
(Lack of) reanalysis of ‘FINISH + GERUND’ in English: experimentally assessing subordination and informativity in bridging contexts

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In historical linguistics, semantic reanalysis is defined as the process by which speakers assign a new meaning to a grammatical construction (Detges & Waltereit 2002). Despite its significance, the conditions that trigger reanalysis are largely unexplored, and accounts of why very similar constructions grammaticalize in some languages but not in others are lacking. This study addresses this question, focusing on whether similar lexical meanings can trigger comparable implicatures, leading to parallel grammaticalization pathways across languages.

We examine whether the conditions that led to the reanalysis of Spanish ‘ACABAR + de + INFINITIVE’ as a recent past marker are detectable in English, where such a process has not occurred in the parallel construction ‘FINISH + GERUND’. In Spanish, this periphrasis has evolved from its compositional meaning (‘to finish doing something’) to a non-compositional meaning (‘have just done something’), driven by contexts characterized by temporal subordination and low informativity of the non-finite verbal form (Rosemeyer & Grossman 2017, 2021). We aimed to determine whether English speakers exhibit a similar sensitivity to these contexts, so we asked 180 native speakers to judge the temporal distance between two separate events. The experimental design was a 2x2 within-subjects setup, manipulating informativity of the non-finite verbal form (low vs. high) and sentence structure (subordinate clause vs. two main clauses).

Results revealed that temporal distance was judged as significantly shorter in subordinate clauses with low-informativity verbs, suggesting that similar cognitive processes underlie temporal inferences in both Spanish and English. These findings imply that temporal subordination and low informativity of verbal forms may indeed be cross-linguistically critical factors in the grammaticalization of ‘FINISH’ constructions into recent-past markers. This research contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms behind semantic reanalysis, demonstrating that experimentally replicable linguistic features, such as informativity and clause structure, play a vital role in advancing grammaticalization processes.

References. Detges, U., S & R. Waltereit (2002). Grammaticalization vs. reanalysis: a semantic-pragmatic account of functional change in grammar. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 21(2), 151-195. • Rosemeyer, M. & E. Grossman (2017). The road to auxiliarity revisited: the grammaticalization of finish anteriors in Spanish. *Diachronica* 34(4), 516-558. • Rosemeyer, M & E. Grossman. (2021). Why don’t grammaticalization pathways always recur? *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 17(3), 653-681.