

## Building the case for the grammaticalization of Palenquero *asé*: we have to test this stuff

Claims of grammaticalization in creole languages are often made without applying empirical tests. In the case of Palenquero creole, an afro-Hispanic variety spoken in northern Colombia, the habitual morpheme *asé* has close phonetic resemblance to Spanish *hacer* ‘do,’ making it easy fodder for claims that *hacer* is its lexical precursor (Bickerton & Escalante 1970:258; Lewis 1970:114; Schwegler 1992:224). Despite this, other scholars believe that *asé* is really two morphemes, *a* (<Sp. *ha* aux. ‘have’) and *sé* (unknown), since, they claim, negative polarity contexts automatically trigger the deletion of *a* (Patiño Roselli 1983:118; Simarra Reyes & Triviño Doval 2012:63). So how do we adjudicate between hypotheses? And how do we resolve a longstanding stalemate? The origins of *asé* are directly tied to this matter of it being two morphemes or just one, since they imply different grammaticalization paths, one for habituales and another for perfectives (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994). To tackle this problem, I employ the one-two punch: grammaticalization theory and the variationist method (Labov 1966).

Grammaticalization theory was employed in this study as a heuristic tool to uncover the origins of the putative habitual marker *asé*. Generalizations made in the typological literature were converted into testable hypotheses which make specific predictions for what the synchronic Palenquero data should look like if grammaticalization is indeed taking place. I tested claims regarding: polarity, marker deletion, the aspectual functions of *asé* (form-function asymmetry), semantic dissonance, frequency of preverbal *asé* versus main verb *asé*, formal asymmetries in past versus present temporal reference. In other words, by utilizing grammaticalization indices (Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2011), or diagnostic tests, which Palenquero can either ‘pass’ or ‘fail,’ we infer *the degree of grammaticalization of asé*.

Comparison of the synchronic distributions of tense-aspect morphemes in 30 speakers across past and present temporal reference (Total N=2,544) shows several patterns that are consistent with language-internal grammaticalization. Results of multivariate analysis confirm that *asé* is not a habitual ‘marker,’ but has all of the earmarks of an emerging grammatical morpheme, and not one that has attained obligatory status. Frequency counts reveal that *asé* only appears 39% of the time in present habitual contexts and 60% in past ones. *asé* is early enough in its development that it passes tests for early habituales, e.g., it eschews the main verb *asé* and is favored in positive over negative polarity contexts. Yet, preverbal *asé* is advanced enough that it is far more frequent than main verb *asé*, which through quantitative analysis we confirm to be its lexical etymon. There were also formal and distributional asymmetries in past over present, findings that are consonant with typological markedness and a grammaticalization hypothesis (Bybee et al. 1994). Although results vindicate some scholars that *asé* is indeed grammaticalizing language internally and derives from erstwhile *hacer*, here we provide proof of such, and it was arrived at inductively and not a priori.

## References

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