

Structural ambiguity and reanalysis – the case of Swedish *fortsatt*

In Swedish, the past participle *fortsatt*, derived from the verb *fortsätta* 'to continue', is often used as a clause adverbial with the meaning 'still'.

- (1) Situationen i Göteborgs Hamn är **fortsatt** inte bra. (GP 2009)
 'The situation in Gothenburg's harbour is still not good.'

This usage of *fortsatt* has developed during the 20th century, and can therefore be studied in great detail in electronic corpora. A careful investigation of this change can also contribute to a general understanding of the conditions for structural ambiguity, which is a significant factor in language change. This discussion is not new – Wurzel (1997) refers to Hermann Paul and Georg von der Gabelentz – but it is still dynamic and relevant. Several linguists claim that structural ambiguity is a prerequisite for reanalysis:

To summarize, the conditions necessary for reanalysis to take place are that a subset of the tokens of a particular constructional type must be open to the possibility of multiple structural analyses, where one potential analysis is the old one (applicable to all tokens) and the other potential analysis is the new one (applicable to a subset). (Harris & Campbell 1995:72)

Roughly, reanalysis can be defined as a process that changes the actual (underlying) linguistic structure without necessarily affecting the visible or audible surface manifestation of that structure. So it presupposes ambiguity in linguistic structures [...]. (Burridge & Bergs 2017:108)

See also Hopper & Traugott (2003), Fischer (2007), Denison (2017), Weiß (2021), and many others. However, while structural ambiguity often is recognised as an absolute requirement for reanalysis, the question of whether the frequency of ambiguous constructions may be relevant is rarely – if ever – mentioned.

In this talk, I present a detailed study of the development of *fortsatt*. I show that the change proceeds in two separate reanalyses. In order to evaluate whether the relative frequency of ambiguous structures have any effect on the conditions for change, I introduce a quantitative measure of ambiguity (*ambiguity index* or *ambix*). It is demonstrated that both of the reanalyses of *fortsatt* take off when about 80 % of the respective source constructions are structurally ambiguous. The conclusion is that the changes of *fortsatt* are facilitated by a large amount of structural ambiguity in the investigated texts, and that the ambiguity index drops when the new constructions are introduced and established. Testing whether this is a general tendency in this type of language change, I also utilize a recent study by Delsing (2022), in which he investigates two similar reanalyses (the changes of Swedish *mycket* and *litet* from adjectives to quantifiers). It is shown that these changes seem to corroborate the conclusion that the relative frequency of ambiguous structures is of vital importance in the initial stages of structural reanalysis, and that the establishment of the new structures coincides with a gradual drop of the ambiguity index.

In the light of these findings, the question of the relation between structural ambiguity and reanalysis is further discussed.

Literature

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Elektronic corpora

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