Obligatorification in Syntax

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A common feature of the grammaticalization of function words is that they develop the requirement for obligatory hosts. For instance, English *the* does not occur except when followed by a nominal construction. This talk offers an account of the historical development of obligatorification - how hosts develop from optional extras to required accompaniments.

In the first part of the talk, we show that the process leading to obligatorification is semantically and/or pragmatically driven. We further show that it begins before grammaticalization "proper", rather than being a result of grammaticalization as has been widely, but implicitly, assumed. In fact, specific semantics and/or pragmatics create the need for overt hosts at every synchronic stage of every language. Only rarely does this overt-host requirement develop into a syntactic requirement as a result of grammaticalization. We illustrate this with both diachronic and synchronic examples from diverse parts of speech, from several languages.

This account is supplemented by a computational model of incremental sentence processing. We show that in some circumstances, the desired interpretation of a construction can only be achieved if the host is present. This model shows that obligatorification is not a feature of grammaticalization but rooted in ever-present creative language use.