

From causality to concessivity – the case of *just because*

This paper explores the grammaticization of the English causal connector *just because* into a concessive connector:

- (1) Just because they're charming doesn't mean you can trust them.
- (2) Just because he is a professor of medicine at Cambridge it does not make his findings unquestionable.
- (3) Courts should not exclude evidence just because it is not accepted wisdom.

I adopt a usage-based methodology, using 650 million words from diachronic corpora to assess meaning and use of *just because* from the 17th century up to the year 2000. The data allow three observations.

First, the changing syntactic environments of *just because* suggest that its concessive sense is very recent. Whereas some constructions with *just because* have remained stable over the past 350 years, some have become more frequent, others have disappeared. The first concessive usages have *just because* in sentence-initial position with a negative matrix clause, as in (2). This construction has experienced a sharp rise within the past fifty years. Conversely, constructions with sentence-initial *just because* and a positive matrix clause have at the same time sharply declined. Sentence-initial *just because* has taken on concessive meaning so that speakers disprefer to use it as in (4), which expresses causality.

- (4) Just because the theory is so vague and indefinite, it is unfalsifiable.

Second, concessive usages of *just because* collocate with negated forms of epistemic verbs such as *assume*, *follow*, *think*, and above all *mean* (cf. König and colleagues 1988, 2000). This suggests that the grammaticization of *just because* into a concessive marker has developed out of an epistemic judgment, in which the speaker denounces some reason for a conclusion as invalid. We can put this epistemic judgment in the form *X is no sufficient cause for me to conclude Y* and apply it to (1).

- (1) Just because X _[they're charming] is no sufficient cause for me to conclude _[doesn't mean] Y _[you can trust them].

Third, the subject pronoun *it* is dropped from the construction in later examples (cf. [1] vs. [2]). This changes the syntactic status of the *just because* clause from a subordinate clause to a sentential subject. To my knowledge, this type of sentential subject is unaddressed in the literature. We observe clausal integration in the making.

These observations bear on the notion of subjectification in grammaticization (Traugott 1989, Sweetser 1990). They also have implications for general methodological questions, such as how the use of corpora allows diachronic, usage-based analyses of infrequent constructions.

References

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- Traugott, E.C. 1989. On the rise of epistemic meanings in English: An example of subjectification in semantic change. *Language* 65: 31-55.

Corpus Resources

The British National Corpus

Literature On-line (LION): <http://lion.chadwyck.com>, date of download: 08-30-2003.

Modern English Text Collection (METC): <http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/p/pd-modeng>, date of download: 09-10-2003.

The Times Digital Archive (TIMES): <http://web1.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw>, date of download: 10-23-2003.