

The Grammaticalization of the Spanish Construction *lo que pasa es que*: From Lexical Reference to Subjectification

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ABSTRACT

The construction *lo que pasa es que* ‘what happens is that’ is a Spanish discourse marker that was originally a pseudo-cleft construction. Before becoming grammaticalized, the verb *pasar* contained its full lexical meaning ‘to happen,’ but later evolved into a fixed expression losing its lexical meaning and acquiring an implicit contrastive and causal meaning. The present study aims to describe the construction’s evolution on the path of grammaticalization in relation to Traugott’s (1989) three semantic-pragmatic tendencies. In addition, a Usage-based Theory approach is employed in order to describe some of the formal aspects of the construction. Using two corpora, *CORDE* and *Corpus del Español*, all instances of the construction were located and analyzed with regard to function and usage in context. Results indicate that the construction was first used in the 16th Century and that its evolution as lexical > concessive > epistemic is in line with Traugott’s tendencies. Mechanisms of change such as chunking and phonetic reduction and loss of compositionality and analyzability, as well as increase in overall frequency are also discussed in relation to this construction, lending further support to Usage-based theory.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of grammaticalization has been widely examined among scholars interested in both diachronic and synchronic language change (e.g. Bybee, 2011; Diewald, 2002; Hopper and Traugott, 2003; Howe, 2011; Traugott, 1989, 1995, 2010) and has been defined by Hopper and Traugott (2003, p. xv) as “the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions”. For English, this has included, for instance, the development of complex prepositions, such as *in spite of* (e.g. Hoffman, 2005). Regarding Spanish, examples of grammaticalization studies have included the lexical item *mente* ‘mind’ becoming an adverbial morpheme, as in *lentamente* ‘slowly’ (e.g. Torner, 2005) and the development of the periphrastic past (present perfect) in Peninsular Spanish to take on perfective meaning, as in *he lavado* ‘I have washed’ to indicate a sequence of events (e.g. Howe, 2013; Howe and Schwenter, 2003; Schwenter and Torres Cacoullós, 2008), among many others. No study thus far, to the best of my knowledge, has attempted to trace

the grammaticalization path of the Spanish phrase *lo que pasa es que* ‘what happens is that’, and the present analysis aims to explore its path from lexicon to grammar and discourse.

The construction *lo que pasa es que* is a Spanish discourse marker that was originally a pseudo-cleft construction (Alamillo, 2011). Before becoming grammaticalized, the verb *pasar* contained its full lexical meaning ‘to happen’ and the meaning of the construction was always related to a description of something happening or taking place. However, *lo que pasa es que* has evolved into a fixed expression in Spanish, losing its lexical meaning and acquiring both a contrastive and causal meaning that is implicit (Alamillo, 2011; Romera, 2008). An example of the original pseudo-cleft construction is illustrated below:

- (1) A: ¿Y qué pasa si alguien aprieta este botón?
‘And what happens if someone presses this button?’
B: *Lo que pasa es que* se abre la compuerta y se cae el contenido del tanque.
‘What happens is that the lockgate opens and the content of the tank spills out’
(Alamillo, 2011, p. 1438)

In the above example, speaker B is simply giving an explanation for speaker A's question, describing in a very literal way what happens as a result of pressing the button. Used in this sense, the full lexical meaning is retained. In contrast, example 2 below demonstrates the use of the grammaticalized construction that lacks the lexical meaning.

- (2) Tiene unos dolores muy fuertes, lo que pasa es que nunca se queja.
'He is in a lot of pain, *lo que pasa es que* he never complains' (Alamillo 2011, p. 1436)

In this example, *lo que pasa es que* is being used as a fixed expression that introduces a contrastive element. Specifically, 'he never complains' contrasts the preceding discourse 'he is in a lot of pain.' In this sentence, *lo que pasa es que* could be paraphrased with *pero* 'but' or *sin embargo* 'however.' The goal of this paper is three-pronged with regard to the grammaticalization of *lo que pasa es que*:

- Locate historical uses of *lo que pasa es que* to determine when it was first used and when it began the process of grammaticalization
- Describe the grammaticalization of *lo que pasa es que* in relation to Traugott's (1989) three semantic-pragmatic tendencies
- Discuss formal aspects of *lo que pasa es que* in relation to Usage-based theory (Bybee 2011)

The data sources used for the study include two corpora: *Corpus Diacrónico del Español* (CORDE, Real Academia Española) and *Corpus del Español* (CdE, Davies, 2002). The former was used to analyze the historical use of the construction and the latter corpus was used for contemporary Spanish analysis. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: First, I briefly discuss the historical use and function of *lo que pasa es que* as found in the CORDE. Second, I describe the grammaticalization of the construction in greater detail and in relation to Traugott's (1989) three tendencies of semantic/pragmatic change. Then, I discuss some of the formal aspects and mechanisms of change involved in the grammaticalization process from the perspective of usage-based theory (Bybee, 2011). Finally, I conclude with a summary of general conclusions as well as suggestions for future research.

HISTORICAL USE OF *LO QUE PASA ES QUE*

Regarding the historical use of *lo que pasa es que*, it first appeared in the 16th Century. That is, the first entry of this construction in the corpus data that I observed was from this time period and is illustrated below:

- (3) En lo que decís de Marco Aurelio, lo que pasa es que yo lo traduxe, y le di a César, aún no acabado, y al Emperador le hurtó Laxao... (16th c., CORDE)
'Regarding what you say about Marco Aurelio, what happens is that I translated it, and I gave it to Cesar, though unfinished, and Laxao stole it from the Emperor...'

In this example, similarly to (1) above, the verb *pasar* contains its full lexical and referential meaning to refer to a series of events that occurred in the past. Moreover, there is no specific discursive function or implied meaning

associated with its use. It is, however, interesting to note that even though this example is a narration of past events, the verb *pasar* is found in the present tense. This may indicate a type of intermediate stage in which the construction is becoming fixed while still retaining its lexical meaning. Another example from the CORDE data, this time from the 17th Century, shows a similar pattern:

- (4) ...lo llevó y escondió en una bodega para venderlo; y lo que pasa es que luego murió lo pusieron en una caja, con intención de entrar con el cuerpo muerto... (17th c., CORDE)
'he took it and hid it in a wine cellar to sell it; and what happens is that after he died they put it in a box, with the intention of entering with the dead body...'

The first instance of *lo que pasa es que* as a grammaticalized construction was observed in the late 19th Century. That is, I located numerous examples in the corpus that illustrated its loss of referential meaning and gain of discursive meaning and grammatical function, which will be described and exemplified in greater detail in the following section.

TRAUGOTT'S SEMANTIC-PRAGMATIC TENDENCIES

The tendencies of change observed for *lo que pasa es que* in the present analysis are very much in line with the tendencies in semantic-pragmatic change that Traugott (1989) has proposed. Below I present and illustrate Traugott's three tendencies, using examples from the two corpora employed in the present study. The first tendency is as follows:

Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation (Traugott, 1989, p. 34).

This tendency involves the meaning of items shifting from the external to become increasingly based on evaluative, perceptual, or cognitive situations. Consider examples (5) and (6) below.

- (5) ..castigando en público lo que passa entre ellos secreto (*Libro áureo de Marco Aurelio*, 16th c., CORDE, s.v. *lo que passa*)
'...punishing in public what happens between them in secret'
- (6) le dixo todo lo que passó con la prisión (*Las sergas del virtuoso caballero Esplandián*, CORDE, 16th c., s.v. *lo que passó*)
'he told him everything that happened with the imprisonment'

In the above examples, the verb *pasar* is used with its referential meaning to refer to what happened in certain situations, and there is no pragmatic meaning implied. Moreover, the second tendency relates to the textual and metalinguistic aspects, as shown below:

Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation (Traugott 1989, p. 35)

This tendency involves the change in meaning based in the text: the construction becomes a textual connective, is used discursively, and loses its lexical meaning, gaining a contrastive or causal meaning as seen in (7) and (8).

- (7) Tiene unos dolores muy fuertes, lo que pasa es que nunca se queja. (Alamillo, 2011, p. 1436)
‘He is in a lot of pain, lo que pasa es que he never complains.’
- (8) A: ¿Qué pasa con Silvia Pantoja, ¿se ha retirado o no? (Alamillo 2011, p. 1446)
‘What’s happening with Silvia Pantoja? Did she retire?’
B: Ni mucho menos, lo que pasa es que he estado ausente discográficamente
‘Far from it, lo que pasa es que I have been absent from the music industry.’

In (7), as seen above, *lo que pasa es que* serves as a contrastive implicature. Particularly, it functions as a textual connective that links the first clause with the second clause and introduces a contrast as well as something unexpected (he never complains) to the previous utterance in the first clause (He is in a lot of pain). In this example, *lo que pasa es que* could be paraphrased as ‘however’ or ‘but.’ On the other hand, example (8) does not only illustrate contrast, but also the causal meaning of *lo que pasa es que*. Speaker B is giving the cause or justification for her initial response (‘Far from it’). Finally, the third tendency relates to the subjective nature of meaning:

Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition (Traugott, 1989, p. 35).

- (9) Claro, lo que pasa es que tu situación ahora es mejor que la mía antes. Por eso sería muy injusto que yo te dijera no vayas (*Corpus del Español*, Habla Culta: Buenos Aires)
‘Sure, lo que pasa es que your situation now is better than mine was before. That’s why it’d be very unfair for me to tell you not to go.’
- (10) Sí, sí, claro, lo que pasa es que... e... no es tan fácil como parece conseguir... (*Corpus del Español*, Habla Culta: Caracas)
‘Yeah, yeah, sure, lo que pasa es que...um....it’s not as easy as it seems to get...’
- (11) yo creo que podemos vivir sin televisor a color y sin televisor siquiera ¿no? ¿no te parece? Lo que pasa es que no inventan tantas necesidades (*Corpus del Español*, Habla Culta: Lima)
‘I think we can live without a color television and even without a television at all, ya know? Don’t you think? Lo que pasa es que they don’t invent as many necessities’

In examples (9), (10), and (11), *lo que pasa es que* is being used to introduce the speaker’s attitudes, beliefs, or opinions concerning a proposition. This increased use of the speaker’s involvement, attitude, and point of view is known as *subjectification* (Traugott, 1982, 1989, 1995, 2010; see also Lyons, 1982). More specifically, subjectification is a phenomenon in which “forms and constructions that at first express primarily concrete, lexical, and objective meanings come through repeated use in local syntactic contexts to serve increasingly abstract, pragmatic, interpersonal, and speaker-based functions.” (Traugott, 1995, p. 32). In this regard, in the examples above we see *lo que pasa es que*

signaling and introducing subjectification (e.g. “yours is better”; it’s not as easy”, etc), showing a development from its original meaning and beyond simply a textual connective. In the next section, I will discuss some of the formal aspects of *lo que pasa es que* and tie them to usage-based theory.

FORMAL ASPECTS AND USAGE-BASED THEORY

Usage-based theory holds that linguistic structure is created as language is used (Bybee, 2011). Adopting Bybee’s perspective on this theory in relation to grammaticalization, I will discuss three specific mechanisms of change and how they relate to the grammaticalization of *lo que pasa es que*: chunking and phonetic reduction, loss of compositionality and analyzability, and gradual constituent structure and category change.

Chunking and Phonetic Reduction

This notion is connected with the idea that speaking is a neuromotor activity and that repetition of forms engenders fluency, which in turn leads to phonetic reduction. (e.g. going to > gonna, want to > wanna, have to > hafta). Likewise, there is evidence of reduced forms of *lo que pasa es que* that reflects this idea of repetition, chunking, and reduction. The three reduced forms are *lo que pasa que*, *lo que*, and *lo que pasas que* (Alamillo, 2011). These forms tend to exhibit dialectal variation (e.g. Spain, Argentina) and are the result of the high frequency use of the construction.

Loss of Compositionality and Analyzability

According to Bybee (2011), sequences of words become autonomous or independent from the words or morphemes that compose them. With regard to frequency of use, sequential relations within a chunk become strengthened while the relations of component members are weakened. Consequently, pragmatic functions and meanings are assigned to the unit as a whole, lessening the contribution of meaning from the components. In particular, *lo que pasa es que*, which once only contained a literal, referential meaning (‘what happens is that’), becomes a discourse marker whose meaning is now contrastive and causal.

Gradual Constituent Structure and Category Change

The last mechanism observed in the construction has to do with decategorialization, a process whereby an item loses or changes categories and internal structure. For example, *pasa* lost its category membership and constituent structure. Its verbal properties were lost and it has moved into a more grammaticalized category. Bybee (2011) mentions certain tests that can be employed to test for the degree of ‘unit-hood’ of a chunk, that is, how closely knit the elements are within a chunk. A specific test, an adjacency measure, is particularly relevant to the unit-hood of *lo que pasa es que*. An adjacency measure is done to determine if the elements of the chunk can be separated by intervening words. According

to Alamillo (2011), *lo que pasa es que* does not allow items to be inserted between its component parts such as dative pronouns, adverbs, or modal verbs. In addition, the construction is always affirmative and one cannot insert ‘no’ before the word ‘pasa.’ This demonstrates a relatively high degree of unit-hood for this construction.

For all of these mechanisms, frequency is related in some way. Before concluding, I would like to provide some numbers regarding the overall frequency of historical and modern usage of *lo que pasa es que* as found in the two corpora. For Old Spanish, there were only 35 entries in the CORDE, while there were 480 entries in the modern Spanish corpus. This clearly demonstrates a substantial increase in the use of this construction.

Interestingly, while most cases show this construction as a fixed expression, a few examples of modern Spanish show analyzable forms in which the tense of *pasa* and/or *es* is modified:

- “lo que pasó es que” (what happened is that)
- “Lo que ha pasado es que” (what has happened is that)
- “Lo que pasó fue que” (what happened was that)

This variation could indicate that the loss of analysability and the change in constituent structure is a gradual process and is still ongoing in modern Spanish (Bybee, 2011, p. 74).

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, I have been able to draw some preliminary conclusions in relation to the main goals of this study that were outlined in the Introduction, namely to (a) locate historical uses of *lo que pasa es que* to determine when it was first used and when it began the process of grammaticalization; (b) describe the grammaticalization of *lo que pasa es que* in relation to Traugott’s (1989) three semantic-pragmatic tendencies; and (c) discuss formal aspects of *lo que pasa es que* in relation to Usage-based theory (Bybee 2011). First, *lo que pasa es que* was first used in the 16th Century (as evidenced from the CORDE data) with its full referential meaning and gradually became grammaticalized, evidenced by its first grammaticalized appearance in the 19th Century. Second, the grammaticalization process, including the tendencies of semantic-pragmatic change of *lo que pasa es que* appear to fit with the three semantic-pragmatic tendencies proposed by Traugott (1989). Finally, the mechanisms of change regarding formal aspects of the construction, particularly chunking and phonetic reduction, loss of compositionality and analyzability, and gradual constituent structure and category change, are in line with Usage-Based Theory as described by Bybee (2011). Concerning future research, it would be useful to take a closer look at this construction and carry out a more in-depth historical study of the uses, functions, and structure of *lo que pasa es que* in relation to the grammaticalization process. Further, it would be interesting to study

the apparent dialectal variation that occurs with the construction to enhance our knowledge regarding the regional differences in relation to not only structure, but perhaps variation in pragmatic function as well. In general, it would be beneficial to consider additional sources that reveal more concerning the history and use of this construction in order to be able to further trace its grammaticalization path and to discover more about the complex morphosyntactic, phonological, and semantic/pragmatic changes and developments that have occurred along the way.

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