



The genesis of the Latin conjunction 'vel': a case of grammaticalization

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INTRODUCTION

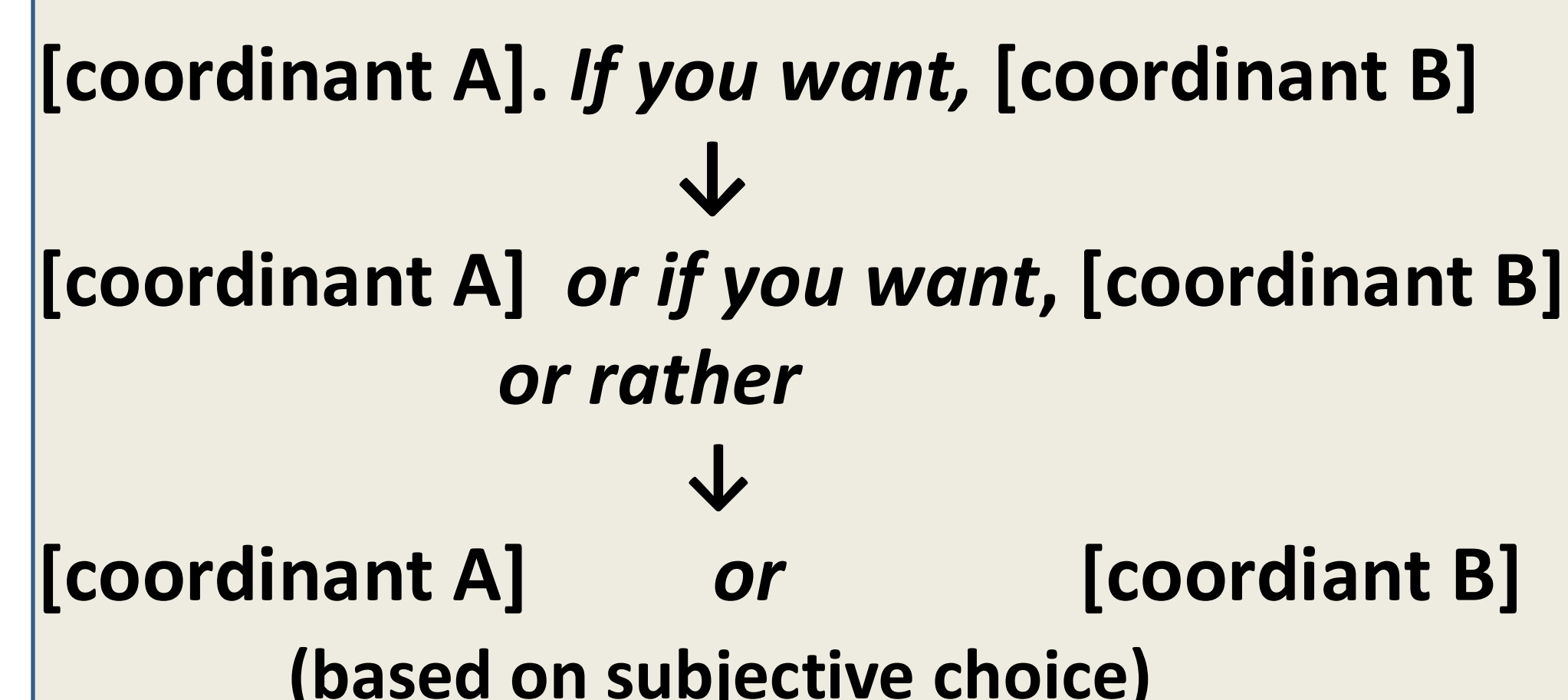
The Latin conjunction 'vel' "or" offers an interesting insight into the grammaticalization of particles from lexical elements (like verbs) as it was originally a verb form that got grammaticalized. In the following sections of the poster, an attempt to better understand this case is presented reflecting on the earliest attestations of 'vel' in the Latin corpus as well as cross-linguistic examples in which the 'verb > conjunction' grammaticalization path is also attested.

ETYMOLOGY AND FIRST ATTESTATIONS

'vel' was originally the 2s.pres. of *volō* and its evolution from Proto-Italic to Latin is reconstructed by de Vaan as *welsi > *well > *vel* (de Vaan 2008 : 687).

The 2s. 'vīs' is suppletive and is explained from PIE *weiHs "you wish" from the root *wiH- (Meisser 1998 : 224) cited in (de Vaan 2008 : 687)

Based on this, one could reconstruct a grammaticalization path in which 'vel' was originally used to introduce an alternate 'option' to a previous one through the meaning "if you want/will" which then developed its disjunctive function and it can be explained from both the semantic component of the verb ("to want" and hence also "to choose between two options") as well as its syntactic position :



However, examining the first attestations of 'vel' in Old Latin, it seems that its development is a bit more complicated than a linear grammaticalization 'cline'.

'vel' is first attested in fragments of works by Gnaeus Naevius (271 – 202 BC) which survived through commentaries by later Latin grammarians :

(Warmington 1953 : 140; 7-8, 9)

(1) *Vel quae sperat se nupturam viridulo adolescentulo ea licet senile tractet retritum rutabulum?* (in Festus, 354, 9)

"Again, she who hopes to marry a young lad, is she to be allowed to handle an old dotard's worm-down poker?"

(2) *An nata est sponsa praegnans? Vel ai vel nega!* (Diomedes a.p G.L, I, 374, 1K)

"Is my daughter a bride with child? Say yes or no!"

Already in the first attestations, 'vel' has two different functions : an adverbial function (translated by Warmington as "again") in **(1)** and a disjunctive coordinator (very close to *aut...aut* here) in **(2)**. In both cases, 'vel' seems to have already been fully grammaticalized and its function here has little to do with "choice/preference".

Interestingly, however, just one century after in a fragment of a play by Lucius Accius, we have another attestation of 'vel' where it acts as a disjunctive coordinator that introduces an alternative as a matter of subjective choice which is known to be the marked function of 'vel' as a coordinator :

(3) *me est aecum frui fraternis armis mihique adiudicari vel quid propinquus vel quod virtuti aemulus*

"It is but fair that I enjoy the arms that were my cousin's; fair that they should be adjusted to me, because I'm his kinsman, or if you will, in bravery his rival" (Warmington 1953 : 362; 103-8)

- The different functions of 'vel' seem to have always existed together, and the semantics of volition/choice/preference seems to have persisted, establishing one of the main differences in use between 'vel' and 'aut'

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

The development of 'vel' (coexisting alongside the inherited 'aut') contributes to our understanding of grammaticalization cases where two elements express the same grammatical function (conjunction) as the grammaticalization of 'vel' cannot be explained from a *functional need*. The fact that 'vel' retained at least some of its source meaning transferring it to the grammatical function itself (typically described as "*disjunctive coordination that introduces alternatives as a matter of choice and not absolute opposition as in aut*") seems to correspond with the behaviour of some grammaticalized elements that share indicating a grammatical function with other elements in the same language (cf. Kuteva 2004 on expressing the same grammatical functions using different lexical elements). We might hence argue that in cases like these, a linear grammaticalization path or *cline* would not be the most accurate way of illustrating the state of affairs.

Nevertheless, it's also important to note that between 'vel' and 'aut' it's the latter that was continued as the disjunctive coordinator in the daughter languages while 'vel' was discontinued in spoken varieties.

TYPOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE VERB > CONJUNCTION GRAMMATICALIZATION

The development of conjunctions from verbs is not exclusive to the Latin case. Evidence from genetically unrelated languages show similar developments. For instance, the Chinese verb 'gong' "to share (with)" was grammaticalized in Late Archaic Chinese (fifth – second centuries B.C.) to an adverb meaning "together", and since the early Medieval period (second – sixth century A.D.) it developed into a comitative preposition which eventually developed into an NP-and conjunction (first attested in the Song period) (Heine and Kuteva 2002 : 81-2).

A further example, and a quite interesting one for our case here, is a conventional way of expressing disjunction in Hakha Lai, described by Haspelmath as "rather complicated and young" (Haspelmath 2004 : 23) where the verb "to be" + a fossilized conditional marker is used :

(4) *làwthlawpaa=ni vok a-sii-law=leè aàr a-tsook*
farmer=ERG pig 3SG.SUBJ-be-NEG=COND chicken 3SG.SUBJ-buy
"The farmer bought a pig or a chicken" (lit. The farmer, if it wasn't a pig, bought a chicken) (Peterson and VanBik, ex. 12a)

CONCLUSIONS

- 'vel' is already grammaticalized since Old Latin, evidenced by its polyfunctionality since the earliest attestations
- The varying degrees of semantic retention of 'vel' could make it hard to understand its evolution and function through a grammaticalization cline, but rather, it seems that a functional description of the element (with respect to other elements that share more or less the same grammatical meaning) could be more useful here.
- The notion of 'semantic bleaching' and questioning its relevance in cases of convergence of lexical 'sources' for a single grammatical 'target'

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