

Overspecifying Particle Meanings

The contribution of a particle to their host meaning can be very diverse dependent on the host and the further context. Yet, like other items at the end of grammaticalisation paths, they intuitively form a unity for the language user and mixups between different uses are hard to find or construct.

The unity has traditionally been attributed to a core meaning which is pragmatically enriched in different ways in different contexts. Such a view has however problems: it is hard to give the details of the enriching process, the core meanings can become very vague and there is the translation problem. A good instance of that are the highly similar Dutch *toch* and German *doch* that because of their high similarity should have an identical core meaning. Since pragmatic enrichment is universal, it is then hard to understand that there are also uses in Dutch that are not in German and the other way round.

The alternative explanation of semantic unity is the overspecified meaning view due to Smolensky 1988. In this view, the meaning of the particle is understood as the set of all semantic features with which it associates, i.e. all the ones that it evokes in some occasions of its use. In each particular use, some of these features are switched off by conflict with the context, leading to the strongest meaning that the context allows. Though Hogeweg has successfully applied this model to the Dutch particle *wel*, the model is not sufficiently expressive for more complex particles such as *toch*. The reason is that in a set the features are independent and have equal weight. A better proposal for overspecification is Smolensky, Hogeweg, Zeevat et al. 2016, in which such dependencies and weightings can be taken into account.

For the particle *toch/doch*, it means that the two different families of uses (correction versus confirmation) can be kept separate without interference from each other (which would give the wrong predictions). The proposal can also make Hogeweg's treatment of *wel* simpler.

The conclusion that will be argued for is that overspecified particle meanings can explain the unity of meaning of the particle without having to invoke a core meaning or inference-rich accounts of pragmatic enrichment.