

Changes in the syntax of prepositions Towards a constructional approach to grammaticalisation

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Previous studies on grammaticalisation of prepositions have mainly concentrated on metaphoric transfers (e.g. noun *back* > preposition *back*) (see e.g. Heine & Kuteva 2002), and less on their external syntax. In this paper, we focus on the changes in the ‘valency’ of the preposition. Such a constructional perspective unveils a number of interesting changes that have not been fully accounted for so far.

It has since long been noted that prepositions derive from adverbs that were used in apposition to an obliquely marked NP (see e.g. Hirt 1927:15; Beekes 1990:161; Ringe 2006:64-65). This can be illustrated by the Latin examples under (1) and (2). In (1) accusative morphology itself is sufficient to mark allative meaning. In some contexts, the accusative could be reinforced by an adverb, as in (2). Later on this adverb became obligatory, resulting in a reanalysis: the case morphology on the noun came to be felt as ‘governed’ by the adverb, which then reached the status of a preposition.

- (1) domum meam vēnit
 house.acc mine.acc came
 ‘he came to my house’
- (2) ambulat in hortum
 he.walks into garden.acc
 ‘he walks into the garden’

What we have here, is a change in the valency of the preposition. As an adverb, it has no valency; as a preposition it takes a complement. What we would like to argue in our talk is that the story does not end here. In a next stage, the preposition takes an extra argument. This is clear in the history of Dutch. NPs linked by a preposition as in (3) are attested no sooner than the 13th century, and prepositional objects with verbs, see (4), are an innovation of Early Modern Dutch (15th/16th century) (see Van der Horst, t.a.).

- (3) de jongen met de hond
 ‘the boy with the dog’
- (4) twijfelen aan zijn eerlijkheid
 doubt prep his honesty
 ‘doubt his honesty’

At present, Dutch (and English) witnesses a further stage in the development. The syntactic link with the right argument, for a long time the strongest one, loses its privileged status to the left argument. The combination is reanalysed, from (5) to (6).

- (5) [geeft] [om zijn broer]
 [cares] [for his brother]
- (6) [geeft om] [zijn broer]
 [cares for] [his brother]

Arguments come from constructions like (7) and (8).

- (7) Hij geeft om en zorgt voor zijn jongere broer

‘He cares for and looks after his younger brother’

- (8) Bananen houd ik niet van
 Bananas like I not prep
 ‘Bananas I am not fond of’

In (7), the two coordinated verbs each take their own prepositions, which are expressed adjacent to the verb. A construction like *He cares and looks for and after his younger brother* is markedly worse than (7). In (8) we have preposition stranding. Both constructions, (7) and (8) are fairly recent in Dutch (Van der Horst, t.a.).

Probably the last stage in this development is the rise of constructions like (9), in which the right complement is altogether unexpressed.

- (9) *ik moet om een aantal scènes heel hard*
 I have.to prep a number scenes very hard
 lachen, maar het is toch ten koste van
 laugh but it is still at.the.cost of
 ‘I had a very good laugh with a number of scenes, but it still is at the cost of
 [someone]’

Again, this is a fairly recent phenomenon. In Van der Horst (2003) it is suggested that it is probably a late 20th century innovation.

References

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