On the status of obligatorification in defining grammaticalization

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EMMA
Some languages are claimed to possess a grammatical category because this category is encoded by ‘obligatory’ markers, such as number in English, gender in Spanish, evidentiality in Quechua, etc. (Athanasopoulos & Kasai 2008, Lew-Williams & Fernald 2007, Aikhenvald 2007)

As Boas put it, ‘[Grammar] determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed.’ (Boas 1938: 132)

Obligatorification (the diachronic equivalent of ‘obligatoriness’) is often considered a definitory property of grammaticalization

However, nothing is obligatory all the time in a language and many grammatical forms are actually deletable

The concept of obligatorification and its link to grammaticalization have to be re-assessed

What defines and motivates obligatorification?
OUTLINE

1) What is grammaticalization?
2) How to define obligatoriness?
3) What causes obligatorification?
1. What is grammaticalization?
A definition of grammaticalization

- Grammaticalization is **defined** as the development from **lexical to grammatical forms**, and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms. (Kuryłowicz, 1975 [1965])

- As linguistic forms grammaticalize, they progress on a **continuum** by losing lexical properties and acquiring grammatical features

- **Grammaticalization cline**

  Content word → Function word → Clitic → Inflectional affix

- A **cross-linguistic universal**: words expressing concrete entities or activities are recruited and transformed to encode abstract notions

- For example, **prepositions** in the World’s languages tend to come from **body parts**, such as 'belly' or 'back' to convey abstract meanings, such as 'inside' or 'behind'. Words referring to **location** and **movement** grammaticalize to refer to **time**: ‘be going to’ (movement → future) ‘be gonna’
The genesis of grammar

- Several schools of linguistics have proposed hypotheses
- Grammaticalization theorists have reconstructed a step-by-step process

“grunt, grunt”

Basic communication: sounds and gestures, symbolic thought emerges

“fruit take”

Proto-language: a few lexical words for daily life are enough

“Mother pick apples”

Advanced proto-language: vocabulary expansion, noun/verb distinction, some word patterns stabilize

“John thinks your mother told my dad that she was going to pick some apples.”

Fully developed language: complex, consistent syntax, subordination, temporal markers, noun determination, grammatical words

Once a language is fully developed, grammaticalization cycles continue.
Processes of grammaticalization

- French future *chanterai* from the Late Latin *cantare* + *habeo*

- **Processes of grammaticalization** (Heine et al. 1991):
  
  (i) **Extension**: use in new contexts
      
      *Habeo* is used more and more frequently, and with new types of verbs

  (ii) **Desemanticization**: loss in meaning content
       
       possession > deontic modality > future

  (iii) **Decategorialization**: loss of lexical morphosyntactic properties
        
        a full lexical verb > an auxiliary > a suffix

  (iv) **Erosion**: loss in phonetic substance
       
       *habeo* > *-ai*
Grammaticalization and obligatorification

- ‘The obligatoriness of grammatical categories [is] the specific feature which distinguishes them from lexical meanings.’ (Jakobson 1959: 489, discussing Boas’s views)

- Obligatorification occurs as forms grammaticalize
  - Obligatory tense conjugation: ‘je chant-e/-erai/-ais...’ (*je chant)
  - Obligatory noun determination: ‘I saw a/the dog’ (*I saw dog)
  - Obligatory aspect: ‘Look! He is eating.’ (*Look! He eat)

- Obligatorification is one of Lehmann’s 6 parameters of grammaticalization (Lehmann 1995 [1982]): attrition, paradigmatization, obligatorification, condensation, coalescence, fixation
2) How to define obligatoriness?
What do linguists mean by ‘obligatory’?

- Often taken for granted, but one word for a disparate range of phenomena
- How to test it?

According to Crystal (2003 [1980]: 329), an optional element is one ‘that can be removed from a structure without that structure becoming ungrammatical’

- **Pb 1:** What does ungrammatical mean?
  Impossible to find in an authentic corpus? Perceived as incorrect by native speakers?

- **Pb 2:** Undeletability cannot really help us distinguish between lexical and grammatical forms
  ‘Grammar determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed.’ (Boas 1938: 132)
  ‘Grammar determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed.’
  ‘Grammar determines those aspects of experience that must be expressed.’ (correct)
  ‘* * determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed.’ (incorrect)

- In order to assess obligatoriness, one has to delve into its conditions: Syntactic / Semantic / Pragmatic conditions (Mélac, in press)
Syntactic obligatoriness

- When the **syntactic context impedes the deletion** of a form

‘Grammar determines those aspects of each experience that *must* be expressed.’

‘* determines those aspects of each experience that *must* be expressed.’

- **Syntactic rule**: In English, a finite clause must typically have a subject

‘* Grammar determines those aspects of’

- **Syntactic rule**: In English, a preposition must typically be followed by a Noun Phrase

- What allows the deletion of the form is **not the form itself** (e.g. noun VS pronoun) but the **syntactic construction** it is in

- Syntax is part of grammar, so it makes sense to say that grammar is about **obligations**

- However, **grammaticalization** is usually defined as the **development of grammatical forms** (auxiliaries, pronouns, inflections...), and not the development of syntax, which corresponds to very distinct diachronic processes
Semantic obligatoriness

Expressing a broad semantic domain requires us to specify certain semantic specificities

- The choice between the *imparfait* and *passé composé* when expressing the past in French

« En même temps - et je passais du premier état au second avec une désolante facilité - dès que je ne le voyais plus, je l’oubliais, et son sort me devenait totalement indifférent. »
(Tu n’es plus là, Bernard Pingaud, 1998)

VS

« En même temps - et je suis passé du premier état au second avec une désolante facilité - dès que je ne l’ai plus vu plus, je l’ai oublié, et son sort m’est devenu totalement indifférent. »

- No neutral form available in the paradigm, the *imparfait* expresses the imperfective aspect and the *passé composé* (or *passé simple*) expresses the perfective aspect

- If you want to express a past action in French, you are obliged to choose between the perfective aspect (*passé composé* or *passé simple*) or the imperfective aspect (*imparfait*)

- Semantic obligatoriness is not about deletion per se, but about the possibility of avoiding to specify a semantic feature in a given semantic context
Pragmatic obligatoriness

- **Pragmatics** is usually presented as **expectations** more than **obligations**

- **However**, **pragmatic factors** may determine the **acceptability judgements** of native speakers

- Is this sentence acceptable: ‘What **do** you got?’
  - No example found in formal written English, but quite common in specific situations

- The **subject is non-deletable in English** according to the syntax of formal English, but in specific situations, it is very likely to be deleted (Mélac 2022)
  - ‘Looks like you’ve made it!’

- The subject is **syntactically deletable** in Italian, but in a contrastive context, it sounds **incorrect** to delete it.
  - ‘Giulia ha pagato.’ ‘No, ho pagato io!’

- When talking about the obligatoriness of a form, it is necessary to specify **what types of conditions** may make the use of a form ‘obligatory’. Syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic conditions refer to very different types of obligatoriness, and their **links with grammaticalization** still need **further investigation**
3) What causes obligatorification?
A functionalist paradox

- Without grammatical forms, **expressing complex meaning** would take much more time
  ‘John thinks *your* mother *told* my dad *that* she was going to pick *some* apples.’

- **However**, being **obliged** to use certain forms when it is unnecessary is **not economical**, and seems to contradict Grice’s maxim of quantity

- If grammaticalization is **motivated by economy**, **WHY** do grammatical forms become **obligatory**? Why can’t we keep them **optional**?

- **Unnecessary morphological weight**
  ‘The dogs are barking’ VS ‘*dog bark’

- **Unmotivated Redundancy**
  Gender in French:
  « Le skieur maladroit est tombé dans la neige poudreuse.»

- For a **step-by-step study of obligatorification**, one cannot investigate number in English or Gender in French (because already obligatory in Proto-Indo-European)

- A case study: **BE + V-ing**
**Early grammaticalization** (Middle English)

- Previous research on the grammaticalization of Be V-ing (Elsness 1994, Smitterberg 2005) mentions its obligatorification, but no thorough investigation

- A linguistic innovation usually has an **expressive function**

  ‘Hark you, the king is coming, and I must speak with him from the pridge.’ (Henry V 3.6, Shakespeare)

- **Maxim of extravagance**: the emergence of new forms allows speakers to draw attention (Haspelmath 1999, 2000)

- Be V-ing spread (16th c. onwards)

  ![Be V-ing spread chart](chart)

  | 1500s | 1510s | 1520s | 1530s | 1540s | 1550s | 1560s | 1570s | 1580s | 1590s | 1600s | 1610s | 1620s | 1630s | 1640s | 1650s | 1660s | 1670s | 1680s | 1690s |
  |-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
  | 0     | 0     | 1     | 0     | 2     | 2     | 7     | 4     | 3     | 18    | 24    | 16    | 23    | 44    | 109   | 82    | 88    | 121   | 100   |
  | 1.3   | 0.9   | 3.0   | 7.1   | 8.7   | 7.2   | 16.1  | 26.9  | 32.0  | 24.1  | 40.0  | 42.9  | 38.6  | 42.8  | 47.1  | 99.5  | 63.5  | 74.6  | 92.6  | 79.7  |
  | 0.00  | 0.00  | 0.14  | 0.00  | 0.28  | 0.12  | 0.26  | 0.13  | 0.12  | 0.45  | 0.56  | 0.42  | 0.54  | 0.93  | 1.10  | 1.29  | 1.18  | 1.31  | 1.25  |

- But it remained optional

  ‘[Enter ghost] Look, my lord, it comes!’ (Hamlet 1.1, Shakespeare)

- Difficult to know why a form becomes popular and spreads (sociolinguistic factors)
Late grammaticalization (20th c.)

- **Be V-ing keeps spreading**

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- **Still optional until mid-20th c.**

‘Look, look! He *eats* a bean. [...] Look, that is salt. See, salt? and he’s *eating* it.’ (coha, 1927)

- **However**, the simple form is used in a progressive context in **only approx. 5%** of its occurrences in the early 20th c., so the association of the simple form with the non-progressive aspect must have **started solidifying** (conventionalization of an implicature)

- **Context-induced semanticization of zero** (Bybee 1994) leads to **obligatorification**

- **Obligatorification happened at a very late stage of grammaticalization**

- **Contemporary English**: ‘* Look! It comes.’
Morphemic vs cognitive economy

- It is true that **grammar** often obliges us to use more morphemes
- However, **economy** cannot be assessed only by the **number of morphemes**
- At the **early stage** of grammaticalization, a form spreads because of its **popularity**
- At the **late stage** of grammaticalization, a form may have spread so much that it might become more **economical** to simply repeat full phrases (chunking) every time the right context occurs than to keep a ‘specified’ VS ‘unspecified’ contrast

“Jonas, Jonas, where are you going?” “I am going down into the woods beyond the brook.” (COHA, 1857)

- More is sometimes less: In the human mind, storage is cheap and computation is expensive (Bybee 1994)
- It is not so much that forms obligatorify but rather that as forms become very frequent and **enter a tight paradigm**, their **absence** becomes **meaningful**. When they are not used, the opposite is implied, making a **notion** likely to **obligatorify**
CONCLUSION

- **Obligatoriness** is a concept that should be handled with care, because it may refer to a wide range of phenomena.
- It is not an inherent property of grammatical forms as opposed to lexical forms.
- The obligatorification of a notion seems to emerge at the very end of the grammaticalization of a form if this form has become very frequent and has entered a tight paradigm.
- Obligatorification should not be considered a defining property of grammaticalization but is a common scenario motivated by chunking followed by zero semanticization.
- Obligatorification does not contradict the Gricean maxim of quantity or the economical motivation of grammaticalization. It is rather a by-product of these principles.
Thank you for your attention!

"MY FATHER IS VERY HARD TO COMMUNICATE WITH -- HE ONLY KNOWS NOUNS AND INTERJECTIONS."

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