Different thresholds of actuation and a case for micro-analytical studies

Tine Breban, *The University of Manchester*

This paper offers a reflection on the actuation problem in the context of grammatical change. It is grounded in a cognitive-functional approach to language change and follows on from the work on grammaticalisation and from empirical case studies using historical corpus data. A core contribution of grammaticalisation studies was the identification of regularities and pathways of change, shaped by general cognitive mechanisms and functional purposes of communication. Such pathways indicate potentiality of change, with actual change occurring in language use. Kuteva *et al*. (2019) provides us with an updated catalogue of known actual changes. The lexicon shows that some changes are ubiquitous, e.g. the development from demonstrative to definite article, whereas others are rare, e.g. the development of lexical verb *do* into a dummy auxiliary in English. I suggest this difference may be explained by different actuation needs or thresholds. The rarer the phenomenon cross-linguistically or within a single language, the higher the threshold for actuation. The threshold of actuation is conceived of as the number of factors that need to fall into place in order for a change to occur. These factors are not only multiple but diverse, including the simultaneous presence of multiple linguistic constructions and other language-internal as well as language-external factors (De Smet *et al*. 2013, including Joseph 2013).

The idea of different actuation thresholds is illustrated with two cases that present opposite ends of the scale of actuation needs. On the low-demand end, the development of complex prepositions (Hoffmann 2005) is used as an example. Hofmann (2005) describes this as a case of analogy-driven change. The development of an abundance of (low-frequency) complex prepositions happens when there is straightforward linguistic model for change in place that other items which are similar in their source form and in their source meaning replicate. Such developments are motivated by an intention to be explicit, precise or 'extravagant'. No other language-internal or external factors appear necessary. Actuation takes the extreme form of opportunism. The question is not so much 'why here, why now', as 'why not'. At the other, high-demand, end of the actuation scale, we find 'striking innovations' and indeed cases that have proven puzzling in terms of their actuation. The case focussed on is auxiliary *do*, with reference to Moretti (2021). Moretti (2021) identifies a large, varied set of factors that coincide in the early Middle English period to make the development of *do* happen: the full range of delexicalised uses of *do* including a causative use with various argument structure configurations and a use as pro-verb; systemic changes involving the expression of causation, the development of auxiliaries, changes to inflectional morphology; and contact factors such as the presence of French loanwords.

Actuation even in a single domain, grammatical change, is not a unified phenomenon and different changes have different thresholds of actuation. I further suggest that these different thresholds necessitate different methodological approaches. In particular, complex high-demand cases in which multiple and diverse linguistic phenomena are involved for particular changes to be able to happen require micro-analytical studies, consisting of the miniature-like investigations of carefully-chosen historical data sets. The detailed qualitative nature of the work means that data sets will be small, generating findings that can then be extrapolated and tested (quantitatively) on larger data sets and supplemented with other types of studies investigating language-external factors. I make the case for this type of micro-analytical empirical work to be added to the toolkit to crack some of the most intriguing actuation puzzles.

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