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The future of “want”

We compare the polysemous properties of ‘want’ morphemes in three languages: Brazilian Portuguese, Dutch, and Mandarin Chinese. In these three languages, ‘want’ has not only a desire reading, but also a future-like interpretation with no bouletic flavor, a result of historical changes. We submitted these ‘want’ verbs, on both interpretations, to a battery of tests to determine their grammatical properties. The main conclusion is that the newer future-like meaning is always accompanied by a syntactic change: desire ‘want’ behaves like a control verb but the future-like ‘want’ is a raising verb. We believe that by uncovering the properties of the future-like ‘want’, we can shed light on three theoretical issues. The first is the syntactic and semantic differences between attitude verbs and modals, as these ‘want’ morphemes straddle the verbal/modal divide (Kratzer 1977, 1981, Bogal-Albritten 2016). The second is the grammaticalization process from *want* to a future-like marker, which is a common historic process (Traugott 1989, Bybee et al. 1994, LaBarge 2016, etc.). We are able to probe how words involved in a grammaticalization process are represented synchronically in the speaker’s mental grammar, thus overcoming limitations of data based on historical texts. The third issue is the representation of polysemy in the lexicon itself: the postulation of one or multiple lexical entries for different interpretations sharing a semantic core.