Meanwhile: From temporal to discourse marker

IRIS PAPADOPOULOU

University of Macedonia, Greece

ABSTRACT

The paper was inspired by the American sitcom “The Nanny”, in which meanwhile is frequently used to indicate a new, discourse function, to indicate a change of topic within a conversational turn. It is a common tendency that has been discussed by Traugott & König (1991), among others, for temporal markers to develop discourse uses (while, since etc). What is particularly intriguing about the case in point is that temporal meanings did not merely give rise to concessives, but to discourse connective uses that signal turn taking and topic shift. The mode of discourse seems to be relaxed chat among relatives or friends, and the use is quite reminiscent of Modern Greek εντομεταφό. The only reservation that will be expressed with regard to the construct is that there could be interference from Yiddish, as the pattern was examined in a show featuring a Yiddish-speaking protagonist.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine the synchronic polysemy of meanwhile in Modern English, which is primarily a temporal adverb, but also displays in context concessive use and, in the examples furnished in this paper, a discourse connective function of introducing a new topic. While the latter two uses are more frequently contextually defined (requiring an effort on the part of the hearer to decode) they are emergent functions all the same, that may or may not be conventionalized in the course of time.

The structure will proceed as follows: from an overview of the implication of discourse in grammaticalization theory, to a brief comment on the function of discourse markers and their study in grammaticalization literature, to finally an examination of the case in point and a proposed account.

2. DISCOURSE IN GRAMMATICALIZATION LITERATURE

The domain of discourse phenomena has been a relatively recent addition to the linguistic changes examined under the rubric of grammaticalization. Of course, discourse did feature for some time in the extended approach to the process, represented by the term grammaticisation and in the work of linguists such as Givón, Traugott and Thompson. In that line of research, however, it was not so much the object of study, as part of the mechanism of the process. The mechanism of the metonymically operating
conventionalisation of conversational implicatures was proposed as underlying force that drove the unidirectionality hypothesis, often in reaction to the trend in the literature that attributed the process to the cognitive mechanism of metaphor.

In a broader sense, discourse was implicated in the theory of grammaticalization as the parameter that licenses synchronic crosslinguistic (typology) as well as diachronic linguistic comparison (grammaticalization proper). In Papadopoulou (1994), I ascribed to the tenet in grammaticalization whereby discourse was the motivating force standing outside the linguistic cycle, directing the changes¹. This hypothesis had the advantage of providing a superordinate level in which linguistic variation can find motivation and explanation. The evolution of linguistic items across time can be traced by looking at the linguistic coding of discourse functions at given times in the history of a language. The diachronic developments in grammatical categories reflect the shift in cardinal categoriality of the corresponding members of cognitive categories/discourse functions.

The most recent implication of discourse in the theory of grammaticalization relates to the study of the rise of discourse markers, in a unidirectional trend towards greater subjectification and the shift from the textual to the interpersonal (Traugott 1982, 1988; Traugott & König 1991). Among such changes studied are fillers such as you know, and epistemic parentheticals such as I think.

The present paper runs along the same lines, tracing the grammaticalization of the adverb meanwhile from a fully lexical expression ‘in the mean while’ to the more grammaticalized, textual function of temporal marker indicating parallel actions, to an emergent, interpersonal, discourse function in Modern English indicating topic shift². The first part of the change falls well within the traditional grammaticalization approach, whereby more grammatical meanings arise from less grammatical ones. The latter part of the change, which is characteristic of the increased subjectification observed in the process, is pragmatically motivated.

¹ According to the discourse > morphosyntax approach (Hopper 1987) grammar is emergent, constantly evolving and encoding discourse function.
² I must express a reservation, however, as to the data on which the phenomenon is studied, as the examples are restricted to a sitcom featuring Yiddish speakers. The risk would be that the emergent feature is marked to speakers of this variety, possibly due to a similar function in Yiddish. The observations made in this paper would have different force if more examples were found, from a broader variety of spoken sources.
2.1 Discourse markers: Meaning and function

Discourse markers are expressed with a wealth of terms, such as pragmatic marker, connective, filler among others, with definitions as diverse as their inventory of terms.

Among the properties attributed to them we find (Brinton 1996: 33, 64, in an examination of Old and Middle English “mystery features”): “phonological “shortness”, high frequency, little or no prepositional meaning, no identifiable grammatical function, initial or fixed syntactic position, marginal word class membership, multifunctionality, an oral quality, and stylistic stigmatization,” features reminiscent of the linguistic parameters of grammaticalization described by Lehmann (1982). In terms of function, they may mark the beginning of discourse, mark topic shift, or resumption of topic, act as a filler or delaying tactic, denote old or new information, constrain relevance³.

Meanwhile in the particular sitcom features in informal, chatty conversation, always in sentence-initial position, and in the speech of primarily females, Fran Fine, her mother and her friend, Val, all of which are Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers of the lower classes.

3. DISCOURSE MARKERS EXAMINED IN GRAMMATICALIZATION STUDIES

Studies on the evolution of pragmatic markers are not frequent in the literature of grammaticalization. Those that do exist, however, convene to the three tendencies proposed by Traugott, attributing it to the shift from propositional to interpersonal meaning. Among these studies are the following: the one by Traugott (1982: 251) of “conversational routines” well and right; Finell (1989), discussing well, finds that it proceeds from less to more personal (Finell 1989), the shift being from a sense of “finding good” to the speaker expression of acceptance of either the topic or the interlocutor. Topic changing pragmatic markers such as well, however, anyhow and besides are found to emerge in the propositional domain as expressions of time, space, manner or concession and acquire more subjective meanings. Traugott (1995) observes this shift toward greater subjectivity in connection

³ According to Brinton (1996: 33, adapted), discourse markers: a) are predominantly a feature of oral discourse, their appearance being due to the informality of speech and the “fragmentation” brought about by the lack of planning time, b) are stylistically stigmatized and negatively evaluated, often deemed to be a feature of the insecurity of female speech, c) are often phonologically reduced an unstressed and compose a separate tone group, with falling-rising or rising intonation, d) are often restricted to sentence-initial position, e) have little or no propositional meaning and no clear grammatical function. In fact they are only loosely attached to the syntactic structure.

They can be derived from a variety of categories.
with *let’s* that shifted from 2nd person imperative in Old English, to 1st person imperative in Middle English, to the Modern English function of acknowledging the presence of an interlocutor and "bracketing a unit of discourse" to let him respond. The same line of argumentation is pursued in Thompson & Mulac’s (1991) discussion of epistemic parentheticals *I think* and *I guess*, from phrases consisting of subject + main verb.

4. **MEANWHILE: THE CASE IN POINT**
The examples collected from “The Nanny”, listed in the appendix seem to fall under the following categories:

a. Examples such as 2, paraphrasable by “however”, “on the other hand”, “and still”, or an expression to similar effect, which bear a concessive meaning, or in Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) terms, an emphatic contrastive adversative, expressing what is dissimilar. This is an extension of the original, temporal, meaning of co-temporality, whereby the juxtaposition of two incompatible situations gives rise to an implicature of concession.

(Nanny Fine and her friend Val at the kitchen table)
Nanny Fine- I tell you, this whole thing with my father has gotten me so confused! I mean, where do I go from here? Getting some guy’s approval has always been my whole raison d’etre.

Val – *Meanwhile*, if I could blame my father for why I’m gonna end up alone and miserable, I’d be the happiest girl in the world.

b. Examples such as 7, 10 and 13, in which we observe the innovation of a discourse function expressing an afterthought Halliday and Hasan would cover by the term “complex de-emphatic additive”, equivalent to “by the way”, “incidentally”. In this use *meanwhile* signals topic shift, sometimes within a conversational turn,

(Nanny Fine on the Dr Quinn set)
Dr Quinn- Excuse me but we’re in the middle of something.
Nanny Fine- Honey, honey! You’re only married to him on the show. When they yell “cut”, let it go.

*Meanwhile*, that coat is to die for!

between turns,

(from a boy’s circumcision ceremony, hosted by nanny Fine’s mother)
Mother- So what do you think of my boy?
Sylvia & N. Fine- Beautiful!
Mother- *Meanwhile*, everything is just delicious!
or it represents a resumption of topic, reinstating a previously mentioned one.

Nanny Fine - Ma, I didn’t wanna tell you this because you always get so carried away, but, ma, I met the man I’m going to marry!
Niles- Miss Fine, don’t you think you’re moving a little fast?
Sylvia- Please! You don’t know how old she is. She’s gonna be thirty... (Miss Fine puts a plate of pancakes in front of her to distract her) Mmm! Chocolate chip in the pancakes?
Miss Fine- Mmm!
Sylvia- Meanwhile, if you like this guy so much, why don’t you take him to the wedding? It’ll give him a chance to meet the whole family.

d. to the two above, we must add the long-established textual use of *meanwhile* as a temporal durative adverbial, signifying actions unfolding parallel to each other. For instance,
She’s due to arrive on Thursday. Meanwhile, what do we do?
(Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary)

5. THE PROPOSED ACCOUNT
To some extent, the particular evolution can be subsumed under the trend that is in favour of the metaphorical motivation of the process. *Meanwhile* originates in the prepositional expression *in the meanwhile*, a compound of the temporal connective *while*, and like the latter it stems from the full noun *while*.

_In the meanwhile, Hurstwood encountered a humorous item._
(Th.Dreiser, *Sister Currie*)

A thorough diachronic examination of *while* from noun to conjunction will not be attempted here, as it can be found in Traugott & König (1991:189-218), who trace the development of the temporal connective from the adverbial phrase *pa while pe* “at the time that”. At this point *while* represents a characteristic evolution for grammaticalization theory, the derivation of a gram from a full lexical word and can be seen in terms of the shift from concrete to more abstract.

The subsequent evolution is pragmatically motivated, by means of the conventionalisation of conversational implicatures, whereby local implicatures appearing at different contexts are promoted to central meaning of the construction, through frequency of use. This evolution can be accounted for by means of the three Semantic-Pragmatic tendencies proposed by Traugott:
Semantic-pragmatic Tendency I:
Meanings situated in the external described situation > meanings situated in the internal (evaluative/ perceptual/ cognitive) situation

Semantic-pragmatic Tendency II:
Meanings situated in the described external or internal situation > meanings situated in the textual situation,
And
Semantic-pragmatic Tendency III:
Meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief-state/ attitude toward the situation. (Traugott:1988: 409)

Tendency I describes the shift from concrete physical to abstract and cognitive. Traugott illustrates this by means of the extension of the spatial preposition after to temporal preposition in Old English. Tendency II amounts to the shift from cognitive to textual. In the case of after this relates to the rise of temporal connective, in the case of meanwhile, as well to the rise of temporal connective meaning. The development of concessive relates to Tendency III, that refers to the shift from the textual to more interpersonal, to the expression of speaker belief toward the proposition, a shift that underlies a host of other grammaticalization chains. Some of these are: a) the rise of future marker, or epistemic from volitional will, b) The rise of causal from temporal meanings, as is the case of Modern English since, derived from Old English sippan ‘from the time that’, c) The development of concessives from temporals (while), expressions of concomitance (all the same), negative expressions (nonetheless), d) The development of conditionals from topic markers and demonstratives (Romance si from *s 2nd person deictic + ei locative)

In the case of the rise of causal meanings out of temporal ones, as with sippan, this relates to the inference on the one hand that there is an analogy between temporal sequence of events and sequence in causality where cause precedes result. In addition, causal interpretation is aided by the fact that events with since appear in reversed order. The implicature at play is that conjoined clauses that are uttered in sequence without an explicit connective, will be interpreted as having some coherence. Reference is made to Blakemore’s (1987:113) observation that: if the clauses are event/ action ones, then the relation will be interpreted to be temporal; if, on the other hand, the temporal reading is inconsistent with the ordering of the actions, then other meanings will be sought. Hence:
The road was icy. She slipped. (temporal)
She slipped. The road was icy. (causal)

In the same way, the temporal use of meanwhile gives rise to the concessive one, analyzable as although. This function no longer belongs to the actual world, relating events, but to the speaker's world of belief about "coherence, about correlations between situations or eventualities".

I went to college. Meanwhile all my friends got well-paid jobs.
(as with while from Traugott & König:1991)
While I am very fond of him, I cannot help but notice he is at fault in this particular occasion.

Temporal simultaneity invites the inference of juxtaposition of two states felt to be sufficiently incompatible, and thus concessive functions arise. It is quite significant how in the latter sense meanwhile can be reinforced by however, strengthening this inference.

Meanwhile, however, the rest of the Hurricanes had been suffering badly at the hands of the German fighters. CA 8. 1223 (The Modern English Collection at the University of Virginia)

The evolution of meanwhile can be schematically represented as shown in Table 1, whereby (mean) while arises in the prepositional expression and is increasingly grammaticalised. The linguistic cycle is mirrored by the discourse cycle in which meanwhile progresses from the external situation, to the textual to the expression of speaker attitude to a means of organizing information structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Cycle:</th>
<th>full lexical \rightarrow\text{gram}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Function:</td>
<td>(noun) Temporal Concession Discourse Marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(adverb) (event-world relations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(mental-world relations)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| In the mean (event-world relations) |
| Conversational (relations) |
| While relations |

*Table 1. The grammaticalization chain of meanwhile*

The only departure from Traugott's proposal is that I feel this new discourse function falls outside the three Tendencies, or at best, in order to accommodate it, the third Tendency should be subdivided into local and
more global expression of Speaker attitude, the latter dealing entirely with
the structure of discourse.

6. CONCLUSIONS
To sum up, the present paper has presented a fairly recent development in
the English language, the development of discourse connective function by
the temporal marker meanwhile, in pretty much the same way Modern Greek
εντομεταχω has done. The evolutionary chain proposed in Table 1 can be
accounted for, to some extent, by Traugott’s three semantic-pragmatic
tendencies, which, however, fall short when it comes to accounting for the
emergent discourse function. While the concessive function of meanwhile
does indeed relate to the speaker’s subjective belief state, the new function
relates to a more ‘global’ sense of speaker attitude, speaker orientation to the
discourse topic.

The mechanism in the observed evolution is pragmatically
motivated. How can we see the metonymic mechanism of language in
operation in this development? Co-temporality of two real-world events may
be translated (in the concessive function) as juxtaposition of two mental
states/ situations, when these can be found to be sufficiently dissimilar. In
the discourse function, this juxtaposition is between topics, as the new topic
is inserted in the discourse slot, or a previous one is reinstated.

Can this connection be made? The impression is that the
requirement for a relation between world-events (temporal adverb) or mental
states (concessive adverb) has been relaxed in the new function, the resulting
effect being one of a slides projector, whereby meanwhile simply alternates
topics. Meanwhile is liberated from the propositional content of the
discourse, and only participates in its formal structure.

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KEYWORDS: grammaticalisation, discourse, diachrony.

APPENDIX
(instances of meanwhile in episodes of “The Nanny”, copyright by Tristar Co., 1997)

(1) (Nanny Fine descends the stairs)
Niles- Miss Fine! The way you’re dressed! ... You’re dressed!
Nanny Fine- I’m taking my father out to a basketball game and he likes women to dress so conservatively!
Niles- Is that why your mother dresses so demurely? (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)
Nanny Fine- Meanwhile, one time she bought this backless dress and he made her return it because it showed too much cleavage.

(2) (Nanny Fine and her friend Val at the kitchen table)
Nanny Fine- I tell you, this whole thing with my father has gotten me so confused! I mean, where do I go from here? Getting some guy’s approval has always been my whole raisinette (raison d’etre).
Val – Meanwhile, if I could blame my father for why I’m gonna end up alone and miserable, I’d be the happiest girl in the world.
(3)
Yeta- Leave me alone! I like to sing along in the theatre.
Sylvia- Ma! It wasn’t a musical!
Nanny Fine- Oh, you should have seen her at Schindler’s List. She was snapping her fingers singing “Papa can you hear me?”
Yeta- Meanwhile, the show in my head was better than that crap we just saw.
Sheffield- So, how was the theatre, ladies?
(ladies)- Wonderful!
Nanny Fine- Thank you for the tickets.
Sylvia- Meanwhile, my feet are killing me!
Nanny Fine- Ma! These aren’t your shoes!

(4)
Nanny Fine- OK, kids. Get ready for supper. Say ‘Goodbye!’.
(kids) – Goodbye!
Yeta- Goodbye, my darlings!
Sylvia- Nice kids. Meanwhile, they don’t say two words.
Yeta- Who could get two words in with you?

(5)
(Sheffield gets ready for a date)
Sheffield – Hurry up, Miss Fine, you’re not getting any younger!
Nanny Fine- I’m not the one that looks like Lilly Monster. Meanwhile, I just met the man a week ago. It takes a while to form a relationship. I don’t even know if we are compatible.

(6)
Nanny Fine- You know, there’s only one explanation for your negativity!...
Sheffield- Oh, please! You think I’m jealous of Noel?
Nanny Fine- And that makes two!... You just don’t want me to reach my full potential. You want to keep me in that kitchen, barefoot and pregnant!
Sheffield- You’re the one who wanted to have children! You wanted to make it your full-time job! ... Oh, God, what am I saying?
Nanny Fine- Meanwhile, Professor Noel Babcock, PhD, thinks I’m smart enough to get on jeopardy!

(7)
(Dr Quinn on the Dr Quinn set)
Dr Quinn- Excuse me but we’re in the middle of something.
Nanny Fine- Honey, honey! You’re only married to him on the show. When they yell “cut”, let it go.
Meanwhile, that coat is to die for!

(8)
(Fran and Mona. The latter announces her future wedding.)
Mona- it's my boss. We were saying goodnight at the Waldorf and he asked me to come back to the house and I thought, "Did I forget to clean my drain?". But no! He had something to give me! (shows ring)
Nanny Fine- Oh, Mona! It's gorgeous! Oh I'm so happy for you! No-one deserves it more than you! Meanwhile, do you think this (shows her a sketch she has made to enter in a competition) looks like Blinky?

(9) Sheffield-Now, come on, Miss Fine! When you fall off a horse, it's very important that you get right back on.
Nanny Fine- Oh, Mr Sheffield, that horse analogy never worked with me. When I fall off a horse, I call Jacobi & Meyers... (looks away). Meanwhile, that little talk Brighton had with Miss Babcock is working out well.
Brighton – (to potential thug) Are you talking to me?

(10) (from a boy's circumcision ceremony, hosted by nanny Fine's mother)
Mother- So what do you think of my boy?
Sylvia & N. Fine- Beautiful!
Mother- Meanwhile, everything is just delicious!
(11) Nanny Fine- Ma, I got something I want to tell you, but I'm scared you're gonna yell.
Sylvia- Darling! You're scared of your own mother! I could just smack you!
Niles- Be afraid! Be very afraid!
Sylvia- Meanwhile, when's the last time you called your poor mother? An ocean away in a drafty country, eating French-fries from a newspaper!

(12) therapist – So, ladies, what brings you to therapy?
Nanny Fine – Well, I came because my mother has an obsession with me getting married.
Sylvia – I came because my daughter has a delusion that I have an obsession.
Yeta – I came because they brought me and I don’t know how to get home from here.
Sylvia (whispers to Fran) - Meanwhile, for 100 bucks a session, she could have put out some coffee and wafers!

(13) Nanny Fine – Ma, I didn’t wanna tell you this because you always get so carried away, but, ma, I met the man I'm going to marry!
Niles- Miss Fine, don't you think you're moving a little fast?
Sylvia- Please! You don’t know how old she is. She’s gonna be thirty... (Miss Fine puts a plate of pancakes in front of her to distract her) Mmm! Chocolate chip in the pancakes?
Miss Fine- Mmm!
Sylvia- *Meanwhile*, if you like this guy so much, why don’t you take him to the wedding? It’ll give him a chance to meet the whole family.

(14) (Nanny Fine with Sylvia in the kitchen. Sylvia wants to know why her daughter still doesn’t have an engagement ring)
Nanny Fine- Ma, you know when they caught the mugger, they never recovered the ring … *Meanwhile*, that mugger’s girlfriend is giving him the conjugal visit of his life!

(15) Sheffield- Oh, I get it! Preparing the virgin for the big sacrifice, heh?
Sylvia – yeah, that was 1980!
Nanny Fine- Ma!
Sylvia- *Meanwhile*, show some decolatessen! (meaning decolte)