Tracking grammaticalization through synchronic contextual variation: 
FINISH as an aspect marker in Auslan

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Language change and variation (including grammaticalization) can most clearly be tracked diachronically but this, naturally, requires historical data, usually in the form of written records. Sign languages lack detailed historical data. A solution can be found in the fact that grammaticalization can also be observed synchronically through the comparison of data on variant word forms and multi-word constructions in particular contexts and in different dialects and registers, e.g., the presence of similarly related variants of particular constructions often indicate on-going grammaticalization, e.g., going to and gonna in modern English (Pagliuca 1994, Chambers 1995). This is termed ‘synchronic contextual variation’ (Heine 2002).

In this paper, we report an investigation of language change and variation in a signed language Auslan (Johnston 2008), based on a dataset of 435 tokens of signs that can be glossed as FINISH in Auslan. These tokens have been identified in an annotated corpus and the tagged for function (full verb, auxiliary, affix, conjunction, etc.), variation and/or erosion (reduction in phonetic form) (Hopper & Traugott 2003, Heine & Kuteva 2007), and correlation of these with position in clauses and clause complexes for evidence of grammaticalization (cf. Meir 1999, Pfau & Steinbach in press).

We report on multivariate analysis of the data using Rbrul that suggests on-going grammaticalization is part of the explanation of variation—variants correlate with different uses in different linguistic contexts, and there is evidence of phonetic reduction in grammaticalized versus lexical uses. Grammaticalization theory predicts that there should be exactly such pairs of sign variants in the corpus in which one is clearly a lexical source and the other is an emerging/emergent grammaticalised form, i.e., there should be some evidence that particular variants or forms of the target lexical signs are preferentially used in particular environments. Manipulated corpus data of this type enables the identification of patterns that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to identify.
References


