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The Spread of Grammaticalized Forms: the case of *be+supposed to*

Grammaticalization has been examined as a semantic/pragmatic process, but the ways that grammaticalized forms diffuse through a language have not been closely studied. In previous work I discussed the possibility of a form which grammaticalizes only within a single register of texts. In this paper, I look at the dynamics of polysemic forms: how do grammaticalized forms coexist with their pregrammaticalized lexical senses and how does the possibility of ambiguity motivate speakers to use or avoid constructions? Electronic corpora permit us to examine these questions and to compare usage from different genres.

This paper considers *be+supposed to*, a construction which could be either the passive form of the main verb *to suppose* (*be supposed [to...]*) or the semi-modal construction *be+supposed to*. The evidential *be supposed (to...)*, which indicates belief, therefore, exists alongside the deontic *be+supposed to* which indicates obligation or intention, and the epistemic *be+supposed to* which points to a recognized expectation which the speaker does not hold, (Sweetser 1990, Ziegeler 2003). Consider the following three examples from the British National Corpus.

- 1) Hippocrates **is supposed to** have said ‘What is Woman? (BNC, ACL 1006)
- 2) ‘You boys **are supposed to** be helping with the washing up,’; said Mrs Crumwallis, in the tones of an aggrieved crow. (BNC, H8Y 852)
- 3) Surface links between American airports and the cities they **are supposed to** serve are usually dire. (BNC, A5X 246)

Example (1) presents the evidential sense *is thought to* or *is believed to*. Example (2) and (3) present aspects of the further grammaticalized sense: (2) depicts the deontic sense *is expected/ obliged to*, and (3) invokes the epistemic sense *is expected to (but not by me)*. Jacqueline Visconti argues that these three forms are stages in the semantic development of the construction, rather than polysemous forms from the outset (Visconti 2004). A search of the British National Corpus, complemented with the Chadwyck Healey databases and the Nineteenth-Century Fiction database, permit us to compare the usage of the grammaticalized senses of the phrase with the pre-grammaticalized senses; we find that the evidential usage is becoming less common and is preserved primarily in written genres. The ambiguity that can exist between the evidential and deontic senses is found to serve as increasing inducement for speakers to avoid the evidential sense. The use of electronic corpora, in this case, provides tools to apply register/genre analysis to questions of semantic change.

References

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