

Gradualness of Linguistic Change: Can Construction Grammar Meet the Challenge?

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This paper explores the viability of Construction Grammar (CxG) as a tool for discourse-grounded diachronic analysis. One of the central problems in dealing with variability and change is the issue of capturing, in a systematic way, the inherently dynamic nature of linguistic structure and the gradualness of grammatical change, which comes from language use. The usefulness of CxG, so far largely untested on diachronic data, is illustrated on the emergence of the subjective epistemic particle *jestli* – ‘maybe[-in-my-opinion]’ in conversational Czech, as attested in the *Czech National Corpus*. I argue that the modal use can be organically linked to the more familiar and chronologically older function of *jestli* – ‘if/whether’ as a subordinating conjunction in reported yes-no questions (in both spoken and written Czech). This paper articulates the interaction between the change at the ‘holistic’ level (syntactic subordinator > epistemic particle) and the internal mechanics that lead to such a change; this interaction is also at the heart of the analytic and representational challenges.