‘You hear it on the telly and that’: Tracking grammaticalization across the generations

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Clause- or phrase-final tags such as and stuff (1), and things like that (2), and or something (3), referred to here as general extenders (GEs), constitute a locus of rampant variability in contemporary English (Overstreet 1999).

(1) You have to speak clearly and stuff
(2) There’s no sort of racial tension and things like that
(3) They’d rather have pot noodles or something

In this paper, we present the results of an apparent-time study of 787 tokens of GEXs comprising some ninety variant forms drawn from interview data collected in Berwick-upon-Tweed, north-east England.

Adopting a quantitative approach, we assess the extent to which the formal and functional differences between the most frequent variants can be explained in terms of grammaticalization. We focus primarily on two interrelated mechanisms operationalized as key measures of grammaticalization (Heine 2003): phonological reduction, as gauged by the length of variants, and decategorization, as evidenced by the loss of morpho-syntactic properties of GEs containing a lexical item such as things and stuff, as well as the ability of GEs to collocate with non-nominal phrases, as in (1) above (Cheshire 2007, Tagliamonte & Denis in press). The results reveal that the use of short forms such as and that and or something, and the collocation of GEs with non-nominal phrases, are more advanced among young speakers. A breakdown of the main variants also shows that phonetic reduction is not a prerequisite for decategorization, and that grammaticalization is proceeding at different rates across the cohort of variants and age groups.

The results of our quantitative analysis contribute important insights into the mechanisms underlying the ongoing grammaticalization of GEs, and foreground the utility of a variationist approach in tracking the evolution of discourse-pragmatic features in contemporary varieties of English, a topic that has been lamented as under-researched (Macaulay 2005).

References