The shape of grammaticalization: matching the bridging context scenario with patterns of frequency use

Heine's theory of contexts (2002) has been recognized as a satisfying account of a grammaticalization process, detailing the diachronic steps leading to and stemming from the drastic semantic shift or reanalysis that lies at the core of a grammaticaliaztion process (Detges & Waltereit 2002). Other grammaticalization scholars have offered similar scenarios for the key steps of a grammaticalization process (Diewald 2002), introducing a critical context in which a new semantic inference can take place, while this inferential mechanism as a trigger for grammaticalization has been scrutinized on its own (Traugott 1988, Nicolle 1998, Nicolle 2011). From then, the form spreads over new contexts and becomes conventionalized through further constructional changes (Smirnova 2015).

On the other hand, it is known that language change is reflected, in terms of frequency of use, by a common template, that of the S-curve (Kroch 1989, Blythe & Croft 2012). Furthermore, this S-curve has been specifically associated with semantic expansion (Feltgen et al. 2017). Therefore, it is to be expected that the context-based scenario outlined by Heine and others in the one hand, and the S-curve pattern of frequency change on the other hand, should match on the level of their diachronic development; however, no robust parallel between the two accounts has been offered so far. Notably, frequency has been considered as a driving force for semantic change in grammaticalization processes (Bybee & Thompson 1997, Bybee 2006); nevertheless, whether the frequency needs to reach a 'critical threshold' for the shift to occur (or in which stage of the S-curve does the form starts transitioning from the bridging context to the switch context) remains largely unclear. The goal of this contribution is precisely to remedy to this state of things.

To do so, I provide three empirical case studies of grammaticalizations in French, based on corpus data from the Frantext database (ATILF 1998-2023). These three case studies have been chosen to test my findings over three widely different grammaticalization scenarios. I thus explore a grammaticalization leading to the entrenchment of a schematic construction (Trousdale 2014), *une espèce de* N ('a kind of N'); a grammaticalization highlighted by a syntactic shift of the form (Fischer 2010), *mis à part*, which starts being fronted by the nineteenth century; and a grammaticalization driven by a calque over an already existing form (Cornillie 2019), *d'une façon* ADJ ('in a(n) ADJ way'), calqued from *d'une manière* ADJ. For each of these studies, I follow qualitatively the emergence of the grammatical meaning by manually parsing the occurrences, and I compare it with the S-curve of frequency rise extracted from the quantitative data.

In all of these three cases, the S-cure appears in the wake of the grammaticalization 'trigger', that is, as a consequence of the semantic shift. Several hints support this hypothesis; e.g., in the case of *une espèce de* N, the frequency over the types (i.e. how many fillers can enter the construction) also follows an S-curve, which would indicate a lexical diffusion (Ogura 2007); but then the token frequency of each individual fillers follows the same, identical S-curve, suggesting that they all 'register' the same semantic shift. The competition between *d'une façon* and *d'une manière* also follows two mirror S-curves, indicative of a transfer of a 'semantic load' between the two, similar to other competition processes (*en* vs *dans* in Fagard & Combettes 2013). The S-curve is thus mostly associated with stages 3 and 4 in Diewald's scenario, or with a diffusion over switching contexts in Heine's account. As Heine emphasizes, this also shows that the trigger of a grammaticalization does not guarantee its entrenchment in language use. A further actuation step is necessary. Incidentally, it also shows that frequency plays an ambivalent role in a grammaticalization scenario: it follows the semantic expansion and derives from it, seems necessary to entrench it, but does not seem to foster or facilitate it.

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