

On bottle-necks in grammaticalization: the case of *become*

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This paper focusses on the grammaticalization of *become* into a copula and beyond. Two frequently used criteria to identify an ongoing process of grammaticalization are semantic bleaching (Heine and Kuteva 2002:2) and syntactic context expansion (Himmelman 2004). Semantic bleaching is a function mainly of the quantity of a certain unit: the more frequent, the more eroded a unit is of its original content (Bybee 2003). Syntactic context expansion is qualitative in nature, and implies the increase of different syntactic collocates the grammaticalizing unit appears with. Typically, though not necessarily (as Hopper and Traugott 2003 note), these criteria are associated with an increase in type and token frequency of the collocates of the grammaticalizing item as long as the grammaticalization process is not finished, which is for instance the case in the grammaticalization of the *going to*-construction.

The history of *become* raises questions to this typical idea one has of a grammaticalization process. First attestations show that *become* gradually developed out of a lexical sense ‘arrive’ (type illustrated in (1)) (where the function of *become* was already copular) into a change-of-state copula + AdjP (2) & NP (3), and then into a change-of-state auxiliary in a passive construction (4).

- (1) *We **becoman** on smeðne feld & rumne.*
“We **arrived** at a smooth and spacious field.” (c900)
- (2) *Hio swa **þearl becom.*** (c970)
“She **became** so strong.”
- (3) *Da Wyliscean kingas **becoman** his menn.* (?c1120)
“The Welsh kings **became** his men.”
- (4) *The sayd obstynate parson shall **become** bounde.* (c1560)

From the qualitative perspective, this looks like a textbook grammaticalization example. The quantitative picture, however, is more challenging. On the basis of an extensive corpus-study, it is observed that between 1150 and 1420 both token and type-frequency of the spatial sense of *become* steadily decrease, and by 1420 this sense has disappeared. Simultaneously, type and token frequencies of the copular use increase. But after 1420, the frequencies of types (2) and (3) start to decrease too. Only after about 1560 the frequency of the copular use starts increasing again. It is also at this period that *become* extends to (4).

On the basis of these observations, I argue that (i) the possibility of layering, the co-occurrence of original and grammatical uses (Hopper 1991), will decrease if the semantic distance between them is big enough and the grammatical use gets more and more entrenched – this tendency is cross-linguistically corroborated for locative verbs developing copular functions (Stassen 1997); (ii) the loss of the original spatial sense brings about a crisis in the development of *become*; (iii) if, however, the grammaticalizing unit is sufficiently productive and entrenched in its grammaticalized use when this crisis occurs, its grammaticalization process can get a second impetus. This has happened in the case of *become*, with concomitant new instances of syntactic context expansion (to (4)) and semantic bleaching, for instance the loss of the semantic component of gradual development originally associated with *become*.

References

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