Conventionalization of grammatical anomalies through linearization

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Motivation for this talk

- Synchronously: certain constructions or features in languages do not seem to belong in the grammatical system as a whole. What to do about ‘exceptions’?
- Diachronically: we might find some explanation from their historical development, with implications for synchronic analysis.
- Specifically: is there evidence in some cases of historical change conventionalizing anomalies?
- Perhaps a new perspective on reanalysis in general.
Assume we can measure linguistic complexity by quantifying the amount of knowledge of a speaker:

Exceptional constructions, those not explained by more general rules in a language, add to complexity. Examples of such constructions will be discussed.

Therefore, anomalies in a language may be responsible for the bulk of its complexity.
Imagine we could explain most of English grammar with 1,000 rules.
Mostly these rules support each other and interact.

But now imagine a 1,001st rule that must be added just because of an unusual construction.
The more general rules are not sufficient.
This more specific rule is not otherwise motivated.
How many are there? How do they develop?
A sentence is grammatical if it is generated by the rules of the language.

A sentence is acceptable if it feels natural to speakers.

Usually these two factors align.

But some especially complex sentences may be hard to process, for example.

Still, we should usually expect an acceptable sentence to be grammatical! *Almost by definition:*

Remember: we are describing native speaker knowledge.
Some cases of acceptable but ungrammatical sentences have been reported. They are called grammaticality illusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence types</th>
<th>Grammatical</th>
<th>Ungrammatical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>*The rat the cat the dog chased hid.</td>
<td>The dog chased the cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>!The rat the cat the dog chased scared hid.</td>
<td>!*Chased dog the cat the.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “!” used to represent unacceptability.
Grammaticality Illusions

Sometimes acceptability despite ungrammaticalivity can be robust even to an informed speaker:

More people have been to Russia than I have.

(Townsend & Bever 2001, Phillips et al. 2011, inter alia)
Grammaticality Illusions

- These illusions are often interesting from a processing perspective (Phillips et al. 2011, *inter alia*).
- But usually not considered important for syntactic theory, seen as just errors in performance.
  - Like the difficulty with layered center embedding being unacceptable despite it being grammatical.
  - Most illusions aren’t pragmatically relevant (cf. *Russia*...).
- But could they ever conventionalize and become grammatical?
- What would the resulting grammatical system be like?
Diachronic change usually involves a mismatch between the speaker and hearer.

The hearer parses the sentences differently from the speaker’s intended meaning.

The same form, but different structures!

Over time, this new structure becomes conventionalized for the form.

(I have oversimplified some details, especially sociolinguistic factors, but this model is sufficient for the current discussion.)
Reanalysis

Motion > Future grammaticalization

I am going to visit the prisoner.
(Danchez & Kytö 1994:65)

Compare: I’m gonna visit the prisoner.

Each step of the development is consistent with the general grammatical rules of English.
In fact, this change is mostly lexical.
Syntactic change

Syntactic change as well often proceeds regularly.

Consider word order changes in Germanic:

Old SOV order: *He the book read will.*
Modern German: *He will the book read.*
Modern English: *He will read the book.*

Certainly there are some difficulties in the analysis of Germanic word order, but for the most part it is compatible with syntactic theory, and a common topic.

Yet some diachronic residue can build up:

Not only have I studied German, but I have also studied Swedish.
What is normal change?

- Normally, rules change but are not added.
  - If rules are added, they usually resemble other rules.

- We often see changes as progressing to an endpoint.
  - Anomalies sometimes arise at what we could think of as an intermediate point in a grammaticalization path.

- In general, languages vary, but we might assume not in the *kinds* of rules they have.
  - Likewise, that should not change over time either.
Some unusual changes

Unusual changes and constructions have received some attention from different linguists who point out that they do not conform to the more general or expected properties of the language, e.g.:

- McCawley’s (1988) discussion about ‘Patches and Syntactic Mimicry’
- Culicover’s (1999) Syntactic Nuts (because they’re hard to crack)
- Ross (2014), regarding their contribution to the complexity of a language.
Prenominal Adjectives

Prenominal adjectives in English can be asyndetically coordinated:

relevant, interesting research

This is anomalous because all other coordination in English requires an overt conjunction and:

*mother father     *sing dance

*That research is relevant, interesting!

(e.g. Quirk et al. 1985:961)
Is this really coordination?

Consider the following ambiguity:

- short young man
- short for his age, or both young and short

A comma can also be disambiguating:

- short, young man

The order can also be reversed in coordination:

- relevant, interesting research
- interesting, relevant research
Asyndetic coordination found cross-linguistically:
N+N/V+V ‘and’ is: (Haspelmath 2005)
But why this anomaly for English adjectives?
It isn’t explained by more general rules!

Old English permitted overtly coordinated adjective phrases or one before and another after a noun.

Middle English then developed (or used more often) hierarchical prenominal adjectives (Fisher 2004):

\[
\text{Adj} \ [\text{Adj N}]
\]

\[
\text{short} \ [\text{young man}]
\]
Prenominal Adjectives

- The modern asyndetic coordinated construction has the same linear structure as the hierarchical one:
  \[ \text{Adj Adj N} \]
- The hierarchical structure is ambiguous, and often the hierarchy is not semantically salient.
- By assigning coordinating semantics to the structure, reanalysis of the syntactic structure took place.
- Now the conjunction \textit{and} is optional in English, but only between prenominal adjectives! A special rule!
Icelandic Past Infinitives

- Old Icelandic 3PL.PRES verbs were coincidentally homophonous with infinitives.

- By analogy (in a certain construction), *preterite infinitives* developed, homophonous to 3PL.PAST.

- The result is semantically vacuous tense-agreement.

(cf. Heusler 1921, Sigurðsson 2010, Ross forthcoming)
English has an unusual ‘go and’ construction:

I’m going to school and study. / I’m going home and sleep.

This usage is rare but found in natural usage by native speakers of American English (Staum 2004).

It appears to be a blend of two different sentences:

I’m going to school. I’m going to go and sleep.

Or maybe a reanalysis of:

I’m going to school and going to sleep.

(Zwicky 2002, Staum 2004)
try and [verb]

Pseudocoordination with try and is semantically equivalent to try to (*What did you both try and also do? is ungrammatical for the relevant reading!)

Example:

I will try and win the race.

(But even if I try, I might not win!)

(Ross 2013, 2014, 2015, forthcoming)
A quick survey…

?Try and win! (It’s ok if you don’t though.)
?I will try and win. (But I might not win.)
?We always try and win. (But we don’t always win.)
?He tries and win. (But he doesn’t always.)
?He tries and wins. (But he doesn’t always.)
?We tried and win. (But we didn’t win.)
?We tried and won. (But we didn’t win.)
Grammaticality

Try and win!
I will try and win.
We always try and win.
*He tries and win.
*He tries and wins.
*We tried and win.
*We tried and won.

(It’s ok if you don’t though.)
(But I might not win.)
(But we don’t always win.)
(But he doesn’t always.)
(But he doesn’t always.)
(But we didn’t win.)
(But we didn’t win.)

$x$ The ‘bare form condition’ applies (Carden & Pesetsky 1977)
Neither verb can be inflected. Paradigmatic gaps:
*He tries and win(s).

Descriptively, we can restrict inflection. However:

In Faroese, a comparable construction exists with overt inflection (Ross 2015, Heycock & Petersen 2012):

Tey royna og lesa bókina.
(lit.) They try and read the book

Faroese PRES.PL inflection (but not SG, PAST, etc.) is identical to the infinitive: looks-like-infinitive rule!
Historical Development

- 1500s: literal coordination reanalyzed as ‘attempt to’:
  You maie (said I) trie and bring him in…
  But only in infinitive and imperatives!
- 1800s: syntactic shift allows bare present tense usage:
  We always try and eat well. (*He always tries…)
- 1900s: be permitted in present tense contexts:
  I always try and be polite.

(Ross 2013)
Grammaticality Conditions

(A) The second verb is a bare infinitive, selected by *and*
(B) Inflectional parallelism, 1\textsuperscript{st} shares inflection w/ 2\textsuperscript{nd}
(C) Standard subject-verb agreement (1\textsuperscript{st} verb only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential <em>try and</em> sentences</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I try and win.</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>He tries and wins.</em></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
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<td>*</td>
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</table>
Townsend & Bever (2001:184) propose that some grammaticality illusions may blend two similar (but grammatical) sentences, often with related meanings:

*That’s the first time anyone sang to me like that before.

(a) *That’s the first time anyone sang to me like that.*

(b) *No one sang to me like that before.*

Diachronically this may come from the tendency to try to parse messy input (see Frazier & Clifton 2015).

More generally may be a type of ‘good enough’ processing.
Reanalysis can occur when a linear sequence of words is grammatical under *any* reading.

Note that grammaticality is determined for pairs of form and meaning, not just that a sentence has at least one grammatical parse.

If the hearer reinterprets the meaning of the utterance (in context), then a new parse may develop, and if conventionalized then syntactic change has occurred.
Reinterpretations

Speakers seem to try to do their best to find a meaningful interpretation in an utterance.

Even grammaticality illusions might be interpreted:

No head injury is too trivial to be ignored.

Compare: No missile is too small to be banned.

(Wason & Reich 1979)
Partial grammaticality

Local linear sequences within a sentence tend to be grammatical, and they might be parsed locally.

We could consider unusual constructions like *try and to* be like grammaticality illusions, blending two different grammatical segments/sentences.

*If I try and be valedictorian, I might not succeed.*

Segment 1: *I try*… (subject verb agreement)
Segment 2: …*try and be valedictorian.* (parallelism)

Context: becoming valedictorian is hard; I might fail.
In fact, it isn’t inconsistent with the idea of reanalysis to consider *all instances* of syntactic change to be the conventionalization of grammaticality illusions. 

Most of the time this more complicated explanation does not seem necessary. 

What it does explain are the more anomalous cases, which appear synchronically to still almost be grammaticality illusions despite being conventional. 

*But do these constructions actually remain illusions?*
Assuming we don’t want to think of grammaticality illusions or structure-blending as a synchronic grammatical process, what alternatives are there?

We must find some way to patch the grammar.

One option is a specific grammatical rule, but this complicates the grammar overall.

Another option is to use the approach of Construction Grammar: add a (lexically stored) surface-level construction with distinctive properties.
Conclusions

- Grammatical anomalies require special rules.
- Grammatical linearized sequences of words can be reanalyzed with new (possibly unusual) structures.
- Such exceptional usage can conventionalize.
- In general, I think it is important to consider both core structural components of language and also allow for surface-level constructions to explain form.
- Rather than one theory being ‘right’, it may be a matter of which is right for which questions.
References


References


Thank you for listening to my developing new perspective on this as I reanalyze the data!