I Can’t Even With This Thesis: A Syntactic and Pragmatic Analysis

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Submitted to the faculty of the Department of Linguistics in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Fisher (2018)

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April 9, 2025

Abstract

This project focuses on the construction *I can't even,* a sentence coined in the early 2000s that expresses a speaker's strong emotion to the point where they are lost for words. The most typical emotion conveyed using *I can't even* is exasperation, as in example (1), but it can also be an indication of extreme happiness, like in (2).

(1) He tried to get my number AGAIN. I can't even.

(2) You came all the way from New York to watch me perform? I can't even.

While the modal *can* and the adverb *even* normally require the presence of a lexical verb, users of *I can't even* still utter it as a self-standing sentence.

There is little to no published research on *I can't even* despite its seemingly truncated syntax. My project fills this gap by a) describing the syntactic properties of *I can't even*, b) evaluating multiple hypotheses for its syntactic derivation, and c) discussing its pragmatic properties. I examine and reject three possible analyses of *I can't even*: (1) that *even* acts as a lexical verb, (2) that *can* acts as a lexical verb, and (3) that *I can't even* arises from VP ellipsis. I propose a syntactic derivation of *I can't even* based on van Riemsdijk (2002), which posits the existence of silent lexical verbs that do not correspond exactly to any overt verb. I then discuss how the silent structure of *I can't even* contributes to its pragmatic effects, particularly its ability to generate high cognitive relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and reinforce both the speaker's and their listener's positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987). Lastly, I argue that the social stigma of *I can't even* as 'lazy' English is not inherently due to its unpronounced syntactic elements, but instead arises from its association with a teenage female speaker base.

This paper forges novel connections between the fields of syntax and pragmatics by studying an under-researched construction through the intersecting lenses of silent constituents and positive politeness. Ultimately, despite its attribution to a demographic group that is stereotypically portrayed as ignorant and vapid, *I can't even* is a complex linguistic phenomenon that obeys systematic principles and rules.

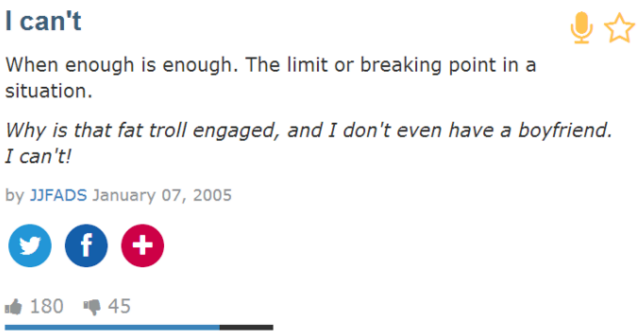
1. What is This Thesis Even About?

This project focuses on the construction *I can't even,* a sentence expressing the speaker's strong emotion to the point where they are lost for words. The most typical emotion conveyed using *I can't even* is exasperation, as in example (1), but it can also be an indication of extreme happiness, like in (2).

(1) He tried to get my number AGAIN. I can't even.

(2) You came all the way from New York to watch me perform? I can't even.

The website Knowyourmeme.com dates the lexical origin of *I can't even* to 2005, when user JJFADS submitted an entry for *I can't* to Urban Dictionary, denoting "when enough is enough. The limit or breaking point to a situation."



I Can't Even (2014)

Over the next few years, a number of variations of *I can't* cropped up across the internet, all with largely similar structures and meanings. These variants almost always contain the first-person singular pronoun *I,* always have a negative modal verb, and, crucially, lack a main verb. In terms of semantic features, the offshoots of *I can't* all retain the key feature of intensity, i.e. they convey an emotion so overwhelming that the speaker is unable to verbalize it properly. In 2007, for instance, user ryanxwombin uploaded an entry for *what is this i don't even* to Urban Dictionary, with the definition "Internet meme used to denote confusion." In this case, the sentence contains the pronoun *I* and the negative modal *don't,* and conveys a confusion so extreme that the speaker cannot put it into words—all they can do is express their inability to fully articulate themselves.

The word-for-word phrase *I can't even* was first added to Urban Dictionary in 2010 by user tooyoung, who described it as an expression used predominantly on the social media platform Tumblr. From there, *I can't even* rose in popularity online and offline, and its usage came to be associated with teenage girls and young women. In 2013, a Tumblr blog called TheBunionPaper posted a satire article titled "Rich Girl in Dining Hall Can't Even." January 2014 marked another key moment for the proliferation of *I can't even*—and its status as a characteristically female figure of speech: the then-26-year-old singer Kacey Musgraves repeatedly said "I can't even" while accepting her Grammy Award for Best Country Album. The

awards show was broadcast on CBS and garnered an average of 28.5 million viewers over the three hours and 45 minutes of the ceremony (Faughnder 2014). Further confirmation of the association of *I can't even* to a young, female demographic comes from the now-viral meme "Why do teenage girls travel in odd numbered groups? Because they can't even," submitted to the image sharing site Imgur in April 2014.

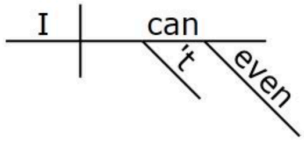
I Can't Even (2014)

1.1 Project Aims and Motivation

The aim of this project is to examine the relationship between the syntactic and pragmatic properties of *I can't even.* While the modal *can* and the adverb *even* normally require the presence of a lexical verb, users of *I can't even* pronounce it as a self-standing sentence. My thesis explores why this is possible, and to what effect. In other words, I investigate how the seemingly truncated syntax of *I can't even* influences the pragmatic effects and social perception of the construction.

My reasons for choosing this topic are two-fold. The first is that *I can't even* is an under-researched expression. There is little to no mention of it in linguistics publications despite an emerging interest in the study of Gen-Z and millennial language, particularly internet speech (McCulloch 2019; Dieu et al. 2024; Brownlow et al. 2024; Ugoala 2024).

Conversely, *I can't even* has been the subject of a number of articles and posts on popular media outlets since the 2010s, some of which briefly discuss its syntactic makeup. For instance, Michael Reid Roberts wrote a piece titled "The ABCs of 'I Can't Even'" (2015) for the now-defunct literary journal *The American Reader.* In his article, he provides a diagram (reproduced below) to show how the modal *can* lacks a lexical verb complement.



Roberts (2015)

Roberts dubs *can* as a "fluid modal verb that implies an ambiguous relationship to an unknown primary verb," which he posits to be something like *to handle, to deal,* or *to cope* (Roberts 2015).

In her article for Bustle, titled "'I Can't Even': A Linguistic Analysis," (2015) Lucia Peters takes Roberts' interpretation one step further. Building on Roberts' claim that a modal is "virtually meaningless" without a lexical verb complement, Peters argues that the modal *can* in *I can't even* must take *even* as its complement, meaning that in this case, *even* exceptionally acts like a verb.[1]

Texts like Roberts' and Peters' are a start, but they are, understandably, quite brief and lacking in scholarly references in order to remain appealing to a general audience with no background knowledge of linguistics.

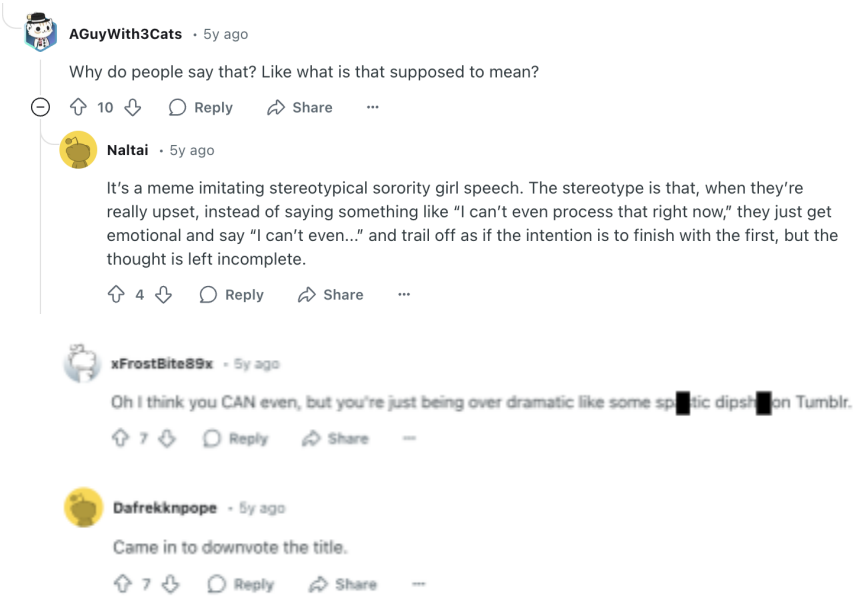
Hence, the primary goal of this paper is to fill the gap in the academic literature by a) providing an in-depth description of the syntactic distribution and flexibility of *I can't even*, b) proposing and evaluating multiple hypotheses for its syntactic derivation, and c) discussing the relationship between its syntactic structure and pragmatic properties.

My second goal is that, by carrying out a project that applies scholarly linguistic theoretical frameworks to *I can't even*, I will dispel the misconception that colloquial expressions created and used by younger generations (particularly young women)—and often popularized through the internet—are nonsensical and arbitrarily used, and should therefore not be taken seriously as instances of linguistic innovation. *I can't even* itself is no stranger to this type of controversy. As a case study, let us consider the reactions to a photo of a toddler surrounded by puppies posted on the Reddit thread r/aww in 2019. Nearly half of the 300 comments underneath this seemingly harmless image are actually rather disparaging (see the examples below). The crime? The photo was captioned, "I literally can't even…"

[1] We will see in later sections that the analysis of *even* as a lexical verb has significant pitfalls.

Reddit (2019)

Many redditors were far from thrilled at the incompleteness of this title, with user Rvideomodsmicropens condescendingly encouraging the person who captioned the photo to "try again and this time use your words." Other comments offer insights into the origin and meaning of *I can't even.* The user Naltai, for instance, explains that *I can't even* is an imitation of "stereotypical sorority girl speech," particularly their tendency to trail off when they get emotional. User xFrostBite89x, for their part, attributes *I can't even* to Tumblr aficionados (albeit in less benevolent terms).



Reddit (2019)

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Likewise, in 2014 Devin Largent published a scathing critique of *I can't even* ironically titled "I Can't With 'I Can't Even' Anymore" on the popular culture blog Thought Catalog. In his article, Largent ascribes *I can't even* to 18 to 25-year-old women, thereafter asserting that the phrase "makes zero sense and indicates maybe a complete sentence was just too tough [for them] to process." He suggests that the widespread acceptance of *I can't even* marks "rock bottom" for

the self-expression of many English speakers, who have fallen prey to "elocutive laziness." He then further defines the prototypical user of *I can't even* to "a fairly privileged girl obsessed with her own vapidity." Thus, Largent makes no secret of his disdain towards this construction—but also towards the young female demographic he believes is largely responsible for disseminating it.

Rebecca Cohen responded to Largent's post with an article of her own, called "In Defense of *I Can't Even*" (2014), published on Slate. Cohen refers to *I can't even* as "an efficient, Internet-inflected way of saying 'I can't even express how I'm feeling right now.'" She condemns many people's dismissal of *I can't even* as a sloppy shortcut, explaining that these critics have failed to recognize the phrase as a new manifestation of a well-known figure of speech—aposiopesis. This rhetorical device is defined as "a speaker's deliberate failure to complete a sentence," and "usually indicates speechless rage or exasperation" (*Aposiopesis* 2024). Cohen cites examples of aposiopesis from as early as the first century B.C., such as an exclamation by Neptune in the *Aeneid*: "How dare ye, ye winds, to mingle the heavens and the earth and raise such a tumult without my leave? You I will—but first I must quiet the waves." She adds that the *even* in *I can't even* aligns with a shift in the English language whereby this adverb is no longer used only to denote extreme or unlikely iterations of a general situation (e.g. *Even Susan ate the cake*), but also "purely for emphasis" of a lexical verb (e.g. *Why did she even eat that?* Or *What did she even mean?*). Cohen concludes that the advent of *I can't even* does not mean that English speakers' communication abilities are regressing, but simply that they are "doing more with less."

In this vein, I want to use frameworks within syntax and pragmatics to show that *I can't even* is not just an incorrect or incomplete adaptation of some other 'proper' English sentence. It is a self-standing linguistic phenomenon that obeys a set of systematic and complex rules in terms of both its structure and extralinguistic effects.

1.2 Roadmap

The rest of this paper can be broadly divided into two parts: the first (Sections 2-4) compares *I can't even* to better-researched syntactic phenomena and evaluates existing proposals for its derivation. In the second part (Sections 5-6), I offer my own syntactic analysis and discuss its connections to the pragmatic and sociolinguistic properties of *I can't even.* Section 2 provides an overview of the syntactic properties of *I can't even,* in light of which I conclude that it is not a fixed expression. Section 3 discusses how *I can't even* is a unique type of construction despite exhibiting certain syntactic or semantic similarities to idioms, snowclones, collocations, and 'special' English registers like Diary Subject Omission, Headlinese, and Recipe Object Drop. Section 4 examines and rejects three possible analyses of *I can't even*: (1) that *even* acts as a lexical verb, (2) that *can* acts as a lexical verb, and (3) that *I can't even* arises from VP ellipsis. Section 5 proposes a syntactic derivation of *I can't even* based on van Riemsdijk (2002), which posits the existence of silent lexical verbs that do not correspond exactly to any overt verb. Section 6 discusses how the silent syntactic elements of *I can't even* influence some of its

pragmatic properties, particularly its ability to generate high cognitive relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and reinforce both the speaker's and their listener's positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987). It also argues that the social stigma of *I can't even* as 'lazy' English is not inherently due to its unpronounced syntactic elements, but instead arises from its association with a teenage female speaker base. In Section 7 I summarize my findings and explain their significance for the discipline of linguistics and beyond.

2. What Can It Even Do? A Descriptive Analysis

As mentioned in the introduction, normally the modal *can* and the adverb *even* would be followed by a lexical verb. The absence of such a verb from *I can't even* makes the construction feel unfinished both syntactically and semantically, a feeling of incompleteness that becomes particularly salient when *I can't even* is written or pronounced as a full sentence of its own. *I can't even*? I can't even…what? Handle this? Deal? Cope? Say something?

The grammaticality of *I can't even* in spite of its missing verb becomes doubly unexpected when we consider that *even* is a focus particle. Focus particles are a class of words like *also, only, either,* or *too* that emphasize another element (a noun, adjective, verb, etc) in a given sentence. According to Karttunen & Peters (1979), a focus particle a) suggests the existence of a set of alternatives to the sentential element it is associated with, and then b) selects this particular element as its 'focus', excluding all the other alternatives. For instance, in the sentence *even Bill likes Mary,* the *even* suggests that a) other people besides Bill have feelings for Mary, and that b) of all these people, Bill is the least likely to have feelings for Mary (Karttunen & Peters 1979). Generally, focus particles cannot be stranded with VP ellipsis. This includes *even,* as shown below:

(3) *Sarah should [$_{VP}$ do the dishes], but I shouldn't **even** ~~[$_{vp}$ do the dishes].~~

(4) *Mary can [$_{VP}$ cook], but I can't **even** ~~[$_{vp}$ cook]~~.

However, contrary to examples (3) and (4), the *even* in *I can't even* does not seem to require a subsequent verb phrase in order for the whole sentence to be grammatical.

In order to arrive at some hypothesis explaining the grammaticality of *I can't even* for some speakers, we must first examine the syntactic distribution of *I can't even* in more detail. This will, in turn, enable us to compare *I can't even* to other English constructions with similar syntactic properties to it, whose better-researched structures will offer insights into a possible derivation for *I can't even* itself.

2.1 Syntactic Properties

Before comparing *I can't even* to specific phenomena, it is worth outlining some of its key syntactic properties. Most parts of *I can't even* can be modified from their baseline form in some way. A number of these possible modifications are outlined below.

To begin, *I can't even* can take an adverb, such as:

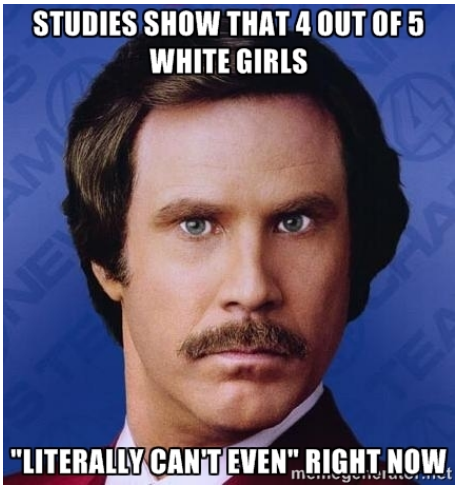
(5) I literally can't even.

(6) I actually can't even.

(7) I just can't even.

Impressionistically, *literally* is by far the most commonly used adverb with *I can't even.* The internet is rife with content featuring this construction. For instance, Snapchat's first original TV show is titled *Literally Can't Even*—unsurprisingly, it follows the social lives of two young women (Kosoff 2015). An episode of the animated series *#SquadGoals* is likewise titled "Literally Can't Even Right Now." A simple Google search also yields a plethora of memes and social media posts in which *I can't even* is modified with *literally,* such as the two shown below.

Dayton Mom Collective (2015)



Eventing Nation (2014)

This variant of *I can't even* is so popular that it has even infiltrated the interior design market—the wall decor company Sixtrees sells a 'Decorative Box Sign' painted with the sentence "Without coffee I literally can't even" (Sixtrees). Amazon also sells a desk plate that reads "I Literally Can't Even" (Amazon).

It is important to note that the adverbs accompanying *I can't even* are almost always speaker-oriented, i.e. they express the speaker's own attitude toward the proposition they are uttering. This behavior aligns with the restrictions on the types of adverbs occurring above the modal *can't* in general. The examples in (8) show that manner adverbs cannot go between the subject and *can't* both in general, and for *I can't even* specifically.

(8) a. *Mark tactfully can't speak.

b. *Mark efficiently can't work.

c. *I tactfully can't even.

d. *I efficiently can't even.

However, (8a) and (8b) become grammatical when the adverb is sentence-final, whereas (8c) and (8d) do not:

(9) a. Mark can't speak tactfully.

b. Mark can't work efficiently.

c. *I can't even tactfully.

d. *I can't even efficiently.

The most commonly used speaker-oriented adverbs with *I can't even* tend to be hyperbolic (such as *literally* or *actually*), or at least intensifying (like *seriously*, *really*). This is likely because these intensifying adverbs reinforce the exaggerated meaning of *I can't even* itself—that is, they underscore the overwhelming magnitude of the emotion that the speaker is attempting to convey. Some softer but still speaker-oriented adverbs are also acceptable, such as:

(10) a. I honestly can't even.

b. I lowkey can't even with Mary.

In combination with *I can't even* in particular, adverbs like *honestly* or *lowkey*[2] almost always convey a negative attitude. In other words, sentences (10a) and (10b) read as the speaker complaining about something or someone. An alternative interpretation where these sentences instead express the speaker's excitement is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to access.

I can't even is also compatible with the temporal adverb *right now*. However, synonymous alternatives like *currently* or *at the moment* are more marked.

(11) a. I can't even right now. My food is late again!

b. ?I currently can't even.

c. ?I can't even at the moment.

This difference in acceptability likely arises not from syntactic factors, but simply from a clash in registers. The discrepancy between the colloquiality of *I can't even* and the more formal register of *currently* and *at the moment* makes sentences like (11b) and (11c) sound far less natural than (11a).

One of the most common modifications to *I can't even* is the addition of a PP adjunct headed by *with.* The complement of *with* is most often a DP referring to a person or object, but it may also be a CP headed by *how*:

(12) a. I can't even with Jim.

b. I can't even with all these gifts. You're so sweet, thank you!

c. I can't even with how secretive you're being right now!

d. I can't even with how quiet this room is.

Unless there is some indication of the opposite like in (12b), the baseline reading of *I can't even with* __ sentences is negative. In other words, without additional context explicitly pointing to a positive emotion, sentences like (12a), (12c), and (12d) are interpreted as expressions of the speaker's frustration towards the person, thing, or situation evoked in the proposition.

As discussed in Section 1, it is also possible to remove the *even* while retaining the same meaning as *I can't even.* Indeed, per the most recent entry on Urban Dictionary, the sentence *I can't* refers to "when someone is so done with something (a comment, a person, etc.) they can't even finish a sentence" (Mohd 2018). Just like *I can't even, I can't* can be modified by an adverb:

(13) a. I literally can't.

b. I can't right now.

It can also be followed by a *with*-PP taking a DP or CP complement:

[2] *Lowkey* is a speaker-oriented adverb connoting discretion or secrecy. It was popularized 10 or so years ago.

(14) a. I can't with her.
b. I can't with this math homework!
c. I can't with how long this food is taking to arrive.

I can't even can also occur in an interrogative. The most acceptable interrogatives are *wh-*questions, where the *wh-* is extracted from some material following *I can't even*, such as:

(15) a. Who can't you even with?
b. What can't you even with?

It is my intuition that the examples in (15) are more acceptable when asked as clarifying questions in reference to some previous material in the conversation, i.e as echo questions. If, however, a speaker posed these questions unprompted, then they would be unacceptable.

Inverse questions like (16) below are much more marked, if not entirely ungrammatical:

(16) a. ?Can you even with Jaden after what he did today?
b. ??Can you even with that homework?

This is likely because the removal of the negation from *can,* coupled with the fronting of *can* before the subject are a significant departure from the baseline form *I can't even*. These syntactic changes make the conventionalized reading of *I can't even* much more difficult to access.

In some cases, the modal *can't* can be changed to the past tense. For instance:

(17) a. Yesterday I couldn't even with my sister.
b. That meeting we just had was so long, I couldn't even.
c. He surprised me with flowers and I just couldn't even!
d. When I got scammed for the second time in two months, I literally couldn't even.

The future tense, on the other hand, is unacceptable. But this likely stems from the fact that the future form of *can* is *will be able to* (as opposed to *will can*):

(18) a. *If Ava comes to the party tomorrow, I won't be able to even.
b. *I'll be so busy next week, I know I won't be able to even.

Much like the syntactic changes in (16), the substitution of *can* for *will be able to* makes it much harder to access the conventionalized meaning of *I can't even.*

Moreover, there are cases where the subject of *I can't even* can be modified:

(19) a. It takes a lot for me to hate someone, but **even I** can't even with Maya.
b. He proposed a week ago but, but **part of me** still can't even!
c. **My friend and I** can't even.
d. Me and Jaden were like, "**We** can't even with you anymore."

Notice, however, that all the modified subjects in the examples above still convey a first person (be it singular or plural) point of view. While the subject of *I can't even* can also become second or third person, such modifications are somewhat more marked, at least in a bare clause:

(20) a. ?Those girls can't even.
b. ?Mary literally can't even.
c. ?You just can't even.
d. ?You and Ava can't even.

But this markedness subsides when *I can't even* is in an embedded clause:

(21) a. I know you can't even with Alara right now.
b. My colleague says he can't even with the CEO's new policy.

The differences in acceptability across (19)-(21) are likely due to a semantic incompatibility between the meaning of *I can't even* and a non-first-person point of view. Indeed, since *I can't even* conveys a speaker's inability to express the full extent of their emotion, it is far less plausible for a speaker to assert that someone other than themselves *can't even*, as they have no direct way to gauge the magnitude of that person's emotion. The sentences in (21) are slightly better than those in (20) because the non-first-person subject *can't even* is embedded within a larger clause with a first-person subject—or at least a subject containing a first-person pronoun. The matrix subjects in (21a) and (21b) act as an overt acknowledgment of the counterintuitive semantics of *you/he can't even,* i.e. they by openly recognize the presence of an external observer rather than framing the sentence as a direct assertion of another person's inner turmoil. Hence, if the subjects of (21a) and (21b) were not in the first person, the sentences would become just as marked as those in (20):

(22) a. ?You know you can't even with Alara right now.
b. ?Her colleague says he can't even with the CEO's new policy.

3. What Even is It? A Comparative Analysis

In the previous section, we saw that *I can't even* can undergo various. It can take additional speaker-oriented or temporal adverbs, change to the past tense, take a *with*-PP complement, take subjects other than *I* (including non-first-person ones), be embedded in a larger clause, and occur both in declaratives and interrogatives.

We now have a better grasp on some of the ways in which *I can't even* behaves syntactically, but still lack any explanation for said behaviors. To gain some clarity in this regard, I will now consider *I can't even* in relation to other English constructions with similar syntactic and semantic characteristics.

In this section I will show that, while it seems to share properties with idioms, collocations, snowclones, and various 'truncated' registers, *I can't even* cannot be neatly categorized as any of these other phenomena. However, these comparisons still bring to light syntactic and semantic aspects of *I can't even* that will be helpful in developing a derivation for the construction.

3.1 Is *I Can't Even* an Idiom?

Idioms have often been defined as expressions whose meaning cannot be fully understood from the sum of their parts, i.e. expressions that are not entirely compositional (Nunberg 1994 et al., among many others). The following idiom is often used in the literature to illustrate this property:

(23) Spill the beans.

The meaning of *spill the beans*—'to reveal information'—does not emerge directly from any of the individual words that make up the phrase. Granted, there seems to be a correspondence between the verbs *spill* and *reveal,* and the nouns *beans* and *information,* but this correspondence has almost entirely to do with their grammatical categories. There is perhaps a tenuous semantic link between *spill* (the sudden spreading of some physical substance) and *reveal,* and no apparent connection between *beans* (a legume) and *information*. In other words, we have very little way of deriving the idiomatic meaning of *spill the beans* from the literal meanings of *spill* + *the* + *beans*.

Even less straightforward is the idiom *kick the bucket,* which means 'to die.' Like the previous example, no part of *kick* + *the* + *bucket* conveys the idea of dying. And in this case, even the 1-1 grammatical correspondence between the syntactic structure and the figurative meaning of the expression is absent. 'To die' is an intransitive verb, whereas the expression *kick the bucket* is composed of both a transitive verb *kick* and its DP object *the bucket.*

There are a couple of reasons why we might consider categorizing *I can't even* as an idiom. The first is to do with the semantic properties of *I can't even*. Like idioms, *I can't even* seems to convey a fixed meaning that is not entirely accessible from its individual lexical components. The sum of *I* + *can't* + *even* does not quite capture the overall meaning of *I can't even* (although it comes much closer to doing so than *spill* + *the* + *beans* for 'to reveal information,' for instance). As discussed previously, *I can't even* translates to something like *I'm so* [*frustrated, excited, surprised,* etc] *that I'm unable to even put my emotion into words.* Hence, the *I* of *I can't even* straightforwardly refers to the speaker, *can't* conveys the speaker's inability, and *even* conveys the high improbability of some event occurring (Karttunen & Peters 1979). This decomposition leaves out two key aspects of the overall meaning of *I can't even*. The first is the particular event that *can't* and *even* are referring to. In other words, taken alone, neither *I, can't,* nor *even* tells us that what the speaker cannot do is *put their emotion into words*. The second missing aspect is the particular emotion that the speaker is referring to. None of the individual lexical components of *I can't even* actually tell us whether the speaker's extreme emotion is excitement, frustration, surprise, etc.

Another similarity between *I can't even* and idioms is its behavior with regards to lexical flexibility. It has been frequently attested that many idioms, despite being considered mostly 'fixed' or conventionalized expressions, accept the insertion of additional lexical items or the substitution of one of their lexical components without compromising the figurative meaning of the phrase. For instance, the idioms *pop the question* ('to propose') and *on thin ice* ('in a risky situation') can take additional adjectives, such as:

(24) a. Are you ready to pop the **big** question?
b. Ezana is on **razor-**thin ice with the administration.

Here, the extra adjectives intensify the non-literal interpretation of the expression rather than weakening it. In (24a), *big* underscores the importance and excitement associated with a marriage proposal; in (24b), *razor-* underscores just how close Ezana is to facing adverse consequences from the administration. Likewise, we already saw in Section 2 that *I can't even,*

also allows the insertion of adverbs such as *literally, actually, seriously, honestly,* etc that intensify the aposiopetic meaning of the expression.

As for lexical substitution, idioms like *zip your lips* ('don't speak') allow the substitution of certain elements (in this case, the verb *zip*) without compromising the overall, non-literal meaning:

(25) a. **Button** your lips (Gibbs et al. 1989)
b. **Fasten** your lips (Gibbs et al. 1989)

And likewise, there are attested albeit rare examples of the *can't* in *I can't even* getting substituted for some synonymous verbal constituent while preserving its holistic meaning:

(26) a. I **am unable to** even. (Medium.com, 2014)
b. I **have lost my ability to** even. (AZ Quotes, n.d.)

Hence, *I can't even* resembles the idioms in (24) and (25) in that it, too, allows the insertion or substitution of new lexical items despite being a mostly 'fixed' or conventionalized expression whose meaning does not seem entirely compositional.

Given these syntactic and semantic properties, perhaps *I can't even* might fall under a class of idioms that Gibbs et al. (1989) refer to as "normally decomposable idioms"—such as the ones cited above in (24-25), where each constituent makes a unique and clear contribution to the idiom's holistic meaning. However, there are a few issues with this hypothesis. The first is to do with constraints on the lexical flexibility of *I can't even.* The examples of lexical substitution within *I can't even* in (26) are much more marked than the substitutions for the idiom in (25), and serve an ulterior purpose that those in (25) do not. Indeed, the modifications in (26) are exceptional cases where the speaker manipulates *I can't even* beyond its normal flexibility threshold in order showcase their own creativity and humor[3]. In other words, the speaker knows that *I have lost my ability to even* normally lacks the conventionalized, aposiopetic meaning of *I can't even*—but they assume that the listener will recognize this rule-breaking substitution of *can't* with *have lost my ability to* as a choice made intentionally for comedic effect. Conversely, substitutions like *button* instead of *zip* in the idiom *zip your lips* completely lack this subversive dimension.

The second issue with categorizing *I can't even* as an idiom also has to do with its semantic composition. Yes, we saw earlier that both *I can't even* and idioms have a holistic meaning that cannot be accessed straightforwardly from the sum of their parts. However, the apparent non-compositionality of *I can't even* is of a different nature from the non-compositionality of an idiom. Idioms are often ascribed the label of non-compositional (at least partly) due to the non-literal meaning of the overall expression or its individual elements. Briefly revisiting earlier examples for clarity: *zip your lips* does not mean that the listener should literally fasten their lips with a zipper—it is just an order to stop talking. *Spill the beans* does not mean that the listener should literally dump out a container of beans—it is an order to share information. The term *beans* never means '*information*' outside of this specific metaphorical expression.

[3] See Section 6 for a more detailed discussion of these examples.

On the other hand, there is nothing non-literal about the interpretation of *I can't even.* Earlier in this section we saw that the holistic meaning of *I can't even* paraphrases to something like *I can't even verbalize how* [*frustrated/excited/surprised*] *I'm feeling.* Hence, the individual lexical components *I, can't,* and *even* each map onto an individual semantic component of the expression. In other words, these lexical items each have an entirely literal interpretation within the holistic meaning of *I can't even*—unlike how *zip* and *beans* acquire a metaphorical interpretation that is unique to the holistic context of *zip your lips* and *spill the beans,* respectively. The rest of the meaning of *I can't even*—i.e. …*verbalize* [*how frustrated/excited/surprised*] *I'm feeling*—must therefore arise from some material after *even* that is unspoken but still present in the underlying structure of the expression.

Another semantic difference between *I can't even* and idioms comes to light if we take a closer look at the unspoken material in *I can't even*—particularly the *frustrated/excited/surprised* part. I intentionally listed several options for this component of the paraphrase to illustrate how the emotion conveyed by *I can't even* varies based on context. Consider the minimal pair below:

(27) a. Wow, Isaiah is so smart, I can't even!
b. Oh my God, Isaiah is so stupid, I can't even!

In (27a), *I can't even* has a strong positive affect, conveying the speaker's excitement and admiration at Isaiah's intelligence. On the other hand, in (27b) *I can't even* has a strong negative affect, conveying the speaker's frustration and disdain at Isaiah's stupidity. Hence, part of the meaning of *I can't even* is context-dependent—contrary to idioms, whose meanings are not at all influenced by the circumstances in which they are uttered (Gibbs et al., 1989).

So, is *I can't even* an idiom? It does not seem like it. While idioms are at least partly non-literal and non-compositional, *I can't even* might be better described as literal and compositional, owing to some unspoken material after *even* that carries additional, context-dependent meaning.

3.2 Is *I Can't Even* a Collocation?

Having labeled *I can't even* as literal and compositional, we might be tempted to categorize it as another type of construction called a collocation, i.e. a combination of words that co-occurs often enough to be considered a fixed expression. Per Bruening (2018), collocations follow the same syntactic constraints as idioms, forming the joint category of 'conventionalized expressions.' The crucial difference between collocations and idioms is that the former have entirely literal meanings, while the latter do not. The examples in (28) are edge cases but still collocations, while those in (29) classify as idioms.

(28) a. Get a hint
b. Answer to X
c. Draw attention to X (Bruening 2018)
d. Stand trial for X (Bruening 2018)

(29) a. Miss the train
b. Keep X posted (Bruening 2018)

The meanings of *draw* and *stand* in (28c) and (28d) are considered literal because they are within the normal semantic range of these verbs. In other words, the meaning of *draw* as 'attract' is not specific to the phrase *draw attention to X*—we also see it in expressions like *draw X's gaze, X is drawn to Y,* etc. Likewise, the use of *stand* in (28d) also occurs in expressions like *stand witness to X* or *stand as a testament to X.* Conversely, the meaning of *the train* as 'an opportunity' in (29a) is non-literal in that it does not occur in any context other than the unique construction *miss the train.* The same goes for *posted* as meaning 'informed' in (29b).

Might we then consider *I can't even* a collocation rather than an idiom? The answer is still no. Let us take a closer look at the empirical study and subsequent analysis in Bruening (2018) for a fuller explanation.

Bruening argues that all conventionalized expressions are an XP constituent, which can contain four types of elements: functional items, lexically specified phrases, members of a binding pair, and "open slots" (i.e. all the X's in the examples above, which can be a NP, CP, PP, or VP). One type of pattern that a conventionalized expression can follow, according to Bruening, is *F V (NP P) X,* such as the following collocations[4]:

(30) a. NEG bet on X, has had enough of X, had better X, might want to X, would do well to X, would rather X (Bruening 2018)

b. can't afford X, can't do any harm, can't help X-ing, can't stand X, couldn't/don't give X (where X is a minimizer) (Bruening 2018)

Initially, this type of structure looks like it could produce *I can't even* since it allows for negation and functional elements accompanied by some unspecified, "open-slot" verb X. However, these open slots always end up getting filled by one particular, overt verb (like *had better listen*), whereas the contents of the presumed 'open slot' after *I can't even* always remain unspecified and unspoken. Moreover, none of the examples above contain a subject, which is a crucial component of *I can't even,* given that this expression is typically uttered as a full declarative sentence.

Bruening does give examples of collocations taking the form of full clauses, such as:

(31) a. duty calls, nature calls, the prodigal son returns, X's heart is in the right place, there's more to X than meets the eye, you know (Bruening 2018)

b. X's gorge rises, X's heart sinks, X's jaw drops, X's mouth waters (Bruening 2018)

But these do not have quite the same structure as *I can't even,* as they all contain a fixed lexical verb rather than just a modal like *can*. Further, the examples in (31b) have open-slot subjects, whereas the possible modifications to the subject of *I can't even* are somewhat more restricted to a first-person point of view. (As seen in Section 2, the cases where *I can't even* takes a second or third-person subject are more marked.) In order for *I can't even* to be a collocation per Bruening (2018), there would have to be some empirically attested pattern NP F NEG Adv, which is not not the case.[5]

[4] Here, F refers to functional elements like auxiliaries and modals.

[5] Bruening proposes that the non-attested syntactic patterns for conventionalized expressions are not attested due to a constraint that prevents open slots from having a "hierarchically higher" case competitor (Marantz 1991). See the full paper for more details.

3.3 Is *I Can't Even* a Snowclone?

We saw earlier that *I can't even* cannot be considered a prototypical idiom owing to differences in how the meanings of these two phenomena are constructed: while prototypical idioms are at least partly non-compositional, *I can't even* is entirely literal and compositional thanks to the likely presence of some unspoken but still meaningful verbal material. However, as discussed in much of the literature cited in Section 3.1, the term *idiom* encompasses many subcategories that vary significantly in their syntactic and semantic properties. One phenomenon that has historically been categorized as a type of idiom—though recent literature argues against this (Hartmann and Ungerer 2023, Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b)—is the snowclone.

A snowclone is a customizable sentence template for the production of particular expressions. Classic examples include *X is the new Y* and *All roads lead to X,* where the X and Y can be filled by any term of the speaker's choosing, such as:

(32) a. Orange is the new black.

b.Tuesday is the new Monday, but Saturday is definitely not the new Friday. (Kckrs.com, Corpus of Global Web-Based English)

c. All roads lead to Texas.

d. All roads lead to the shopping mall and all the malls look the same. (Theregister.co.uk, Corpus of Global Web-Based English)

While these constructions were initially deemed as a "customizable…quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers" (Pullum 2003), later scholarly work such as Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017b), claims that snowclones should be considered as a distinct construction with particular formal and semantic traits. Others, like Hill (2018) and Bergs (2019) have explored how snowclones are a form of creative lexical transgression that exploits the tension between linguistic flexibility and rigidity.

Hartmann and Ungerer (2023) examined many of the previous definitions of snowclones and observations about their syntactic and semantic properties, noting their common characteristics. They combined these commonalities to arrive at a three-part operational definition for snowclones. The first criterion is that snowclones must be based on a "lexically fixed source construction." The second is that they must be partially productive, meaning that they are made up of some elements that remain fixed and others that can be substituted (with some restrictions). The third is that they have "extravagant" formal or functional aspects, i.e. they employ particularly "imaginative and vivid" language in order to stand out in a speaker's discourse.

Let us take *all roads lead to X* as an example. The fixed lexical source of this snowclone is *all roads lead to Rome,* which originated as a medieval Latin proverb. Its earliest written record is in the *Liber Parabolarum* (*Book of Proverbs*), written in 1175 by the French poet and theologian Alain de Lille (Leavitt 2011). The second criterion, partial productivity, is satisfied

since *all roads lead to* remains fixed, while the destination *Rome* can be substituted. The terms replacing *Rome* are typically limited to other locations, either specific and well-known ones (major cities, famous landmarks) or general and mundane ones (the grocery store, the mall, and so on). *All roads lead to X* also fulfills the third criterion relating to extravagant and imaginative use of language, as this expression conveys the hyperbolic and often satirical meaning that *X* is the center of the universe, a crucial destination that one will inevitably reach no matter what path they take. This becomes particularly amusing when the *X* becomes something markedly non-poetic (think McDonald's, the liquor store, etc).

By now it should already be obvious that *I can't even* cannot be considered a snowclone by Hartmann and Ungerer's definition. In terms of the first criterion, *I can't even* definitely has a fixed lexical origin: *I can't,* as we saw in Section 1. The issue is that this 'lexical origin' is far too fixed compared to that of a prototypical snowclone. In other words, in light of the descriptive analysis in Section 2.1, it is a stretch to say that *I can't even* is partially productive per Hartmann and Ungerer's second criterion. *Even* certainly cannot be substituted by another adverb or focus particle. *Can't* cannot be replaced by a different modal*,* unless we count the infrequent and marked cases where its tense changes—but that is merely an inflectional change rather than a full lexical substitution. Similarly, the cases where *I* can be replaced are few and become more marked when they are not first-person. As for Hartmann and Ungerer's third criterion of formal or functional extravagance, *I can't even* actually seems to fit the bill, given its exaggerated, aposiopetic meaning. Hence, *I can't even* and snowclones are alike in that they both convey a kind of metalinguistic awareness—i.e.an intentional deviation from some 'standard' expression or grammatical structure for the sake of dramatic flair. Still, it is safe to say that *I can't even* does not fully display the characteristics of a snowclone.

But what if we applied Hartmann and Ungerer's definition to *I can't even with X*? This seems to solve many of the issues that arose with *I can't even* on its own, particularly those regarding partial productivity. Indeed, in this case, *I can't with* or *I can't even with* would be the fixed part of the snowclone, while the subject of *with*—the *X*—would be the productive part. This *X* could be substituted with a variety of lexical items: people, things, or situations evoking some strong emotion in the speaker. Turning to the fixed lexical origin, perhaps we could argue that the original form of *I can't even with X* is *I can't even with* [a general pronoun, e.g. *you, her,* or *this*]. This does not pinpoint the fixed lexical source of *I can't even with X* to a single *X*, but it still narrows it down to a fairly specific type of *X*—arguably specific enough to fulfill Hartmann and Ungerer's first criterion. Indeed, sometimes Hartmann and Ungerer themselves cite a whole category of *X*s rather than one particular word as the fixed lexical source of a snowclone. For instance, they broadly attribute the fixed origin of *X is the new Y* to fashion slogans in the 1970s that used various combinations of "color terms" like *pink is the new black*. Lastly, just like *I can't even* on its own, *I can't even with X* also conveys a hyperbolic meaning that appears to align with the third criterion of extravagance.

On these grounds, then, *I can't even with X* seems rather well-aligned with the operational definition of a snowclone. However, if we look more closely at Hartmann and Ungerer's third

criterion, we will see that neither *I can't even* nor *I can't even with X* fully comply with it. While these constructions do satisfy the "extravagant" component through their aposiopetic meaning, we must also take into consideration the idea that snowclones are meant to have imaginative language that stands out in the speaker's discourse and therefore showcases their creativity or cleverness. This is what differentiates *I can't even* (*with X*) from snowclones like *all roads lead to X.* For the latter, the speaker seeks to intentionally subvert some fixed, canonical expression by replacing parts of it with new lexical items. In other words, using a snowclone has two levels of intended significance: the first is simply the meaning of the expression itself, but the second is an implicit signal to the interlocutor that the speaker is witty and imaginative, able to play with language for comedic or at least emphatic purposes. *I can't even with X*, on the other hand, operates only on the first level. When a speaker says *I can't even with X*, their primary intent is to express their inability to verbalize an extreme emotion regarding some X. We will see more evidence for this in section 6.3, which discusses exceptional cases where speakers also operate on the second level, purposely manipulating *I can't even* to show off their wit and linguistic creativity.

Thus, while it may be tempting to classify *I can't even with X* as a snowclone given its hyperbolic meaning and partial productivity, ultimately it seems that they are two different phenomena. The limitations of this hypothesis are even more salient with *I can't even* alone, whose acceptable lexical substitutions are far too constrained for the construction to be considered partially productive. Hence, *I can't even* eludes categorization as any of the existing 'nonstandard' English phenomena we have looked at so far.

3.4 Is it Truncation?

As we saw in the introduction, the anomaly of *I can't even* being grammatical for some speakers lies in the fact that the adverb *even* should require the presence of a lexical verb, which in this case is missing. In this section, we will compare *I can't even* with other 'special' registers of English that are also characterized by a missing element of some kind: Diary Subject Omission, Headlinese, and Object Drop. While it will quickly become apparent that *I can't even* cannot be categorized as any of these registers, the existing literature on their respective syntactic structures provides insight into key properties of *I can't even* itself, particularly with regards to the recoverability of the verbal material that seems to be missing after *even*.

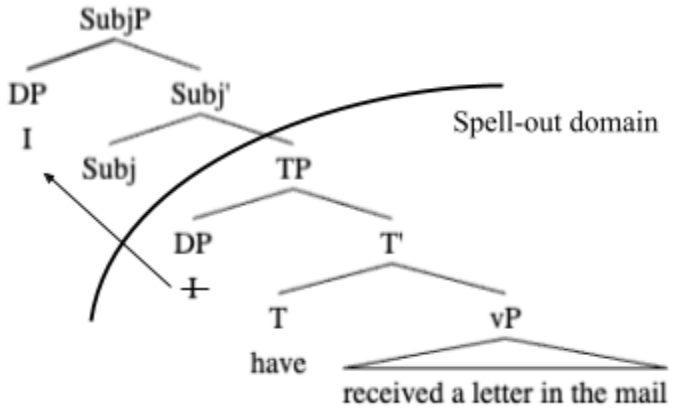
3.4.1 Diary Subject Omission

Diary Subject Omission, henceforth DSO, is a variant of written English where the first person singular subject *I* is absent. A few examples are in (31) below, with the location of each missing subject marked by an underscore.

(33) a. __Went to the library yesterday.
b. __Argued with Maya but now __ am considering apologizing.
c. __Am going to watch *Jaws* in theaters tomorrow but __ think it'll be bad.

d. __Thought I lost my phone.

The literature on DSO has explained this phenomenon based on both the contextual recoverability and the particular syntactic position of the omitted subject. Given that the diary register is by definition written in the first person, then it should always be possible to reconstruct the missing subject as the pronoun *I.* Regarding syntactic restrictions on DSO, Haegeman (1997) and Cardinaletti (1997, 2004) among others have found that subjects can only be dropped in root clauses, and that dropped subjects cannot be preceded by any constituent other than a fronted adjunct. Haegeman (2013) explains these constraints with a proposal based on Rizzi (1997), taking into account the notion of Phase Theory (Chomsky 2001). She argues that in the diary register, the subject splits from the TP, moving to the specifier of a higher projection—SubjP—with an empty Subj head. In the diary register, SubjP is the highest projection and therefore constitutes the Root Phase. Being the complement of SubjP, the TP marks the boundary of the spell-out domain: everything inside the TP gets spelled out (i.e. pronounced), while everything above it does not. Hence, an auxiliary in T will still be pronounced, while the subject *I* in SpecSubjP will not.



Based on example sentence (55) in Haegeman (2013)

Based on this analysis, a key difference between DSO and *I can't even* seems to be the following: while both phenomena seem to be composed by an overtly pronounced part and an unpronounced one (the *I* in DSO and a verb after *even* in *I can't even*), the overtly pronounced part of a DSO sentence is a constituent (a TP), whereas that of *I can't even* ("I can't even") is definitely not. Moreover, a Phase Theory analysis would not account for the phonetic truncation of a verb after *even* because this syntactic position clearly falls within the spell-out domain of the sentence. Indeed, the lowest phase boundary is the vP per Chomsky (2001), which is still one layer above the VP projection that would contain the assumed silent verb after *even.*

3.4.2 Headlinese and Object Drop

Headlinese, a term describing the clipped register of newspaper headlines, has historically been considered an attempt to satisfy "the primordial need to fit as much information in as little space as possible" (Moncomble 2018). As such, Headlinese is characterized by the omission of

function words such as copula *be,* auxiliaries*,* and determiners. Two examples, accompanied by their 'standard' paraphrases, are below:

(34) a. Steve Mensch, __ Tyler Perry Studios president, __ killed in __ Florida plane crash (The Guardian, 12/8/2024)

b. Steve Mensch, **the** Tyler Perry Studios president, **has been** killed in **a** Florida plane crash

(35) a. __ Sister of __ murdered mom of two demands background checks for online dating after __ boyfriend's dark past __ uncovered (New York Post, 12/8/2024)

b. **The** sister of **a** murdered mom of two demands background checks for online dating after **her [sister's]** boyfriend's dark past **was** uncovered

In Headlinese, the dropped function words are easily recoverable based on their syntactic distributions. For instance, the omitted word before *Tyler Perry Studios president* in (34a) can be reconstructed as a singular article based on its position directly before a singular noun phrase, and particularly as the definite *the* owing to the co-reference between *president* and a specific person, *Steve Mensch.*

Object Drop, for its part, refers to the phenomenon whereby a direct object gets omitted in instructional contexts such as recipes or assembly manuals. A few examples are given below, with the position of the missing object marked by an underscore.

(36) a. Incorporate __ into dry ingredients and stir until smooth.

b. Bake __ for 30 minutes.

c. Throw __ away after using.

Similarly to DSO and Headlinese, the dropped object in these instructional registers is always recoverable from the surrounding context. However, unlike for the previous two registers, in this case the omitted object must have an overt antecedent earlier in the text, such as:

(37) a. Beat **the eggs**. Incorporate **[the eggs]** into dry ingredients and stir until smooth.

b. Pour **the batter** into a baking dish. Bake **[the batter]** for 30 minutes.

c. Put on protective equipment to handle toxic substances. Throw **[the protective equipment]** away after using.

These dropped objects are only in the third person and cannot be expletives (e.g. the *it* in *she made it obvious that she was mad*). Weir (2017) analyzes Object Drop as the combination of some null article $Ø_D$ and "an elided or otherwise silent" noun phrase. Crucially, the article in question is not merely an elided *a* or *the,* but a different lexical item altogether—one that is inherently phonologically null.

I can't even is clearly not an example of DSO, Object Drop, or Headlinese, since the 'truncated' element in this case—unlike for the other registers—seems to be a lexical VP. However, the comparison between *I can't even* and these three phenomena brings to light an important characteristic of the former: the unrecoverability of its truncated element.

Indeed, in DSO, RWR, and Headlinese, the specific subject, object, or function word being omitted is fully recoverable through its syntactic distribution and/or the presence of a lexical antecedent. On the other hand, the distribution of the element 'omitted' from *I can't even* tells us only that this element must be a verbal constituent—not which specific verb it is. Of course, the surrounding semantic context (especially if a *with*-PP adjunct is present) gives us a strong intuition that this missing verb has to do with self-expression, self-control, and reactivity. But this still leaves us with quite a few options: anything along the lines of *cope, manage, react, deal, respond, act, speak,* and so forth is fair game.

Thus, we cannot analyze *I can't even* as having a 'truncated' but recoverable VP in the same way that DSO, Headlinese, and Object Drop have recoverable lexical or functional items. Instead, perhaps Weir's (2017) discussion of null articles in Object Drop could extend to *I can't even.* In other words, we might posit a silent element that is not an overt lexical verb that underwent elision, but one that is inherently phonologically null. The fact that this verb never reaches the Phonetic Form level, coupled with its status as a full lexical verb (i.e. a word with many possible synonyms, unlike function words) would explain the impossibility of reconstructing exactly what it is.

In the next section, I will evaluate several possible syntactic derivations for *I can't even,* before proposing a new one in Section 5 that both encompasses this hypothesized null verb and better accounts for many of the syntactic and semantic properties of *I can't even* discussed thus far.

4. How Does It Even Work? Assessing Three Syntactic Analyses

As discussed in Section 1, the most common explanation for the syntactic and semantic properties of *I can't even* is that some part of its structure carries the role of a lexical verb to make up for the apparent lack of a VP. In this section, I evaluate three possible syntactic derivations for *I can't even,* each of which accounts for this 'missing' verb in a different way.

4.1 Is *Even* a verb?

We saw in Section 2 that *I can't even* can be modified by certain adverbial and PP adjuncts without changing the aposiopetic meaning of the expression. On the other hand, *I can't even* cannot take a VP. The most frequently given hypothesis for the incompatibility of *I can't even* with a subsequent VP is that the *even* in *I can't even* functions as a lexical verb itself (Zimmer et al., 2015). In this section, however, I will show why such an analysis cannot be the case.

Before discussing the hypothesis that *even* itself acts as a verb, I want to show more clearly that *I can't even* does not in fact license VPs, since this property is not immediately obvious. Indeed, at first glance, VPs like the ones below appear to be perfectly compatible with *I can't even*:

(38) a. #I can't even [$_{VP}$ deal with this problem set right now]!
b. #I can't even [$_{VP}$ handle the situation with my aunt].

The issue with (38) is that, while these sentences are technically grammatical, they do not quite express the same meaning as *I can't even.* This nuance does not emerge clearly from (38) because the lexical verbs in (38a) and (38b) have similar meanings as the aposiopetic interpretation of *I can't even*. In other words, (38a) and (38b) are practically synonymous with the *I can't even with something/someone* sentences (39a) and (39b), respectively:

(39) a. I can't even with this problem set right now!
b. I can't even with the situation with my aunt.

But the semantic infelicity of *I can't even* VP with relation to *I can't even* becomes apparent when the meaning of the added VP is clearly unrelated to the aposiopetic meaning of *I can't even*, such as those in (40) below.

(40) a. I can't even focus on this problem set right now!
b. I can't even get along with my aunt.

(40a) and (40b) might be paraphrased as (41a) and (41b), respectively:

(41) a. I can't do something as simple as focusing on this problem set right now!
b. I can't do something as simple as getting along with my aunt.

Conversely, (39a) and (39b) can be paraphrased as (42a) and (42b) below, respectively:

(42) a. I can't put into words how frustrated I am with this problem set right now!
b. I can't put into words how frustrating the situation with my aunt is.

Thus, the semantic differences between (41a) and (42a), and (41b) and (42b), show that *I can't even* does not actually license a VP—it just sometimes appears to do so because *I can't even* + VP is a perfectly grammatical construction in English and, depending on the meaning of the verb head, it can convey a nearly identical meaning as *I can't even with* [*something/someone*].

So, if *I can't even* does not license VPs, does this mean that *even* itself is a verb? We will see in 4.1.1 that the answer is no.

4.1.1 *Even* and Verbal Morphology

The first indication that *even* is not acting as a lexical verb in *I can't even* is that it cannot take any verbal morphology. Consider the obvious:

(43) a. *I evened.
b. *I was evening.

One could argue that the examples in (30) are not compelling enough because they do not contain negation, unlike *I can't even.* But the ungrammaticality persists even when a negative auxiliary or modal is present:

(44) a. *I can't be evening.
b. *I'm not evening.
c. *I wasn't evening.
d. *I couldn't have evened.
e. *I haven't evened.

The second strike against the hypothesis that *even* acts as a verb is that *even* cannot be modified by an adverb, which is normally a key property of lexical verbs. Consider the following:

(45) a. *I can't literally even.
b. *I can't honestly even.
c. *I can't actually even.

We already established in Section 2.1 that all three adverbs in (32)—*literally, honestly,* and *actually*—can co-occur with *I can't even*. However, in 2.1, these adverbs were all located before the modal *can,* while in (32) the adverbs are located after *can't* and directly before *even,* meaning that they are supposed to be modifying *even* itself rather than *can.* Therefore, the ungrammaticality of (32) shows that *even* itself cannot be modified by an adverb, and consequently should not be considered a lexical verb.

4.2 Is *Can* A Lexical Verb?

The conclusion of 4.1 may lead us to hypothesize that the modal *can* is functioning as a full verb, taking *even* as its complement. However, if this were the case, *even* would have to occur before *can't* rather than after it, like it does with other lexical verbs:

(46) a. I sing, I dance, and I even juggle!
b. *I sing, I dance, and I juggle even!
c. I even helped with her homework.
d. *I helped with her homework even.

In contrast to (46), (47) shows that it is unacceptable for *even* to occur before *can't* in *I can't even*:

(47) a. *I even can't with Ava.
b. *I can't with Ava even.

Moreover, quite straightforwardly, *can* cannot take another auxiliary, which it should be able to do if it was functioning like a lexical verb in *I can't even*:

(48) a. *I don't can even.
b. *I should can't even.
c. *I will can even.

Thus, *can* must not be a lexical verb in *I can't even.*

4.3 Is *I Can't Even* VP Ellipsis?

We have a strong intuition that some element of *I can't even* carries the syntactic and semantic functions of a lexical verb. However, Sections 4.1 and 4.2 show that neither *even* nor *can* exhibits the properties expected of it if it was indeed acting as a lexical verb. Hence, we might consider the possibility that the grammaticality of *I can't even* arises from VP ellipsis, where a verb phrase can go unpronounced the second time it appears in the discourse, such as:

(49) a. Molly didn't [$_{VP}$ eat the asparagus], so I shouldn't have to [$_{VP}$ ~~eat the asparagus~~].

b. Maya is [$_{VP}$ bringing snacks tomorrow], but I am [$_{VP}$ ~~bringing snacks tomorrow~~], too.

c. Raffaella can't [$_{VP}$ cook] , and I can't [$_{VP}$ ~~cook~~], either.

d. I tell people I can [$_{VP}$ sing], but I can't really [$_{VP}$ ~~sing~~].

Notice how the second clauses in (49c) and (49d) above—*I can't either* and *I can't really*—seem to be constructed similarly to *I can't even,* owing to the presence of a negative modal followed directly by a functional element. (49d) is particularly compelling because its structure appears to replicate that of *I can't even* almost entirely. Just like *I can't even,* (49d) consists of a subject *I* + negative modal *can't* + adverb, where the modal and the adverb modify a lexical verb. Perhaps, then, there is a lexical verb after *even* that undergoes ellipsis to produce the surface form *I can't even* ~~[*verb*]~~, much like *I can't even* ~~*sing*~~.

But this hypothesis, too, runs into a significant problem. In order for VP ellipsis to occur, the verb phrase being erased must have an overt antecedent earlier in the discourse (Johnson 2001). However, this is not the case for *I can't even*. Let us look back to (40a) and (40d) as examples, reproduced below for convenience:

(50) a. Molly didn't eat the asparagus, so I shouldn't have to ~~eat the asparagus~~.

b. #Molly didn't eat the asparagus, so I shouldn't have to ~~cook it for her again~~.

The sentence is only grammatical when we assume that what the speaker should not have to do is eat the asparagus. As illustrated by the infelicity of (50b), the sentence cannot be interpreted as containing a VP in the second clause that is different from the one in the first clause (*eat the asparagus*) (Johnson 2001).

I can't even, for its part, is not subject to this constraint. This should already be obvious from the many cases we have seen where *I can't even* is pronounced as a self-standing sentence, such as *I literally can't even with her.* Seeing as there is no lexical verb anywhere in the sentence, the presence of an overt antecedent has nothing to do with the grammaticality of *I can't even.*

Hence, the silent verbal element must be intrinsic to the syntax of *I can't even* rather the copy of some other VP occurring earlier in the discourse. The following section proposes a hypothesis that accounts for this.

5. *I Can't Even* WHAT? A Quiet Verb Analysis

As mentioned on many occasions already, the most plausible explanation for the syntactic and semantic properties of *I can't even* is that some part of it functions as a lexical verb. In Section 4, we raised the question of which part of *I can't even* carries this role. The conclusion was that the verb-like aspect of *I can't even* is not contained within any of its overt lexical items, nor is it a silent copy of an overt VP from the preceding discourse. Rather, as posited at the end of Section 3, it likely takes the form of a silent element somewhere in the underlying syntax of the construction itself.

5.1 My Proposal: I Can't Even COPE

In light of these findings, I propose that after the *even* in *I can't even,* there is an additional VP headed by a silent verb COPE. A number of silent verb analyses have already been proposed in both English (Kayne 2005, 2016) and other languages (Tang 2001 for Chinese, Marušič & Žaucer 2006 for Slovenian, among others). Van Riemsdijk (2002, 2012) posits the existence of silent lexical verbs to explain why, in all Germanic languages but English, modals can have non-verbal complements like:

(1) a. Stoute kinderen mogen geen snoepje *Dutch*
naughty children may no candy
Naughty children can't have candies

b. Jan wil dood
John wants dead
John wants to die

c. Die doos kan naar de zolder
that box can to the attic
That box can be put in the attic

(van Riemsdijk 2002: 144)

Van Riemsdijk proposes two possible ways to account for these types of sentences: either modals should be considered full lexical verbs, or they are just auxiliaries to an empty lexical verb elsewhere in the syntax. For instance, *kan* ('can' in (1c)) could be interpreted as a lexical verb with the directional PP complement *naar de zolder* ('to the attic')—or as the auxiliary of a silent lexical verb. Van Riemsdijk ultimately opts for this latter hypothesis, positing a silent motion verb GO whose semantic function is clearly defined but does not correspond exactly to the spoken *go* (or any other spoken verb, for that matter).

This account is relevant to *I can't even*, allowing us to posit a silent lexical verb after *even* whose semantic characteristics are clearly discernible despite having no overt antecedent earlier in the discourse. From the contexts in which *I can't even* is used, we know that this silent verb means something like *cope* or *deal.* What we do not know is whether it corresponds to any one of these options exactly—but per van Riemsdijk (2002), we do not necessarily need to know this, because the meaning of the silent verb is clear enough from the context in which *I can't even* is uttered.

Hence, let us posit a silent VP in the underlying structure of *I can't even* that I will call COPE.

This hypothesis accounts for many of the syntactic properties of *I can't even* discussed in Sections 2-4. To begin, silent COPE licenses the presence of the modal *can* and the adverb *even,* which, as stated several times, normally modify a lexical verb. The fact that such a verb appears to be missing from *I can't even* was the main reason why it was unexpected for speakers to find this construction grammatical—but the presence of a phonologically null VP explains this

grammaticality quite straightforwardly. It also easily explains why *I can't even* cannot take a VP complement: its VP node is already filled by COPE.

COPE also accounts for sentences like *I can't even with her.* The PP *with her* is supposed to be a complement to a lexical verb (e.g. *compete with her, reason with her,* etc), so there must be a silent lexical verb somewhere in the syntax that licenses it. The choice of COPE works especially nicely here because the overt *cope* can be either transitive (e.g. *he can cope with the situation*) or just intransitive (e.g. *he can't cope*). Hence, when *I can't even* takes a *with*-PP we would get the ditransitive reading of silent COPE, whereas without the PP we interpret COPE as being intransitive.

Silent COPE also accounts for the fact that it is possible for *I can't even* to undergo coordination, such as:

(51) I can't even COPE with Ava's exotic pet collection and frankly I shouldn't have to.

Since there is no overt lexical verb in either conjunct, the *frankly I shouldn't have to* must have this silent COPE as its antecedent, which then undergoes VP ellipsis.

Let us now consider silent COPE in relation to adverbs—the one property that my analysis does not explain entirely. We saw in Section 2 that *I can't even* can take additional adverbs like *literally, actually, honestly,* or *right now.* However, we also saw in example (8) of Section 2 that silent COPE cannot take manner adverbs. In other words, while sentences like *I literally can't even COPE* or *I can't even COPE right now* are grammatical, sentences like **I can't even COPE tactfully* are not.

Why are the adverbs *literally, actually,* etc and *right now* grammatical, but not manner adverbs? I suspect it is because the speaker-oriented adverbs like *literally,* etc and the temporal adverbs like *right now* are actually modifying the entire CP (i.e. the entire proposition *I can't even COPE*), whereas manner adverbs like *tactfully* can only modify a VP. However, this is still odd because we would expect manner adverbs to be licensed by the silent VP containing COPE.

Regardless, the evidence suggests that silent COPE does not take adverbs at all, though it is unclear why, given how similarly it behaves to phonologically overt VPs in all other regards. This is certainly an avenue for further research.

6. What is It Even For? The Pragmatics of *I Can't Even*

We saw in Section 3 that part of the meaning of *I can't even* is context-dependent: the exact same set of words will convey an entirely different emotion (either anger or excitement) to a listener based on the circumstances in which they are spoken. But the extralinguistic significance of *I can't even* is far broader than this, and deeply intertwined with the syntactic structure of the expression itself. In this section, I consider how the silent syntax of *I can't even COPE* influences some of its pragmatic properties, particularly its ability to generate high cognitive relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and reinforce both the speaker's and their listener's positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987). I also argue, however, that the social stigma of *I can't even* as 'lazy'

English is not inherently due to its unpronounced syntactic elements, but instead arises from its association with a teenage female speaker base.

6.1 *I Can't Even,* Cognitive Relevance, and Linguistic Iconicity

By now we have analyzed the syntax of *I can't even* in depth, arriving at a proposal of a silent COPE that accounts for the grammaticality of the construction despite its lack of an overt lexical verb, as well as the lexical modifications it can or cannot undergo. What we have not yet considered, however, is how this syntactic analysis also helps explain the extra-grammatical properties of *I can't even*—i.e. a listener's emotional response to hearing this phrase.

Let us begin by examining the intersection between the syntactic and pragmatic properties of Headlinese (originally discussed in section 3.3), which will serve as a springboard for the discussion of *I can't even* in this regard. According to Moncomble (2018), the goal of the Headlinese register is to pique a reader's interest enough to make them read a whole news story. This is done by highlighting a striking aspect of the story—rather than offering a holistic synthesis of it—in its title. Moncomble explains this technique in terms of Sperber & Wilson's (1986) theory of cognitive relevance, which is defined as the ratio between "cognitive effort" and "cognitive effect." In the case of newspaper headlines, cognitive effort is the effort it takes to read and understand the text, while cognitive effect is the amount of new information obtained. So, a relevant headline would promise lots of new information with little reading effort.

According to Moncomble, the cognitive relevance of a news headline can be enhanced by appealing to emotional salience rather than the quantity or factual accuracy of the information provided. This allows the reader to "connect to the story more easily." That is, it lowers the reader's cognitive effort by encouraging an emotional rather than intellectual response to the headline. The Headlinese register lends itself to this goal by virtue of its truncated syntax, particularly the lack of articles. Usually the main function of articles is to signal to the reader that they are already familiar with a given noun phrase (definite article), or that they are seeing it for the first time (indefinite article). This means that every choice between a definite or indefinite article is based on the writer's assumption of what the reader already knows or does not know. By omitting articles altogether, then, Headlinese bypasses the risk of alienating potential readers due to incorrect assumptions about what each reader knows or does not know about the topic of the headline. In other words, 'zero articles' give the readers free rein to reconstruct the text's meaning "based on their own cultures and expectations," allowing them to connect to the story more easily. Moncomble dubs Headlinese as an example of "the syntax of expressivity" posited by the French linguist Gustave Guillaume—that is, language that violates grammatical and syntactic rules in order to convey emotion as overtly as possible and thus "produce an effect on" or "act on" the reader (Moncomble 2018).

The syntax of *I can't even COPE* functions similarly to that of Headlinese in terms of enhancing the utterance's cognitive relevance for a listener. The truncated pronunciation of *I can't even*—especially in sentences of the type *I can't even with* [*something/someone*]—foregrounds the speaker's extreme state of upset over the particular

something or *someone* causing these feelings. It takes a listener less 'cognitive effort' to process *I can't even,* as they have already connected with the utterance on a more personal, emotional level before making theintellectual effort to understand the factual reason behind the speaker's feelings. Hence, similarly to Headlinese, speakers capitalize on the 'abbreviated' form of *I can't even* for dramatic effect, capturing a listener's interest primarily through the emotional salience—or, in Guillaume's terms, 'expressivity'—of the sentence rather than its contents.

In light of this intersection between its unpronounced syntax and extreme emotional significance, *I can't even* can also be said to exhibit a form of linguistic iconicity—that is, a non-arbitrary relationship between the form and meaning of a particular expression. In the case of *I can't even,* its truncated written and phonetic forms are symbolic of its meaning: an emotion so potent that the speaker cannot find the words to properly convey it visually or orally.

Let us first consider visual iconicity. Max Nänny (2001) uses a selection of English poetry to argue that line length can serve as a visual reinforcement of the meaning conveyed by the contents of said lines. For instance, he isolates a verse in John Dryden's play *All for Love* which reads "Stretch'd at my length beneath some blasted oke;" (I, i, 235) and is noticeably longer on the page compared to the rest of the stanza. The extended length of this verse is an iconic reproduction of the 'stretching' and 'length' evoked by the text itself. Long lines can reflect not only length as a concrete characteristic of some object, but also more conceptual conditions of excess, surplus, or surpassing. Nänny cites the following verse from John Milton's "Psalm IV" as an example: "With vast increase their corn and wine abounds" (II. 36). Here, the ideas of vastness and abundance as pertaining to the harvest are reflected by the noticeable difference in length between this line and the rest of the stanza. The 'abundance' of characters running across the page becomes a visual representation of the surplus of corn and wine.

Short lines, on the other hand, can be icons of physical properties of smallness, narrowness, slimness, etc. But they can also iconize more abstract concepts like loss or emptiness (Nänny 2001). For instance, during a monologue in Shakespeare's *Othello,* the protagonist says, "All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. / 'Tis gone" (3.3.445-446). The empty space after the very brief "tis gone'—especially in contrast with the length of the preceding verse—creates a visual representation of the loss of love Othello is speaking of. *I can't even* can also be understood in terms of this iconic relationship between the contents and form of a shorter utterance. As discussed in Section 1, *I can't even* is said to have originated and spread online, meaning that most users of this expression are just as (if not more) likely to write it as they are to say it aloud. Similarly to the aforementioned Shakespearean examples, then, we can notice a correspondence between the contents and the typographic appearance of *I can't even.* Its reduced length of only three, short lexical items (the longest one containing just five characters) becomes an icon for the sense of loss or absence conveyed by these words. We might even say that *I can't even* has the appearance of being 'syntactically' smaller, i.e. that its lack of a written verb suggests a lack of any syntactic structure after *even* (even though, per the analysis in Section 5, we know that this structure is still present, albeit phonologically unrealized). It is fitting that an expression describing someone's inability to put their extreme emotion into words

be represented by a reduced number of words and characters. The visual concision of *I can't even*—and the empty space on a screen or page that may follow it—symbolize the speaker's loss of verbal expression due to the overwhelming abundance and weightiness of the feelings they are experiencing.

The iconic dimension of language has also been shown to apply to sounds. A number of linguists have indeed argued for a natural correspondence between the meaning and pronunciation of certain words (Jespersen 1922, Jakobson 1985, among many others). An obvious example of such a non-arbitrary relationship are onomatopoeia—lexical like *ahem, meow, boom,* etc, whose pronunciation imitates the real-world sound that the word picks out semantically. For instance, the word *ahem* might be considered a lexicalized reproduction of its real-world referent: the sound of someone coughing or clearing their throat. Perhaps less obvious an example is the concept of synaesthetic sounds, i.e. sounds that are subjectively associated with particular physical properties in many languages across the world, even languages that evolved separately. Many studies have focused on the phonetic iconicity of diminutives, showing a significant cross-linguistic tendency for words or affixes denoting smallness to be represented by high front vowels like /i/ (from the seminal work by Sapir 1929, to Ultan 1978, to Körtvélyessy 2011, among others).

But sometimes iconicity lies not with the particular sounds in certain words, but in the presence—or absence—of sound itself. Müller (2001), among others, discusses the iconic nature of various rhetorical devices used to convey excessive emotion. He argues that devices involving a deviation from normal language, such as unusual word order, repetition, or omission of words, are "imitative of actual disturbances of language in emotional contexts." He cites a number of examples from Shakespeare's *King Lear,* including "O me, my heart: My rising heart! But down!" (II.3.310). Here, repetition and ellipsis come together to represent Lear's extreme distress, reducing him to "an inarticulate frenzy." The excessive repetition of the words 'me/my' and 'heart' serve as phonetic representations of the protagonist's excessive emotion. This is reinforced through the use of three consecutive noun phrases (O me, my heart; my rising heart; but down). These truncated exclamations, particularly when this line is spoken aloud by an actor, mirror Lear's inability to convey the full extent of his suffering. *I can't even,* when said aloud, has the same effect. The abrupt silence after *even*—which would normally be filled by additional phonetic material in the form of a verb—creates a feeling of incompleteness that phonetically symbolizes the incompleteness of the thought expressed by this phrase. Hence, *I can't even* is a mere trace—both visual and phonetic—of an emotion so extreme that it cannot be captured by words. Its truncated syntax and pronunciation—represented by empty space and silence, respectively—iconize the insurmountable barrier between a speaker's profound inner turmoil and its outward manifestation.

6.2 Politeness Theory

By considering *I can't even* through the lens of Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), we can see that this construction implicates not only the listener's emotions, but also their social relationship with the speaker.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory rests on the premise that people are rational agents who will seek to maintain 'face' in any given interaction. 'Face' refers to a person's "public self-image" (Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 61), and has two components: 'positive face' and 'negative face.' Positive face refers to the desire for others' approval of one's personality, choices, or possessions. Negative face, on the other hand, refers to the preservation of one's authority and autonomy (i.e. being able to act and believe however one wants without others questioning it), and to not be distracted from whatever task or activity one has set out to complete.

Positive and negative politeness refer to the strategies used to validate another person's positive or negative face, respectively, in conversation. Brown and Levinson outline 15 types of positive politeness and 10 types of negative politeness. Some of the former include expressing concern for the other person's health, praising physical appearance or things, using language that affirms in-group identity, avoiding disagreement, or seeking agreement with the addressee. Among the latter are apologizing, hedging before making a request, or giving deference to the addressee. The motivations for or effects of a speaker's decision to use the phrase *I can't even* can be understood in terms of some of Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies.

To begin, the unspoken but still meaningful component of *I can't even COPE* per the analysis in section 5 is relevant to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Strategies 4 and 7, 'Use in-group identity markers' and 'Presuppose/raise/assert common ground,' respectively. Strategy 4 will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but one particular phenomenon that falls under this category is worth mentioning here: ellipsis (which I will broadly interpret as leaving some part of an utterance unpronounced, rather than in the stricter sense of XP ellipsis). Brown and Levinson claim that an utterance like 'Nails,' which is clearly missing some lexical material, is only comprehensible when the speaker and listener have some shared in-group membership—i.e. they are both participants of a certain demographic, professional sphere, fandom, activity, etc. In this case, the in-group is likely a collaborative activity; for instance, the speaker and listener could be assembling a piece of furniture together and the speaker is holding a hammer. The speaker uses ellipsis under the assumption that, owing to their shared contextual knowledge, the listener will be able to interpret the utterance exactly as they would the complete version.

Similarly, the term 'presuppose' in Strategy 7 refers to the assumption that both the speaker and listener are taking a certain piece of information for granted. However, it can also be a form of positive politeness for a speaker to give the *impression* of assuming some common knowledge with the listener even when they do not actually assume this. For instance, by uttering a sentence like *I went out with Jaden yesterday,* the speaker acts as if the listener already knows that Jaden is a close friend of the speaker's—even if the listener actually does not know this.

This assumption of common ground with the listener—be it true or fabricated—creates a sense of familiarity between the speaker and listener, reinforcing each party's positive face in the eyes of the other.

In this vein, we might consider the utterance *I can't even COPE* as an example of in-group identity marking and presupposition of common ground. The 'ellipsis' (in the broad sense) of COPE suggests that the listener and speaker must have a shared in-group membership that enables the former to understand the full meaning of the expression despite its silent element. For instance, if someone said *I can't even right now* while working on a math assignment with a classmate, the classmate would understand *I can't even* to mean *I can't put into words how frustrated I am with this assignment* owing to their common contextual knowledge, i.e. the collaborative activity of doing homework.

In terms of common ground, by not pronouncing any verb overtly, the speaker presupposes—or at least gives the impression of presupposing—that the listener already knows how the sentence would end. In other words, the speaker sends the listener the message, *We're so in tune with each other's thoughts that I don't even need to finish my sentence because I know you still get exactly what I mean.* Through this indication of complicity, the speaker reinforces both their own and the listener's positive face. The listener gets the impression that the speaker holds them in high esteem, i.e. that their bond is strong enough that they can 'read each other's minds.' The listener, flattered by this affirmation of kinship, in turn gains a newfound appreciation for the speaker.

Moreover, sentences where *I can't even* takes an additional argument like *with Ethan* also indirectly preserve that person's positive face. The utterance *I can't even with Ethan* paraphrases to something like *I can't put into words how frustrated I am with Ethan.* By not making explicit mention of their frustration (and its extreme degree) the speaker partly shields their target from the listener's disapproval. They leave up to the listener's interpretation (rather than stating overtly) just how badly the target's actions affected them, which somewhat mitigates the damage to the target's character—i.e. positive face—in the listener's eyes. This omission on the speaker's part might also contribute to their own positive face, as a listener might take it as an indication that the speaker is reluctant to speak ill of other people even when they would be justified in doing so.

6.3 Exceptional Variations of *I Can't Even*

As mentioned in earlier parts of the paper, there are attested examples of sentences in which speakers intentionally subvert the syntactic rules of *I can't even* by substituting and/or duplicating one or more of its core components (usually *can't* and *even*) with a synonymous phrase, such as:

(52) a. I have lost my ability to even. (GIF on Tenor.com)
b. I am unable to even. (GIF on Tenor.com)
c. I am unable to can. (From Reddit thread r/increasinglyverbose)
d. Your ability to can even (Title of a webpage on MetaFilter, 2014)

Normally, constructions like *I am unable to even/can* or *I have lost the ability to even* above would be ungrammatical. It is only when a speaker utters them with the express goal of conveying the same, aposiopetic meaning as *I can't even*—just in a significantly more roundabout way—that they can be pronounced as full sentences. But why would someone go to the trouble of using these elaborate forms instead of *I can't even*? This question, too, can be considered through the framework of politeness theory, particularly positive face. Per Brown and Levinson's Strategy 7 of presupposing common ground, the speaker presupposes that the listener shares their knowledge of the baseline form *I can't even* and the 'normal' ways in which the expression can be modified (discussed earlier in Section 2). Given such an assumption, the speaker can utter a rule-breaking variation of *I can't even* and be reasonably sure that the listener will a) understand that this infraction was intentional on their part, and therefore b) find the utterance—and by extension the speaker themself—clever and funny.

The humorous nature of examples like (52) lies in the ironic contrast between their meaning and the verboseness and/or redundancy with which it is expressed. By violating the baseline syntactic rules of *I can't even*, the speaker reduces the cognitive relevance and iconicity of the original expression. Indeed, we discussed in the previous section that the unspoken syntax of *I can't even COPE* reduces the cognitive effort necessary to understand the expression by appealing to listeners' intuitive emotions rather than to their logical reasoning. Conversely, sentences like *I have lost the ability to even,* by replacing a single word *can't* with multiple new syntactic elements, take longer to parse through. Furthermore, sentences where *even* gets replaced by *can* (*I am unable to can,* for instance) become even more 'ungrammatical' and therefore cognitively taxing: whereas the original *I can't even COPE* or even examples like (52a) and (52b) are ungrammatical only by way of their phonetic incompleteness, examples like (52c) and (52d) outright replace the silent verb COPE with overt items like *can* or *can even* that are clearly not lexical verbs. Hence, these exceptional variants of *I can't even* have a much higher proportion of cognitive effort to cognitive effect, which is comedically at odds with their predominantly emotional significance.

Similarly, the increased phonetic and typographic lengthiness of sentences like (52) stands in ironic opposition to their aposiopetic meaning. If the truncated and concise form of the *I can't even* serves as an oral and visual representation of the speaker's purported inarticulateness, the superfluous wordiness of *I have lost the ability to even* is antithetical to this formal symbolism. In these exceptional cases, then, the speaker strips *I can't even* of its iconicity, turning the expression into a blank canvas for linguistic innovation. The speaker's primary motivation for using these rule-breaking forms is not to convey the actual meaning of *I can't even*, but to showcase their own cleverness and creativity, likely in an attempt to earn validation of their positive face from an in-person or online audience.

6.4 Why Some People Can't With *I Can't Even*

Whereas Sections 6.2 and 6.3 considered the relationship between the structural features and positive pragmatic effects of *I can't even,* this section examines the connection between the

negative stereotypes and the particular demographic group associated with the use of *I can't even*. More specifically, I argue that the disparaging judgments of *I can't even* as 'lazy English' (namely Largent's article "I Can't Even With 'I Can't Even' Anymore," mentioned in the introduction) are not inherently due to this construction's subversion of conventional English grammar—rather, they result from the association of *I can't even* with a young and female speaker base.

Language use has long been recognized as a key marker of in-group identity. In this context, 'group' refers to any community formed around one or more shared characteristics or experiences—demographic traits (gender, race, age, religion, etc.), professional fields, hobbies, neighborhoods, and so on. Be it technical vocabulary, slang, or non-standard pronunciations, language that deviates from the mainstream helps delineate the boundaries of a particular community. By using group-specific language, a speaker confirms—or at least attempts to confirm—their membership in said group, while, conversely, not using or understanding such language might label a speaker as an outsider. For instance, Bucholtz (1999) found that a group of Northern California high school girls who identified as "nerds" intentionally spoke a highly formal English, characterized by careful enunciation, frequent use of scientific and academic terminology, and the avoidance of common contractions and contemporary youth slang. Through the deliberate creation and use of this register, the 'nerd girls' were able to assert their intellectually-focused group identity and thus set themselves apart from the 'mainstream' teenage culture revolving around popularity and social conformity. Kiesling (1998), for his part, studied the in-group language of fraternity men at the University of Pittsburgh, which was characterized by frequent use of slang and vernacular pronunciations such as alveolar rather than velar final consonants (e.g. *goin'* rather than *going*) or relaxed articulation (e.g. *wanna* instead of *want to*). But Kiesling also found that the fraternity brothers' language had a clear exclusionary function: just as knowing and using slang or inside jokes specific to the fraternity marked someone as a member, not knowing these expressions marked someone as external to the group.

A consequence of this intersection between linguistic variation and subjective social perception is that listeners may make judgments about others' identity and character based only on how they speak. Indeed, in a study analyzing listener perception of sexual orientation based on three linguistic variables (mean pitch, spectral characteristics of /s/, and TH-fronting), Levon (2014) found that listeners with traditional views of masculine gender roles and expression used pitch and sibilance as markers of nonmasculinity and gayness—while for listeners who did not share these views, pitch and sibilance had no effect on their prediction of speakers' sexuality. These results suggest that listeners' individual perceptions of particular communities (e.g. that the gay community is 'nonmasculine') can impact the social meanings they ascribe to particular linguistic phenomena (e.g. pitch and sibilance are signs that someone is gay and therefore also nonmasculine). Similarly, Campbell-Kibler (2011) analyzed listeners' perception of speakers' gender, sexuality, and competence in relation to the speakers' mean pitch, /s/-fronting, and pronunciation of the suffix *-ing*. She found that /s/-fronting in particular correlated to listeners' judgments of speakers as less masculine, more gay, and less competent—and that there was a

significant ($p < 0.001$) moderate negative correlation between speakers' perceived gayness and masculinity. These results further support the notion that particular linguistic variations map not only onto particular communities, but also onto the social traits that these communities are associated with.

What these findings cannot show clearly, however, is the causal relationship between the three variables of community, social traits, and language variation. Indeed, if membership in a given community is associated with both particular linguistic patterns and particular social traits, then a new correlation may arise whereby the language patterns become indexical of the social traits themselves, through the intermediary of in-group membership. I suspect that certain English speakers' criticism of *I can't even* as 'lazy English' arises from this causally ambiguous intertwining of social and linguistic factors. In other words, I doubt that the use of *I can't even* directly marks a speaker's unsophistication or intellectual deficiency—rather, *I can't even* has likely come to index these traits *through* its association with teenage girls, who are often portrayed and perceived as such.

In popular culture and media, the stereotypical teenage girl is depicted as shallow and by no means an intellectual prodigy—her main priority is curating her image in order to climb her school's social hierarchy or catch the eye of a romantic interest. We need look no further than the canonical film *Mean Girls* (2004) as an example, whose primary antagonist, the vapid and conniving Regina George, has gone down in history as the teenage mean girl par excellence. Countless other movies, shows, novels, other cultural productions capitalize on similar clichés of middle- and high-school-aged girls as self-absorbed and superficial—the film *Clueless* (1995) with its 'rich-girl' protagonist Cher Horowitz, the horror series *Scream Queens* (2015-2016) with the bratty Chanel Oberlin and her airheaded posse, or even Jane Austen's classic novel *Emma* (1815), whose eponymous protagonist naively believes in the superiority of her social skills and awareness. Another notable instance is the film *Legally Blonde* (2001), which follows the ditzy blonde Elle Woods as she attends Harvard Law School. The selling point of the movie is precisely how Elle proves herself an excellent lawyer despite her bubbly persona and all-pink wardrobe, suggesting that the coexistence of 'girliness' and intelligence is an exception to the norm—an anomaly.

Myriad sociolinguistic studies have discussed the tendency to disapprove of aspects of young women's language precisely because they are the ones using them. One of the most commonly criticized features of young women's speech is vocal fry—speaking in a low-pitched and 'creaky' or croaky voice. Anderson et al. (2014) investigated how vocal fry influenced the perception of young American women in the job market, asking participants to rate female and male speech samples on perceived competence, education level, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and hireability. While vocal fry received overall lower ratings ($p < 0.001$) than normal speech, these negative judgments were more pronounced for female speech samples compared to male ones, pointing to a gender bias in the perception of this phenomenon. These results suggest that no matter how young women choose to distinguish themselves linguistically, those distinctive aspects of their language will likely face unfavorable scrutiny. In other words, phenomena like

vocal fry become stigmatized by virtue of the fact that they index a social group that is already looked down upon in itself.

The social stigma of *I can't even* exemplifies this trajectory. Not long after its inception, *I can't even* itself became a linguistic staple of teenage girls—and an insignia of all the negative stereotypes attributed to them. Remember, for instance, the 2013 satire article from TheBunionPaper called "Rich Girl in Dining Hall Can't Even" that I mentioned in Section 1. In order for this title to achieve its intended comedic effect, a reader must know a) what the phrase *I can't even* is*,* but also that b) this phrase is often employed by teenaged females (as suggested by the dining hall, a fixture of middle and high schools, and colleges). The fact that whoever chose said title assumed TheBunionPaper's general readership to know both (a) and (b) is therefore very telling of the association between young women—particularly spoiled and airheaded ones, as connoted by the adjective 'rich'—and the use of *I can't even.* In sociolinguistic terms, this article's title capitalizes on the widespread knowledge that *I can't even* is part of teenage girls' in-group linguistic repertoire in order to mock these girls' overdramatic reactions to trivial problems, arising from their shallow character and ultra-privileged lives. Similarly, in a YouTube video titled "I CAN'T EVEN," comedic content creator Sam Tabor uses this phrase multiple times in a row while parodying two teenage girls deciding how to respond to a text a boy sends one of them. Tabor's excessive repetition of *I can't even* is indicative of his intent to make fun of its frequent use amongst young women. Following the initial volley of *I can't even*'s, one of the girls vehemently advises the other not to text her crush back at all because her texts "don't make [her] sound interested" and she should "lead him on as much as possible." Through this character's misguided advice delivered with utter confidence, Tabor also pokes fun at teenage girls' naivete and social immaturity. Hence, this YouTube skit simultaneously mocks young women for how they speak, but also for how they act, creating a linkage between teen girls' use of *I can't even,* and their perceived stupidity.

Having established this triangulation of *I can't even*, teenage girls, and stereotypes of vapidity and unintelligence, let us revisit Largent's article "I Can't With 'I Can't Even' Anymore." As mentioned in Section 1, Largent condemns the proliferation of *I can't even* as the "rock bottom" of linguistic expression, asserting that "to not attempt articulation, let alone completing sentences, is to make a mockery of ourselves." Hence, Largent's main gripe with *I can't even* appears to be its incomplete syntax, which, in his view, makes speakers sound unintelligent and uninteresting: "What would you guess was their reading level?," he rails, "Would you assume you could have an engaging conversation with them?"

And yet, there are plenty of other 'non-standard' constructions that do not receive nearly as much flak as *I can't even* despite having a similarly incomplete structure. Indeed, no Largent-esque opinion pieces have been published condemning Diary Subject Omission, Recipe Object Drop, or Headlinese (all discussed in Section 3) for corroding the English language. This is likely because these registers are associated with contexts or communities that are taken more seriously or simply surrounded by less negative stereotypes than the demographic group of teenage girls. Indeed, Diary Subject Omission eludes social stigma because its use does not index

any particular identity group or community of practice; it merely serves to facilitate brevity and economy in self-referential writing. Recipe Object Drop, for its part, holds an inherent authority owing to the fact that it is used to instruct a reader or give them orders. Lastly, Headlinese is associated with journalism, which is not only a professional field, but also one that revolves (at least in theory) around the conveyance of objective and important information—a far cry from the shallow dramatics of a stereotypical teen girl.

Hence, I doubt that truncated syntax is the inherent cause of Largent's disparaging opinion of *I can't even* as 'elocutive laziness.' Instead, this unfavorable view likely arises from the attribution of *I can't even* to teenage girls, who are already associated with stereotypes of superficiality, stupidity, and immaturity—an attribution that Largent is certainly aware of, as shown by his observation that the person typically expected to use *I can't even* is "a fairly privileged girl obsessed with her own vapidity."

7. So…What Did We Even Learn? Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to do two things: first, to examine the relationship between the syntactic and pragmatic properties of *I can't even.* Second, to prove that the criticism of *I can't even* as 'lazy' English arises not from the truncated syntax of this construction, but from negative stereotypes around the people who use it—particularly young women.

I began by providing an overview of the syntactic properties of *I can't even,* which showed that despite its conventionalized meaning, *I can't even* exhibits a degree of syntactic and lexical flexibility. In Section 3, I compared *I can't even to* other types of constructions with similar syntactic or semantic properties to it: idioms, snowclones, collocations, and 'special' English registers like Diary Subject Omission, Headlinese, and Recipe Object Drop. These comparisons suggested that the meaning of *I can't even* can be considered as fully literal and compositional thanks to the presence of an inherently phonologically null lexical verb after *even*. The fact that this verb never reaches the Phonetic Form level, coupled with its status as a full lexical verb (i.e. a word with many possible synonyms, unlike function words) explains the impossibility of reconstructing exactly what it is.

With this in mind, I examined and rejected three possible analyses of *I can't even*: (1) that *even* acts as a lexical verb, (2) that *can* acts as a lexical verb, and (3) that *I can't even* arises from VP ellipsis. In Section 5 I proposed a syntactic derivation of *I can't even* based on the conclusions drawn in Section 3 and van Riemsdijk's (2002) discussion of inherently silent lexical verbs that do not necessarily correspond to any overt equivalent. I posited a phonologically null VP after *even* headed by a lexical verb COPE, and discussed how such an analysis accounts for the syntactic properties of *I can't even* outlined in Section 2. In Section 6, I considered how the silent syntax of *I can't even* proposed in Section 5 constitutes a form of linguistic iconicity and influences certain pragmatic properties of the construction—particularly its ability to generate high cognitive relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and reinforce both the speaker and their listener's positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987). I argued, however, that the perception of *I*

can't even as 'unintelligent' language does not actually stem from its unpronounced elements, but instead from its association with teenage females, who are already perceived as such.

This paper brings to light novel connections between syntax and pragmatics, particularly in how the presence of silent constituents can enhance the emotional expressivity and positive politeness of an utterance. Thus, my scholarly study of *I can't even* challenges the notion that certain ways of speaking are inherently wrong or anomalous. In many cases, expressions dismissed as incomplete or incorrect reveal themselves, under closer scrutiny, to follow patterns that are just as systematic and complex as those governing 'standard' constructions. Language is a form of expression—and self-expression. When speakers break its rules, they are not corrupting language, but intentionally reshaping it to make it their own. To overlook or deride these instances of innovation simply because they deviate from a prescriptive norm—or because they emerge from stigmatized communities—is to miss valuable opportunities for both academic discovery and human connection. Linguistic diversity should not be a cause for marginalization, but a catalyst for curiosity, inquiry, and celebration.

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