The semantics and pragmatics of modal adverbs: Grammaticalization and (inter)subjectification of *perhaps*

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Abstract

In the present study, I trace the shift of the modal adverb *perhaps* and its outdone rivals (i.e., *peradventure*, *percase*, and *perchance*) through the history of English. This analysis is based primarily on the *OED* and its quotation database, complemented by additional data from different datasets, namely, *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* in Early Modern English and the Brown family of corpora in contemporary English. After extracting instances of *perhaps* and related expressions from the datasets above, this study examines the following contextual factors: (i) the position occupied by the items in a clause, (ii) the combination of modal verbs in the same clause, and (iii) their parenthetical use. By analyzing the combined data, I provide a time chart for these adverbs and their competition for prevalence. The findings for the increasingly predominant *perhaps* demonstrate the grammaticalization of its epistemic function as a modal adverb and more recent (inter)subjectification to include pragmatic meanings concerning the relational basis between speaker and addressee.

1. Introduction

Over a period of many years, English modality has received considerable attention from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. In particular, studies on epistemicity, (inter)subjectivity, grammaticalization, and (inter)subjectification have bolstered this interest. In discussions of the concept of modality, it is commonly said to fall into two types of meaning, often referred to as deontic and epistemic modality. Deontic modality denotes obligation or permission emanating from a real-world source, as in the case of *must* in Example (1a); on the other hand, epistemic modality relates to necessity or probability in deduction, as in *must* of Example (1b):

(1) a. John *must* be home by ten; Mother won't be let him stay out any later.
     b. John *must* be home already; I see his coat. (Sweetser, 1990:49)

In exploring the relationship between modality and historical change, diachronic hypotheses state that a certain expression is predicted to undergo a shift ''from deontic to epistemic, not from epistemic to deontic'' (Shepherd, 1982:316). Modal verbs, the primary resources for conveying modality, show this direction of change. Historically, they acquired deontic modality, from which they later developed epistemic modality. Within the domain of epistemicity, Goossens (1982) explores the realization of the epistemic function, concluding that in Old English, there is no grammatical item (such as modal verbs) that functions as a clear epistemic marker, while the ancestors of Present-Day English (PDE) modal verbs are highly restricted in their epistemic use. In Middle English, Goossens (1982:78), Shepherd (1982:323), and Bybee (1988:259) agree that some of the modal verbs (e.g., *may*) came to take up an epistemic function. It was after this period that they began to be used in large measure to signal epistemic possibility.

PDE has many other ways of conveying modality such as certain adjectives (e.g., *possible*), adverbs (e.g., *possibly*), and nouns (e.g., *possibility*). In this system, the forms that are of relevance here are modal adverbs, which are used exclusively for epistemic modality in connection with the division between deontic and epistemic meanings. It is observed by Lyons (1977:800) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:179–180) that this type of modality can be further broken down according to at least three levels or values of strength of the speaker's commitment, namely, ''certain,'' ''probable,'' and ''possible.'' These three notions are illustrated in Examples (2a–c), respectively:

(2) a. [certain]   That *must* be true.   That's *certainly* true.
    b. [probable] That *will* be true.   That's *probably* true.
    c. [possible]   That *may* be true.   That's *possibly* true.
                                            (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014:179)

In the history of English, modal adverbs had their origins in forms stemming from the Middle English period; however, ''none of them had their present-day epistemic meanings'' at that time (Hanson, 1987:137). The following is the example of *probably* functioning as a manner adverb by Hanson (1987:137):

(3) You wrote so *probably* that hyt put me in a feare of daungerys to come.
     (1535 Starkey *Let. in England* (1871), *OED*)

It is in the course of the Early Modern English period that the adverbs came to be used as clear markers of epistemic modality. This semantic-functional development seems to have closely involved the diversification of adverbs in the Early Modern English period (Swan, 1988; Nevalainen, 1994). Nevalainen (1994), who shows semantic-functional shifts of adverbs, including the class of sentence adverbs in this period, observes the following:

> In the Early Modern English period the class is greatly diversified, and includes both high- and low-probability adverbs (e.g., *probably*, *necessarily*, *undoubtedly* vs. *possibly*, *perhaps*). (Nevalainen, 1994:253)

During the Modern English period, possibility (that is, low probability) was expressed by many adverbs, including *belike*, *haply*, *mayhap*, *peradventure*, *percase*, *perchance* (Poutsma, 1929:35–36; Greenbaum, 1969:203; Hanson, 1987:142). Of these adverbs, the focus of the present study is to reconstruct the development of *perhaps*, according special attention to its rivalry with the related expressions *peradventure*, *percase*, and *perchance*. These forms all share an origin in compounds of *per* or *par*, derived from the Latin preposition *per* meaning 'by', with the other elements that signify 'chance', i.e., *hap*, *adventure*, *case*, and *chance* (cf. *ODWH*; *OED*; Terasawa, 1997). We can observe the close relationship of this literal (original) meaning 'by chance' with the (extended) meaning of the epistemic use (i.e., possibility). According to the *OED*, *perhaps* entered the language later than the other three expressions but has superseded them up to the present day. Within this historical context, making use of big data, I will show how, stage by stage, *perhaps* developed as a marker of epistemic (and further pragmatic) function by exploring its competition with the other three related forms; further, I will look into the mechanisms of its development (the paths of grammaticalization and (inter) subjectification). The next section clarifies the data and methodology adopted in this study to do so.

2. Methodology

In recent decades, more and more historical corpora have become available as a tool for linguistic research. The Helsinki Corpus, the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), the Innsbruck Computer Archive of Machine-Readable English Texts (ICAMET), and the Penn Corpora of Historical English are only a few examples. Such corpora provide a range of data that enable us to trace historical changes in the English language over time. Despite the great variety of tools, however, we occasionally obtain insufficient instances of some items, which poses a difficulty for exploring their development over a longer time-span, such as a period of more than a thousand years. Against this background, an alternative or complementary route is to employ the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* for a linguistic analysis. The *OED* is, in essence, a reference source regarded as a world authority on the English language. Furthermore, its quotation