Constructions and halfly missed grammaticalization: a diachronic study of English posture verbs.

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The present paper discusses the unexpected path English posture verbs sit, stand, and lie have taken in comparison to their equivalents in other Germanic languages (see among others, Kvist-Darnell 2008; Lemmens 2002, 2005; Serra Borneto 1996; Van Oosten 1984). While data (exhaustively) drawn from the OED reveal that early uses of the English posture verbs were as diverse as they still are today in other Germanic languages (see Lemmens 2014), the process of further grammaticalization to basic locative verbs (or markers of progressive aspect, as in Swedish or Dutch) must have been cut short, given that in contemporary English the neutral verb be is preferred to encode locative events (e.g., The cup is on the table), while in the other Germanic languages the use of a posture verb is, generally speaking, obligatory in such contexts.

Newman (2009) attributes this ‘missed’ grammaticalization to the verbs’ increasing use to encode inchoative aspect (the dynamic actions of sitting down, standing up, and lying down) in constructions without the expected particle (which expresses the path of motion). While plausible, his hypothesis is based on a small, unrepresentative sample, i.e., the use of sit in the King James Bible. To evaluate his hypothesis, we conducted a more extensive diachronic corpus-based analysis for the period 1710-1920, the time frame when the increasing entrenchment must have occurred (Lesuisse 2015). The data for our study is drawn from the Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (version 3.0; see Diller et al. 2011).

Probability trees based on our corpus data reveal that Newman’s hypothesis is only partly confirmed: the entrenchment of unmarked dynamic uses is significant enough to explain the blocked grammaticalization for sit (as in Newman’s study) and, to some extent, for stand but not for lie. Secondly, and more importantly, our data show that constructional and idiomatic patterns attested in our data necessitate a more nuanced (i.e., constructional) view. In our presentation, we illustrate this with the constructions sit/stand/lie + ADJ/NOUN which trigger a copula-like usage of the posture verbs. This suggests that the three verbs have clearly gone through a process of semantic bleaching co-occurring with changes in the constructions they appear in. These uses are what could be considered ‘grammaticalized islands’, while the non-grammaticalization only applies to the verbs’ postural and locative uses. This confirms the need for a constructional approach to language change showing “how each micro-construction has its own history within the constraints of larger patterns” (Traugott 2014:17).

References


