



A COGNITIVE-METONYMIC APPROACH TO AUXILIARY SELECTION

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Abstract

This paper addresses a fundamental question in grammaticalization studies: why do only certain lexical verbs develop into auxiliary verbs while others do not? Drawing on cognitive linguistics and grammaticalization theory, the study argues that auxiliary formation is not random but constrained by semantic and cognitive factors. Specifically, it proposes that only verbs that encode salient components of event structure and allow metonymic extension within a single conceptual domain are likely to grammaticalize. By examining data from Uzbek and English, the paper demonstrates that verbs such as put, give, and go undergo systematic semantic shifts, while verbs like eat or drink resist such development due to their lexical specificity. The findings contribute to a more precise understanding of the relationship between cognition, semantics, and grammaticalization.

Keywords: Auxiliary selection; conceptual metonymy; grammaticalization constraints; cognitive linguistics; event structure; semantic bleaching; cross-linguistic evidence.

Introduction

Grammaticalization has long been studied as a process by which lexical items evolve into grammatical markers. However, an important question remains insufficiently addressed: why do only certain verbs grammaticalize into auxiliaries, while others with seemingly similar meanings do not?

For example, verbs denoting movement or transfer frequently develop auxiliary functions, whereas verbs such as eat or drink rarely do. This asymmetry suggests that grammaticalization is not a random process but is constrained by underlying cognitive and semantic principles.



This paper proposes that conceptual metonymy provides a key explanation for this phenomenon. It argues that only those verbs that are cognitively salient and structurally accessible within event representation can undergo grammaticalization.

2. Theoretical Background

Grammaticalization is commonly defined as “the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain contexts to serve grammatical functions” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. xv). This process involves semantic bleaching, frequency increase, and structural reanalysis.

However, not all lexical items are equally prone to grammaticalization. As Bybee et al. (1994) note, “high-frequency items with general meanings are more likely to grammaticalize” (p. 15). This suggests that semantic generality plays a crucial role. From a cognitive perspective, metonymy is defined as “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity... provides mental access to another within the same idealized cognitive model” (Radden & Kövecses, 1999, p. 21). Unlike metaphor, metonymy preserves conceptual continuity, making it particularly suitable for explaining grammaticalization.

3. Semantic Constraints on Auxiliary Formation

3.1 Semantic Bleachability

One of the key factors in grammaticalization is semantic bleaching. Hopper and Traugott (2003) emphasize that lexical meaning must become less specific for grammatical functions to emerge. Verbs with highly concrete meanings, such as eat or drink, resist this process because their semantic content is too specific.

In contrast, verbs like give, take, or put have more abstract and flexible meanings, allowing them to undergo reinterpretation.

3.2 Frequency and Generality

Frequency plays a crucial role in grammaticalization. As Bybee et al. (1994) argue, “repetition leads to the reanalysis of forms and meanings” (p. 9). High-frequency verbs are more likely to be reinterpreted in new contexts.

Moreover, semantically general verbs are more adaptable. For instance, go in English has developed into a future marker (going to), reflecting its flexible semantic range.



4. A Cognitive-Metonymic Explanation

While semantic bleaching and frequency explain part of the process, they do not fully account for why certain verbs grammaticalize and others do not. This paper proposes that the key factor is **metonymic accessibility within event structure**.

Metonymy allows one component of an event to stand for the whole. For example:

- **result** → **entire action**
- **beginning** → **process**
- **movement** → **intention**

As Radden and Kövecses (1999) note, metonymy involves intra-domain mapping, which ensures semantic continuity. Only verbs that encode salient components of event structure and allow metonymic extension can develop into auxiliary verbs.

5. Cross-Linguistic Evidence

5.1 Uzbek

Uzbek auxiliary constructions clearly illustrate metonymic processes:

- *yoʻzib qoʻydi* → completion
- *aytib yubordi* → sudden action

Here, verbs like *qoʻymoq* ('put') and *yubormoq* ('send') no longer denote physical actions but highlight aspects of the event. This reflects a metonymic shift from result or manner to the entire event.

5.2 English

English provides similar examples:

- *have* → perfect aspect
- *be* → progressive
- *go* → future

The development of *going to* illustrates a metonymic pathway: movement toward a goal becomes intention and eventually future meaning. As Heine (1993) notes, grammaticalization often follows "identifiable pathways" (p. 35), which are cognitively motivated.

5.3 Non-Grammaticalizing Verbs

In contrast, verbs such as *eat* or *drink* do not grammaticalize because they lack metonymic flexibility. They refer to specific actions and do not easily represent broader event structures.



6. Discussion

The analysis suggests that grammaticalization is constrained by cognitive factors, particularly metonymy. While frequency and semantic bleaching are important, they operate within a broader cognitive framework.

Metonymy explains why only certain verbs can extend their meaning to grammatical functions. It provides a principled account of auxiliary selection, grounded in event structure and conceptual accessibility.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that auxiliary formation is not random but cognitively constrained. Only verbs that are semantically general, frequently used, and metonymically accessible within event structure can undergo grammaticalization.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cognition and grammar and highlight the central role of metonymy in language change.

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