

Grammaticalization and Subjectification in English Intensifiers

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Whereas grammaticalization is essentially a process independent of subjectification, these two processes are closely related, especially in the development of intensifiers. The development of intensifiers involves some of the defining features of grammaticalization, including semantic bleaching, abstraction and decategorization, as well as an increasingly “pragmatic, interpersonal, and speaker-based function” (Traugott (1995: 32)). Above all, intensification is concerned with the speaker’s interpersonal attitudes toward what is talked about and with achieving expressivity, both of which are manifestations of subjectivity. I present two cases of the development of English intensifier phrases, *all you want* and *big time*, and demonstrate through an analysis of diachronic data from COHA how the speaker’s interpersonal and pragmatic or rhetorical involvement has contributed to the emergence of innovative subjective meaning.

All you want has developed an intensifier meaning from its original nominal meaning, as demonstrated in Ohashi (2006, 2011). Investigations into diachronic data indicate that the intensifier use started in sentences that convey permission or suggestion, as in (1).

(1) You’re welcome to use it all you want.

Subsequently, it has been more and more frequently used in “challenging” contexts in which the speaker expresses unpleasant feelings and challenges the utterance or attitude of the addressee, or in “concession” contexts in which the speaker assumes the same, challenging attitude and denies what is inferred to take place as a consequence of the addressee’s attitude, as illustrated in (2) and (3), respectively.

(2) You just go ahead and kid me all you want.

(3) You can inspect it all you want, but it looks perfect to me.

Since *all you want* is almost exclusively used to maximize the force of permission/suggestion, challenge, and concession, rather than used in a descriptive statement, it is regarded as having undergone subjectification in that it has semanticized the intensifier meaning.

A/the big time, which originally had a compositional meaning, as in (4), later developed an adjectival usage, as in (5).

(4) No more shall he urge his Texan cronies to “come on and have a big time.”

(5) Particularly here in the Islands where there are no big time sports.

The phrase was also used to qualify things assumed to have negative associations, as in (6).

(6) Big time gangsters, racketeers, and the criminal aristocrats do not use narcotics.

The adjectival meaning has undergone semantic bleaching and abstraction and derived an intensifying adjectival use as in (7), which in turn has developed an intensifier adverbial meaning as in (8).

(7) About what big time party poopers they are.

(8) I was screwed big time.

Interestingly enough, diachronic data suggests that the semantic shift from its original positive meaning to the derivative negative meaning has promoted subjectification, as the frequency of the intensifier of the negative meaning has noticeably increased in the past 20 years, while the frequency of its original positive meaning has not showed a remarkable change.

These diachronic findings demonstrate an interesting aspect of semantic change in which semantic bleaching and abstraction have resulted in increased subjectivity associated with the speaker’s involvement in interpersonal and rhetorical innovations.

References

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