

The emergence of relational particles in English

This paper explores the emergence of a set of ‘relational particles’ in English, and results from previous research on how Path coding devices and verb particle systems evolved from Old English to Contemporary English.

In a previous paper (Imbert, 2008), I have shown how the typological shift from preverbs to verb particles in Old English in fact only affected morphemes whose function was one of Path coding. I demonstrated that the shift was Path-related through three observations. First, the shift occurred through complex systems dynamics, where the system of preverbs was declining as a Path-coding device, while a system of verb particles emerged, competed with it, and took over. Second, these dynamics occurred through interesting functional motivations, such as that of maintaining the Path-coding function of the *verbal* system – not to rely only on the use of adpositions, which by nature interact with the *nominal* system. Third, these ‘compensation’ dynamics led to an interesting semantic-functional split: while the old set of Path preverbs had become *semantically bleached and unspecific* and could code all types of Path (including Source and Goal), the new set of particles was more specific and *could not code Goal*; after the shift, Goal could only be expressed through adpositions.

In the present paper, I would like to address one of the outcomes of these dynamics: an emerging set of *relational particles*, such as ‘*after*’ and ‘*to*’ in verbs like *look after*, *see to*, etc. ‘Relational particles’ here are labelled after what Craig & Hale (1988) labelled ‘relational preverbs’ in Chibchan Rama (Nicaragua), which may be defined as a ‘fuzzy’ category: they are morphologically preverbs but functionally adpositions, by being syntactically linked to an argument of the verb.

I will show how these relational particles (1) are reminiscent of what happened to Path preverbs before they declined ten centuries ago. Indeed, the Path preverbs had become functionally fuzzy, as is attested by occurrences of relational preverbs (2). In both examples the ‘relational’ Path morpheme appears in **bold** and the verb argument it interacts with appears in *italic*:

- (1) The fuzzy category of relational particles in Contemporary English

He was looking **after** *the kids*

- (2) The fuzzy category of relational preverbs in Old English

His sword shall **purh-gan** *þine saule*
3SG:GEN sword:NOM shall **RP/through**-go:INF 2SG:GEN *soul*:DAT
‘His sword shall go through your soul’

The relational particles are also reminiscent of the Path preverbs before they declined by being *semantically bleached and less specific*. For instance, they include morphemes that, within the frame of Path coding, are Goal-coding morphemes – therefore ending a semantic specificity of the particle system, that of the exclusion of Goal morphemes from its inventory.

REFERENCES

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Craig, C. and Hale, K. 1988. "Relational preverbs in some languages of the Americas: Typological and historical perspectives". In *Language*, 64:2, pp. 312-344.