PROGRESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN DUTCH: THE ROLE OF FORM AS A DIAGNOSTIC FOR GRAMMATICALIZATION

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INTRODUCTION: the current paper explores the dynamics of functional and structural changes in the grammaticalization of progressive constructions in Dutch. Dutch utilizes several progressive aspect constructions. One such construction is a preposition-type progressive construction, [BE+AT+THE+V-INF], as in (1) Jan is aan het vissen (literally ‘John is at the fishing’). Based on a contrastive analysis of Early Modern Dutch (EMD) and Modern Dutch (MoD), I conclude that semantic change is not independently meaningful as a diagnostic for grammaticalization status.

BACKGROUND: Bertinetto et al. (2000: 539-540) posit that semantic changes provide a diagnostic for determining the degree to which progressive devices have been grammaticalized based on the range of abstract/functional relations they may express (i.e. more abstract/functional meanings = more grammaticalized construction). However, their analysis is problematic in that there is little consideration for the role that structure plays in the grammaticalization of progressive devices. For example, Ebert (2000: 609, 628) observes that German and North Frisian utilize noun-incorporation to detransitivize preposition-constructions with transitive verbs. She argues that these languages restrict the use of preposition-constructions with direct objects, because the constructions are still analogous to locational phrases. As Ebert shows, structure may inform us about the semantic status of grammaticalized constructions. These structural clues are not explicitly captured by Bertinetto et al.’s (2000) schema for grammaticalization status.

RESEARCH QUESTION: what does the development of progressive constructions in EMD tell us about the relationship between form and meaning in grammaticalization, and what can it tell us about the formulation of grammaticalization diagnostics?

METHODOLOGY: to assess Bertinetto et al.’s (2000) cline for Dutch, I conducted a qualitative cross-comparison of EMD and MoD data. EMD constructions were extracted from the Brieven als Buit (‘Letters as Loot’) corpus (cf. Rutten & van der Wal 2014) and contrasted with MoD constructions taken from Boogaart (1991), Lemmens (2005), Behrens & Flecken (2013), inter alia.

RESULTS: I observed that form plays a significant role in identifying the degree of progressive aspect grammaticalization in Dutch. In MoD, preposition-constructions have nearly exclusively lost locative expression, thus direct objects move freely within the phrase (Behrens et al. 2013: 103). Likewise, in EMD, preposition-constructions with intransitive verbs appear to have lost the locative expression of the preposition ‘at’, making it function as an auxiliary, yielding an abstract meaning to the overall construction: (2) ik raak […] veelmaals aan ‘t philosheere (lit. ‘I reach… many-times at the philosophizing’). In contrast, I found that direct objects must be incorporated into the verb of transitive EMD progressive constructions, e.g. (3) wij benne aan suiiker laaden (lit. ‘we are at-the sugar loading’). I found only one example of an independent direct object; however, this construction exhibits an illicit syntactic structure from the perspective of Modern Dutch grammar: (4) zij benen aan Maken Baterij (lit. ‘they are at-the making artillery’). In this construction, the direct object appears to be oddly located to the right of the nominalized infinitive, whereas in MoD, the construction would be formed as (5) zij zijn baterijen aan het maken. As these examples illustrate, there is a dramatic structural contrast between EMD and MoD.

CONCLUSION: it has long been supported (Joseph 2001) that grammaticalization is a conglomeration of semantic and morphosyntactic processes, rather than a discrete mechanism. My study adds to this observation by illustrating that while semantic/functional changes occur
independently from structural/morphosyntactic changes, structure does inform us about the semantic status of a grammaticalized unit. It would be valuable to consider the role of structure in determining possible diagnostics for the grammaticalization of (progressive) constructions.

REFERENCES


