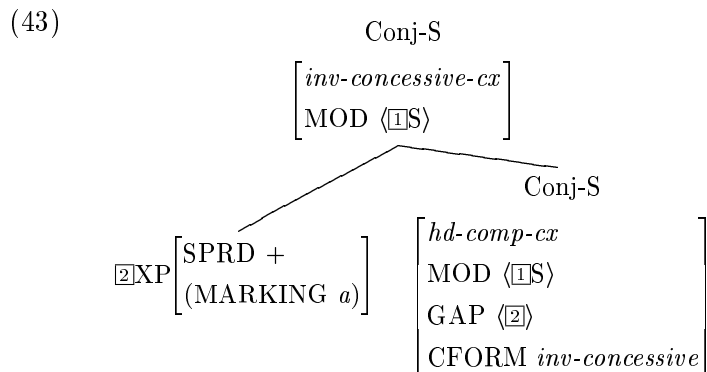
- (41) a.  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle \text{seem} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \langle \text{AP}[\text{SPRD } +] \rangle \end{array} \right]$       $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle \text{make} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \langle \text{NP}, \text{AP}[\text{OPRD } +] \rangle \end{array} \right]$

Given this lexical difference, we can assume that the fronted predicate in the concessive construction must bear the positive SPRD value.

The inverted concessive construction is also peculiar in the fronted nominal can make the indefinite article optional:

- (42) a. Though he was \*(a) hero, he wasn't welcome.
- b. (A) hero though he was, he wasn't welcome.

All these properties are not predicted from the super-construction: they exist as independent constructional constraints on the inverted one. These constructional constructions can be schematized as following:



The inverted concessive construction, just like general subordinating constructions, functions as modifier to the main clause. Like the head-filler construction, the filler XP is linked to the GAP element in the head to predict the contrast:

- (44) a. Angry as he was \_\_ , he invited the students.  
b. \*Anger as he was \_\_ , he invited the students.

In addition, the expression must be one that functions as the subject predicate.

- (45) a. Strange as it may sound, the decision is not confirmed yet.  
b. Incredible as it may seem, it was clear that the team won the game.  
c. \*Angry as he makes me \_\_ sometimes, I like him.

Note that all the complements of the copula *be*, *seem*, *appear* are subject-predicate. In addition, the complement of an auxiliary verb is also subject predicate. The filler also allows its MARKING value optional. This makes it possible to omit the indefinite article.

- (46) (A) Hero he is, he wasn't welcome.

Note that the ConjS's CFORM value is *inv-concessive* assigned only to *as*, *though* and *that*. This is to prevent other conjunctions such as *when* or even those like *although* with a concessive meaning from occurring in the inverted concessive construction:

- (47) a. \*Rich when he was, he became poor.  
b. \*Rich even if he was, he became poor.  
(48) a. Although she was attractive, she wasn't welcomed.  
b. \*Attractive although she was, she wasn't welcomed.

Even though *although* has a concessive reading, it cannot appear in the inverted concessive construction since it does not have the feature *inv-concessive*.

## 4 Conclusion

The so-called English concessive construction allows us to express a contrast meaning between the matrix and subordinate clause. The inverted concessive construction, though sharing certain canonical properties with this canonical one, display its own constructional constructions, the properties of which are not predictable from those of the constructions in the grammar.

In the paper we have seen several peculiar properties of the inverted concessive construction while inheriting a family of properties from its super-type construction. For example, only a limited expression like *though*, *as*, *that* can introduce an inverted concessive construction. The fronted element needs to be the predicative complement of a linking verb. Such constructions are hard to be linked to general constructions. Applying a construction-based description appears to be well-suited for such an intriguing construction.

## References

- Borsley, Robert. 2004. An approach to English comparative correlatives. *Proceedings of the HPSG04 Conference*. CSLI Publications. 70-92.
- Bouma, Gosse, Malouf, Robert and Sag, Ivan A. 2001. Satisfying Constraints on Extraction and Adjunction. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 19(1). 1-65.
- Chomsky, Noam. and Lasnik, Howard. 1977. Filters and control. *Linguistic Inquiry* 8: 425-504.
- Culicover, Peter and Jackendoff, Ray. 1999. The view from the periphery: The English comaparative correlative. *Linguistic Inquiry* 30: 543-571.
- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical Construction Grammar: Syntactic theory in typological perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emonds, Joseph. 1976. *A Transformational Approach to Syntax*. Academic Press, New York.
- Fillmore, Charles J. 1999. Inversion and constructional inheritance. In *Lexical and constructional aspects of linguistic explanation*, ed. by Gert Webelhuth, Jean-Pierre Koenig & Andreas Kathol. Stanford, Ca: CSLI. 113-128.
- Ginzburg, Jonathan and Sag, Ivan. 2000. *Interrogative Investigations: The Form, Meaning and Use of English Interrogatives*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Goldberg, Adele. 1995. *A Construction Grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldberg, Adele. 2006. *Constructions at Work: the nature of generalization in*



*language*. Oxford University Press.

- Huddleston, Rodney, and Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge :Cambridge University Press.
- Kathol, A. 2001. Positional effects in a monostratal grammar of German. *Journal of Linguistics*, 37: 35-66.
- Kjellmer, Göran. 1992. Old as he was: a note on concessiveness and causality. *English Studies* 4: 337-350.
- Kim, Jong-Bok. 2002. *The Grammar of Negation: A Constraint-Based Approach*. Stanford, CSLI Publications.
- Kim, Jong-Bok and Peter Sells. 2008. *English Syntax: An Introduction*. Stanford, CSLI Publications.
- Sag, Ivan, Thomas Wasow, and Emily Bender. 2003. *Syntactic Theory: A Formal Introduction*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London and New York: Longman.
- Vergaro, Carla. 2008. Concessive constructions in English business letter discourse. *Text and Talk* 28.1: 97-118.

Corresponding author: Jong-Bok Kim