The emergence of sentence-initial *hopefully* in Present-Day English

This paper examines the syntax and semantics of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb in English, from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Such use is seen as a relatively recent phenomenon, attributed to U.S. speakers by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and first attested by the *OED* in 1932. Its use is considered problematic by many authors of style handbooks (see discussion in Whitley, 1983), although corpus data show a rapid growth in written works of various genres, corresponding to its heavy use in speech.

One of the main "problems" with the use of *hopefully* is that it is somewhat hard to categorize in comparison to other sentence adverbs. *Hopefully* can be classified as a modal adverb, like *possibly* or *probably*. Yet unlike these two adverbs, which are epistemic, *hopefully* expresses volition or optative mood, which is often characterized as deontic (see e.g. Traugott, 1989). Deontic adverbs in English are relatively rare.

A further consideration is the unclear path by which *hopefully* began to be used as a sentence adverb. The appearance of sentence adverbs in English and other languages is often attributed to the phenomenon of *grammaticalization* (e.g. Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Most grammaticalization pathways involve 1) the reanalysis of a word based on its syntactic environment; 2) the co-occurrence of two or more polysemies (the older version and the newer one); and 3) the emergence of the newer, grammaticalized form in a previously-unavailable position. The pathway from which *hopefully* emerges as a fully-functional sentence adverb is, however, unclear. The *OED* hints, for example, that its use may be a calque from German *hoffentlich*, ostensibly by German immigrants to the U.S.

Although grammaticalization will be a part of the analysis, this paper will concentrate on *hopefully* as the *lexicalization* of a secondary predicate, rather than as a manner adverb that is reanalyzed after appearing in a syntactic Focus position. The lexicalization of *hopefully* depends on the use of the *-ly* affix as a syntactic Relator (Den Dikken, 2006). The relating of the proposition to the adjective *hopeful* depends on the inanimate use of the adjective (e.g. *it was a hopeful sign*), attested from the same era as the animate use (e.g. *a hopeful fan waited for his idol*). This shift in semantic features allows *hopefully* (which originates in the psych-verb *hope*) to be used in a way that similar words such as *wishfully* and *longingly* cannot be used.

Finally, there are indications that *hopefully*, as a modal adverb, may be subject to the erosion of optativity in favor of a broader-based irrealis. This would indicate an ongoing grammaticalization process similar to that of modal auxiliaries in English and other languages. A direct comparison can be made to the volitional verb *will(an)* in Old English that lost its semantic feature of volition in favor of the grammatical feature of future/irrealis.

References

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