From ‘say’ to ‘because’: Grammaticalisation and reanalysis

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One of the ways in which causal clauses can be formed in Bengali is by using the (clause-final) word bole ‘because’, as in:

(1) aj gOrOm poReche bole amra baire jai ni
    today hot has-fallen because we outside go NEG.PERF
    ‘Because it was hot today, we didn’t go outside’

The same form is also used as a quotative marker, corresponding to English that in sentences like ‘they announced that/they hoped that/they thought that/they decided that/it seemed that....’. Synchronically, the word bole is identical to the past active participle of the common lexical verb bOla ‘to say/speak’, so that this form can have all of the following three meanings:

(2) bole: ‘having said/spoken’; ‘that’ (mainly in quotative contexts); ‘because’

There has been no shortage of work on the general phenomenon of verbs of saying developing into (quotative) complementizers (see, amongst others, Lord 1976; Crowley 1989; Hopper & Traugott 1993: 14-16; Klamer 2000; various papers in Güldemann & von Roncador 2002) and the case of Bengali quotative bole seems to fit well into the general scenario of grammaticalisation that has been developed for this type of change. The basic idea is that a sequence such as (3a) might be susceptible to reanalysis as (3b), followed by extension of the new complementizer to less obviously quotative contexts (note that we disregard the actual clause-final position of bole, and many other niceties of Bengali grammar).

(3) a. they anounced bole (‘saying’) they would leave
    b. they announced bole (‘that’) they would leave

Much less attention has been paid to the development from ‘say’ to ‘because’, and it must be for this reason that Singh (1980) refers to the array of meanings in (2) as an ‘unresolved problem in Bengali syntax’. It has been claimed that the problem can be solved if it is assumed that Bengali borrowed this array of meanings from one of the Dravidian languages (Kothandaraman 1990: 161-167; see also Masica 1991: 402-403 and Bayer 2001). In Tamil, for example, the participle eṇru (from ena ‘say’) can have all three meanings shown in (2). Another possible donor source that has been proposed is the Bodo languages of Bengal (Anderson 1913, Chatterjee 1926: III.34). However, we shall argue against a borrowing account as an explanation for (2).

Comparative investigation shows that the coexistence of the apparently disparate meanings of ‘say’ and ‘because’ in (2) can be paralleled in languages outside India. Von Roncador (1988: 117) mentions Turkish and Uzbek; Saxena (1995) adds Akan, Ga and Makah; another language like this is Hungarian, in which the present participle mondván (from mond ‘say’) acquired the meaning ‘because’ at some point in the late 1900s, after having been in use as a quotative marker for several centuries (Dömötör 2001: 360). The existence of such parallels suggests that there must be general mechanisms underlying the development from ‘say’ to ‘because’. In fact, Saxena (1995) explicitly proposes that ‘because’ is one of the stages in a grammaticalization hierarchy that verbs of saying can follow. However, beyond invoking the notions of metaphor and metonomy in general terms, she does
not make clear exactly what mechanism would lead from ‘say’ to ‘because’. In this presentation, we shall identify such a mechanism, which revolves around the use of a verb of saying in the meaning ‘think/consider/cogitate’. Such a meaning could develop in contexts like (4a), where – again using the Bengali form bole as an example to illustrate the general scenario – the compementizer, extended from its strictly quotative use, might be reanalysed as having the general meaning ‘engaging in cognitive processes’ shown in (4b):

(4) a. He thought bole (‘that’) it was hot outside
   b. He thought bole (‘thinking/reflecting/considering/cogitating’) that it was hot outside

The impetus for such a reanalysis could come from the continued existence of sentences like (3a/b), featuring an element (bole) that on the one hand seems to be devoid of meaning but on the other hand seems to be a sort of semantic copy (though perhaps less fully specified; see Klamer 2000) of the matrix verb.

An extension of the analyis in (4b) would yield clauses with bole ‘thinking/reflecting/considering/cogitating’ outside contexts with a corresponding matrix verb, as in (5a), and these might be susceptible to a reinterpretation in which bole has the meaning ‘because’:

(5) a. we didn’t go outside bole (‘thinking/reflecting/considering/cogitating’) it was hot
   b. we didn’t go outside bole (‘because’) it was hot

The status of bole in (5) is in a way comparable to that of English seeing in we didn’t go outside seeing that it was hot, where seeing also wavers between ‘cogitating’ and causal senses.

What we propose, therefore, is that the path from ‘say’ to ‘because’ leads via a stage of ‘think/reflect/consider/cogitate’ (but only in the context where the element in question takes a clausal complement). One consequence of this scenario is the expectation that the relevant form might also be used to express purpose, as shown in (6):

(6) a. he bought it bole (‘thinking/reflecting/considering/cogitating’) he would give it to his mother
   b. he bought it bole (‘in order that’) he would give it to his mother

As it happens, this prediction is fulfilled: purpose use of an (erstwhile) verb of saying is attested not only in Bengali (Smith 1997: 140) but also in several other languages that have undergone the development shown in (3) (von Roncador 1988: 117-118; Saxena 1995).

On the basis of the account for ‘say’> ‘because’ developed here, we conclude that, in Bengali but also in other languages, the development need not be attributed to borrowing but may have resulted from – or at the very least been reinforced by – a cognitively plausible mechanism of reanalysis. Homonomy of ‘say’ and ‘because’ is found in geographically and genetically widely separated languages, and it appears that all of them also show the existence – crucial for the account given here – of a general quotative deriving from ‘say’. Moreover, several of them also have the further sense of ‘so that/in order that’ which our account predicts should exist in at least some of the relevant languages. The mechanism identified in (4)/(5) therefore provides a promising approach to explaining one of the links of the grammaticalization chain for verbs of saying described in Saxena (1995).
References


