Three Stages of the Development of *Talk of the Devil*:
A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Using the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a source of historical data for analysis, this paper considers the English proverb *talk of the devil* from a diachronic perspective. It is demonstrated that the proverb has undergone types of changes in the *and-*coordinate construction including a conditional imperative at three different stages. The case study in this paper shows that a close examination of proverbs can fill a gap between case studies of proverbs and historical research of language change.

Key Words

proverb; *Talk of the devil*; grammaticalization; coordinate structure; conditional imperative

1 Introduction

Proverbs are historical accumulations of wisdom and knowledge of human culture and can sometimes be found in our daily life. This paper is concerned with one of such proverbs, *Talk of the devil*. For example, consider the following conversation between John and Lynn.

(1) John : "Do you know Tom bought a brand-new car last week?"
    Lynn: "Yeah. He must have won a lottery or something."
    John : "Well, talk of the devil! Here he comes."

By *Talk of the devil* it is meant that Tom appeared coincidently while John and Lynn were speaking about Tom. The saying is used when the person under discussion appears unexpectedly during the conversation.

As seen from (1), the proverb has no illocutionary force such as a command or request despite its imperative form. It is well-known that *Talk of the devil* is a shortened form of *Talk of the devil and he'll appear* (or there are some other variants such as *Talk of the devil and he's at your elbow, Speak of the devil and he is bound to appear,* etc.) and this kind of coordinate structure makes a given imperative sound a conditional clause. Then, *Talk of the devil* can be interpreted as *If you talk of the devil*. Even so, it still remains to be seen why and how the target meaning of a coincident appearance is induced in *Talk of the devil* of (1).

The present paper is aimed chiefly at providing a principled account of the form-meaning discrepancy of *Talk of the devil* from a historical perspective. The proverb will be considered in terms of the development of conditional imperatives (i.e. imperatives which are interpreted as conditional clauses) and the historical and cultural context at the time of the emergence of the proverb. There is a wide variety of dictionaries of proverbs, and they are normally dictionaries of general reference (e.g. Flavell and Flavell (1993); Toda (2003); etc.). Hence, they may describe the origins and meanings of proverbs, but they rarely explain them

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syntactically and semantically. To gain a deeper understanding of proverbs, the case study of *Talk of the devil* in this paper attempts a linguistic analysis of proverbs.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 sketches the origin and meaning of *Talk of the devil*. To consider the relevant data from a historical point of view, Section 3 introduces a basic concept in the research of language change and reviews the historical analysis of the coordinate conjunction *and* in Mori （2007）. Based on the discussions in Sections 2 and 3, Section 4 proposes three stages of the development of *Talk of the devil* and argues that its development shows systematic patterns of language change. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2 The origin and meaning of *Talk of the devil*

The origin of *Talk of the devil* has been described in dictionaries of proverbs. Flavell and Flavell （1993: 71）, for example, state that the proverb is based on the fable that wolves appear whenever they are mentioned and that ancient people made a practice of using the Latin expression *Lupus in fabula* （'the wolf in the fable'） for the situation where a person under discussion appeared unexpectedly （this practice goes back to 200 B. C.）. At the present time, *Talk of the devil* can be used in exactly the same context, although the noun phrase including the word *wolf* is replaced by the imperative form using the word *devil*.

Diachronically and synchronically, the proverb has at least two types of senses. The first meaning is related to a superstition; for a religious reason the proverb was used as a warning not to refer to the devil, which is considered to be ominous, and thus even to mention the devil by name should be avoided. The expression had functioned as such by the 19th century. Then, the proverb developed the present familiar use stated at the beginning of this paper. It is used when a person about whom people are talking presents himself or herself unexpectedly during the conversation. This usage is the same as that of *Lupus in fabula* mentioned above. Despite the difference in form, the English proverb *Talk of the devil* inherits the lesson of the fable at ancient times.

3 A preliminary stage of the development of *Talk of the devil*

Talk of the devil is a shortened form of *Talk of the devil and he'll appear*. The imperative form within this type of coordinate construction is called a conditional imperative in the research of imperatives （e.g. Bolinger （1977）; Clark （1993）; Culicover and Jackendoff （1997）; Davies （1986）; Mori （2007）; Takahashi （2004）; etc.）. Especially Mori （2007） discusses that conditional imperatives emerged from the historical change of the English *and*-coordinate structure. Collaborating with Mori （2007）, this paper claims that *Talk of the devil* should be considered in terms of the development of conditional imperatives. The following two subsections are based on Mori's （2007） observations and discussions. Section 3. 1 introduces the concept of grammaticalization and Section 3. 2 reviews how conditional imperatives developed through grammaticalization processes.

3. 1 Grammaticalization

To begin with, in order to understand the main idea of grammaticalization, consider the examples of *be*

going to in（2）. The uses in（2 a）−（2 e）are synchronic evidence for the development of the literal spatial meaning of *be going to* into a grammatical marker.

（2）　a.　Henry is going to town.
　　　　b.　Are you going to the library?
　　　　c.　I'm going to eat.
　　　　d.　I am going to do my very best to make you happy.
　　　　e.　The rain is going to come.

（Heine et al.（1991 a: 70））

（2 a）and（2 b）have the literal meaning of spatial movement, while（2 e）expresses the meaning of prediction. There are intermediate stages between these two meanings. In（2 c）, which is a response to（2 b）, *be going to* is interpreted either as intention or prediction. A spatial nuance still remains. In（2 d）, however, no spatial sense is involved; the example carries the meaning of intention or prediction. The literal spatial meaning is lost in（2 e）, too, and *be going to* serves exclusively as a grammatical marker for future prediction. Thus, grammaticalization processes roughly stand for shifts from more contentful expressions to more grammatical categories.

　　Grammaticalization processes involve several defining features. Himmelmann（2004）, for example, defines grammaticalization as "a process of context-expansion"（Himmelmann（2004: 32））. The context expansion can be divided into three different types: host-class, syntactic context and semantic-pragmatic context expansions. First, host-class expansion means that the class which a given expression did not co-occur with before increases. In the case of（2）, *be going to* was originally compatible with animate entities, which can move, but inanimate nouns such as *the rain* also began to co-occur with *be going to* over time. Next, syntactic context expansion means that the syntactic environments in which a given expression appears is broadened. Himmelmann（2004）, for example, discusses the change of demonstratives into articles（the French definite article *le* results from the grammaticalization of the Latin distal demonstrative *ille*）. Demonstratives originally occurred in subject or object positions（e.g. '*that* is'）, but with grammaticalization advanced, they came to appear in adpositional expressions（e.g. '*that* car'）and developed as articles. In this way, syntactic environments change or become wider according to grammaticalization processes. Finally, semantic-pragmatic context expansion means that the usage context is broadened. In other words, an expression in question becomes available in larger contexts than before. To return to the example of *be going to* above, the expression came to occur in not only the context of spatial movement but also that of prediction.

　　As research of language change in historical linguistics, a large number of phenomena involving grammaticalization have been discussed so far（e.g. Brinton and Traugott（2005）; Bybee（2003）; Bybee et al.（1994）; Heine（1992, 2003）; Heine et al.（1991 a, 1991 b）; Hopper and Traugott（2003 [1993]）; Traugott（1989, 2003）; etc.）. This paper assumes that a given expression involves grammaticalization when that expression loses its literal meaning and can be characterized by at least one of the expansions reviewed above.

3.2　The development of conditional imperatives

　　According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*（henceforth *OED*）（2 nd edition, CD-ROM）, the conjunc-

tion *and* has been used to connect coordinate clauses or sentences（i.e. juxtaposition）since the 9th century. On the other hand, cause-effect reading appeared in the 10–11th century. Its typical example is shown in（3） （through this paper, the year of literary works is mentioned when examples are given as historical data）.

（3）　Werke by counseil, and thou schalt nat rewe.
　　　　'Work by advice and you shall never regret.'

<div align="right">（1386 CHAUCER Millar's T. 344）</div>

Coordinate usage historically precedes subordinate usage. The two types of *and* differ from each other syntactically as well as semantically. Consider（4）and（5）, for example.

（4）　Tom goes to school and Jerry stays here.［juxtaposition］
（5）　He studied hard and（thus）he passed the exam.［cause-effect］

Unlike juxtaposition in（4）, two constituents in（5）cannot be replaced, as in（4′）and（5′）, suggesting that the two establish a subordinate relation.

（4′）　 Jerry stays here and Tom goes to school.
（5′）　 *He passed the exam and（thus）he studied hard.

Conditional imperatives belong to the type of（5）.

（6）　 Make any noise and the baby will cry.
（6′）　 *The baby will cry and（you）make any noise.

Conditional imperative（6）, for example, has a conditional interpretation. The two events are not juxtaposed; rather, making any noise is stated as a condition for the baby's cry. The order of the two constituents is fixed and cannot be changed, as in（6′）.

　　　The cause-effect use of *and* developed from the literal juxtaposition reading of coordinate *and*. In other words, *and* of conditional imperatives originates from the coordinate conjunction *and* that underwent grammaticalization. This claim is supported by one of the defining characteristics of grammaticalization processes reviewed in the preceding section, host-class expansion. Conditional imperatives do not follow the standard rule of conjunctions in English. Coordination in conditional imperatives is against the "Coordinate Constituent Constraint"（Schachter（1977））. This constraint requires the two constituents to be the same syntactic category and semantic function, such as NP（Noun Phrase）*and* NP, VP（Verb Phrase）*and* VP, etc.; accordingly the imperative cannot be conjoined with the declarative（for other relevant discussions on this issue, see Gleitman（1965）; Schmerling（1975）; Mittwoch（1976））. The violation of Coordinate Constituent Constraint in the coordinate structure including conditional imperatives can automatically be explained by the claim that they result from the grammaticalization of the coordinate conjunction *and*. Recall that grammaticalization processes lead to host-class expansion. The host-class of the conjunction *and* expanded due to

grammaticalization. In the coordinate structure 'X and S（Sentence）,' for example, X used to be limited to S to fulfill Coordinate Constituent Constraint; over time grammaticalization processes expanded X to VP and NP, resulting in the coordinate structure expressing a subordinate meaning, or a cause-effect relation, as in （7）.

（7） a. Come one step closer and I'll shoot.［VP and S］
　　　 b. One step closer and I'll shoot.［NP and S］

The fact that the coordinate use of *and* grammaticalized into the subordinate use is in consistent with the chronological order of the appearance of each use in the history of English.

　　　To summarize, by the 10–11th century, conditional imperatives emerged in the coordinate structure as a result of grammaticalization processes and were established as a construction expressing a cause-effect relation. The process concerned is not an ad-hoc type of change but a regular shift of the coordinate conjunction *and,* i.e. host-class expansion. Due to the expansion, the conjunction *and* became compatible with imperatives or other constituents which are not allowed to appear because of Coordinate Constituent Constraint. Then, the resulting string "VP（an imperative）*and* S（a declarative）" became widely used as an idiomatic construction to express a cause-effect relation. The period of this construction is regarded as a preliminary stage of the development of the English proverb *Talk of the devil* since the 17th century, which will be discussed in Section 4.

4 The development of *Talk of the devil*

4.1 Three stages

　　　This paper proposes the following three stages of the change of the expression *Talk of the devil*. Stage Ⅰ, Stage Ⅱ and Stage Ⅲ roughly correspond with the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries, respectively.

　　　Stage Ⅰ: *Talk of the devil,* which functions as a superstitious prohibition, is embodied as a conditional imperative of the *and-*coordinate structure.
　　　Stage Ⅱ: The religious taste of the proverb disappears and *the devil* begins to express a more general object of discussion such as a person.
　　　Stage Ⅲ: *Talk of the devil* becomes available for the context involving no talk as well as the context of speech.

Notice that each stage is not discrete in nature. The three stages can overlap with each other because the shift in language change occurs not abruptly but gradually. Unless the usages at one stage disappear totally from the history of language, they can still be found at the following stages.

　　　At Stage Ⅰ, *Talk of the devil* was used to prohibit people from mentioning the devil's name based on the superstition that even referring to the devil can cause something unlucky. One of the effective ways of talking people out of some course of action is to show that a negative consequence never fails to follow the deed in question. In the case of the superstition, it is important to inform people of the cause-effect relation that some-

thing unlucky or horrible happens even if they simply mention the devil by name. In English, *if-*conditional clauses can encode a cause-effect relation, but imperative forms are more appropriate to express the same kind of relation as a warning or threat. In fact, imperatives which are used as a warning or threat can be replaced by negative imperatives.

（8） a. Come closer and I'll shoot.
        b. Don't come closer.（＝（8 a））

Thus, *Talk of the devil* was molded into the *and-*coordinate structure which is semantically subordinate and the expression was used as a superstitious prohibition. Since the sense of prohibition was involved, it can be inferred that *Talk of the devil and he'll appear* at this stage meant *Don't talk of the devil*. Also, at Stage Ⅰ, since *Talk of the devil* co-occurred with the *and-*coordinate structure, the expression was normally followed by the latter half, as shown in（9）and（10）.

（9） The English say, Talk of the Devil, and he's presently at your elbow.
                                        （1666 G. TORRIANO *Piazza Universale* 134）

（10） Talk of the Devil and he's at your elbow.
                                        （1698 VANBRUGH *Aesop* II. i.（1730）230）

Being incorporated into the *and-*coordinate structure further explains that the religious warning message was expressed by not the noun phrase *Lupus in fabula* but a conditional imperative in English.

   Stage Ⅱ is the phase where the religious message disappears in *Talk of the devil and he'll appear*. Accordingly *the devil* began to lose the literal meaning. Consider an example in the 19th century.

（11） The unexpected appearance of Mrs. Rainscout made him involuntarily exclaim, 'Talk of the devil—' 'And she appears, Sir,' replied the lady.
                                        （1830 MARRYAT *King's Own* II. V.）

Talk of the devil in（11）has no religious nuance and *the devil* has no literal meaning. It refers to Mrs. Rainscout instead, resulting in the use of not *he* but *she* after *and*. Since the superstitious prohibition is not involved, *Talk of the devil* cannot function as a negative imperative. Rather, as clearly shown in（11）, the intended meaning is an unexpected appearance of the person under discussion. From this it can be assumed that the meaning expressed by *Lupus in fabula*（i.e. a coincident appearance）was replaced by *Talk of the devil* used in more general contexts, on the grounds that both the devil and wolves appear whenever they are mentioned. It should also be stated that the illocutionary force of imperatives was lost as well. At Stage Ⅰ, *Talk of the devil* served as a warning such as a prohibition imperative; it had the illocutionary force as imperatives. At Stage Ⅱ, on the other hand, the expression came to sound less religious and thus appeared in broader contexts. These suggest that at this stage *Talk of the devil* was firmly established as a general statement, i.e. a proverb. Since the expression became ubiquitous, the latter half seemed redundant. Accordingly *Talk of the*

devil alone became able to mean the whole meaning of *Talk of the devil and he'll appear*. Historical data at this stage show that *Talk of the devil* was used independently of *and he'll appear* or that the latter part was expressed differently from the original. Consider the following.

（12） He's just coming towards us. Talk of the Devil!

（1738 SWIFT *Polite Conv.* 1）

（13） 'Talk of the devil! ─Here comes Thiselton!'

（1893 G. ALLEN *Scallywag* I. 10）

In （12）, *Talk of the devil* alone means that *he* has appeared unexpectedly at the scene and the latter part *and he'll appear* is abbreviated. In （13）, too, *Talk of the devil* means the coincident appearance of *Thiselton* and is not followed by *and he'll appear*. The semantic change （i.e. from a superstitious warning to an unexpected and coincident appearance at the conversation scene） and the syntactic change （i.e. the abbreviation of the latter half） happened as the original lost the religious taste at Stage Ⅱ.

At Stage Ⅲ, the context for *Talk of the devil* further changed. The expression includes the verb of speech and thus it is natural that the expression should be uttered in the situation where speech is involved, such as （14）. As shown by *talking about you,* the person expressed by *you* was being discussed.

（14） Speak of the devil. We was just talkin' about you.

（1922 E. O'NEILL *Anna Christie* （1923） I. 9 ）

（15） 'What's the matter, Hasselbacher?' 'Oh, it's you, Mr. Wormold. I was just thinking of you. Talk of the devil,' he said, making a joke of it.

（1958 G. GREENE *Our Man in Havana* III. iii. 136）

A close examination of historical data, however, reveals that *Talk of the devil* can also be used in the context in which no speech is involved, such as （15）. Notice that the preceding sentence of *Talk of the devil* is *thinking of you,* but not *talking of you*. This indicates that at Stage Ⅲ *Talk of the devil* became available for the context which is irrelevant to speech.

4. 2 Grammaticalization of *Talk of the devil*

The English proverb *Talk of the devil* underwent three phases of change, as described in the preceding section. These three stages will be revisited in terms of grammaticalization to show that the development of *Talk of the devil* exhibits systematic patterns of language change, especially semantic-pragmatic context expansion.

In the shift from Stage I to Stage Ⅱ, the literal meaning of *the devil* was lost and came to refer to more general objects, such as a person who was being discussed. This process can be regarded as semantic-pragmatic context expansion in that the context of the word *the devil* broadened. The sense of the word was literally Satan and as a superstitious prohibition the use was limited to religious situations at Stage Ⅰ. At

Stage Ⅱ, on the other hand, the expression became possible to appear in more general contexts. Furthermore, there is a major shift in the proverb at Stage Ⅲ. Despite the use of the verb of speech, *Talk of the devil* became available in the context involving no speech as well as the conversation context. This transition can also be considered semantic-pragmatic context expansion. It is obvious that the context in which the proverb was used expanded from speech situations to more general ones.

Given that "semantic-pragmatic context expansion is the core defining feature of grammaticalization processes" (Himmelmann (2004: 33)), it follows that the proverb *Talk of the devil,* which such characteristics are observed at Stage I to Stage Ⅲ, has undergone grammaticalization. As reviewed in Section 3, conditional imperatives developed from the *and*-coordinate structure. Then, as discussed in this section, *Talk of the devil* was incorporated as a conditional imperative into the grammaticalized coordinate construction and within that construction, *Talk of the devil* itself was further grammaticalized into a more general statement, a proverb.

Finally, if *Talk of the devil* lost the literal meaning and began to appear in more general contexts as a result of grammaticalization, one can predict that the expression can play a role as a grammatical category. This prediction is borne out; the expression can sometimes serve as a discourse marker. First, consider the conversation in (16).

(16)   A: "I saw Max and Lucy today. You know she…"
           B: "Talking of Max, did you know he's going to Australia?"

(Swan (1995: 151))

In (16) *Talking of Max* is used to show the connection between what Speaker A has said and what Speaker B is going to say. In this sense, the expression in question helps to make it clearer how discourse is constructed. With this in mind, consider two examples of *Talking/Speaking of the devil* from websites.

(17)   In the meantime, he has started working at Queensland Health Scientific Services to assist Stewart Carswell part-time. Talking of the devil, Stewart Carswell has now officially started his PhD (parttime) with Jochen, Heather, Janet and Fred (what is he getting into?).
(http://www.ecotox.org.au/endpoint/13_2.pdf; retrieved on November 18, 2009)

(18)   It must have been my thirst for Maison Martin Margiela that made me imagine such a thing. Speaking of the devil, it has been confirmed that Mr. Margiela has left the Maison, …
(http: //74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:DDc 0 QK 2 IY 38 J:www.zimbio.com/ Magdalena％2 BFrackowiak/articles/8 GPGRePruIg/Planet％2 Bof％2 Bthe％2 BLang％2 BMo＋％22 Speaking+of+the+devil％22＆cd＝135＆hl=ja&ct=clnk; retrieved on November 18, 2009)

In (17) and (18) *the devil* refers to Stewart Carswell and Margiela, respectively. The whole meaning, however, is not relevant to their unexpected appearance at the scene which has been discussed so far; rather, *talking of the devil* simply connects what the speaker has just said or written to what he or she is going to say or

write. In the sense that the structure of discourse is made clearer, these types of *Talking of the devil* function as a discourse marker. It can be assumed that *Talking of X* as in (16) has developed through a further generalization of *the devil* in *Talking of the devil* such as (17) and (18).

5 Conclusion

Using the data in the *OED,* this paper has demonstrated that the English proverb *Talk of the devil* has developed at three different stages. Stage Ⅰ (about the 17th century) is the phase in which mentioning the devil's name should be avoided and the religious message was conveyed as a superstitious prohibition by a conditional imperative in the *and*-coordinate structure. As discussed in Mori (2007), the coordinate structure had already acquired a subordinate use to express a cause-effect relation through grammaticalization in the 10–11th century. Then, at Stage Ⅱ (about the 19th century) the literal meaning of *the devil* disappeared. Co-occurring with more general contexts, *Talk of the devil* began to express an unexpected appearance of the person who is being discussed and took the place of *Lupus in fabula*. The illocutionary force of the imperative *talk* was also lost and established as a proverb at this stage. At Stage Ⅲ (about the 20th century) the proverb was compatible with the context involving no speech as well, despite the verb of speech *talk*. No less importantly, these steps can be considered in terms of grammaticalization, which is of great interest and importance to historical linguistics, or research of language change. In fact, a series of shifts at the proposed stages can be explained by the concept of semantic-pragmatic context expansion in Himmelmann (2004). As far as the current usage of *Talk of the devil* is concerned, the form looks discrepant from the meaning of the coincident appearance of a person under discussion. This form-meaning discrepancy, however, can naturally be understood when the proverb is analyzed from a diachronic perspective. The case study of this paper strongly suggests that a gap between descriptive works on proverbs and their linguistic analyses can be filled by tracing the development of a given expression back to its origin and considering it in terms of grammaticalization, a key concept in the research of language change.

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