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# WANT TO/WANNA : Verbal Polysemy versus Constructional Compositionality

GUILLAUME DESAGULIER

*Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux 3*

## 0. Introduction

This paper is based on the assumption that *want to/wanna* has grammaticalized from non-modal semantics and non-auxiliary form in Middle English to an emerging member of present-day modal markers (Krug 2000). There is indeed evidence that *want to* has extended beyond the mere expression of lack and volition to the extent that it is more and more used in advice-giving contexts, which tends to show that modalization is at work :

- (1) *You want to be careful.*
- (2) *You do not want to appear brash or pushy. (The Times)*
- (3) *It is 10.30 am, so we'll want to go easy. (San Francisco Chronicle)*
- (4) *You might not want to take those drugs if you're driving.*

Yet this fact does not obliterate the more central meanings of *want (to)* :

- (5) *I want an apple. (volition)*
- (6) *I want to eat an apple. (volition + intention)*
- (7) *Your shoes want polishing.<sup>1</sup> (lack, need)*

At the same time, *want to* displays signs of primary auxiliarization when used deontically and there is every reason to believe that *wanna* is the phonographematic consequence of the phonological reduction, morphological contraction and syntactic univerbation of *want* and *to*. (8) below is a good example of a semantic extension with loss of primary meaning and progressive decategorialization :

- (8) *(...)then you want to/wanna take the left lane.*

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<sup>1</sup> A form restricted to British English almost exclusively. In American English *need* will be used instead of *want*.

It is hard to say that the speaker appeals to the hearer's volition or desire in the driving context. In this situation there may be another path that leads to the final destination and *you need to take the left lane* would be more constraining on the part of the speaker. What motivates the advice-giving use and interpretation of *want to* or *wanna* here is the acknowledgment on the part of the speaker that the hearer (*you*) is his/her own authority. In its modal extensions therefore *want to* undergoes a weakening of its original semantic content in the form of 'semantic bleaching': the primary, more literal meaning is diluted in the extended set of contexts in which it is used. Moreover, in spoken discourse, owing to the advice-giving function of the whole construction, *want to* is very likely to be pronounced [<sup>h</sup>wɒnə], as a single, non-separable unit behaving like an auxiliary governing a bare infinitive. The infinitive marker can even be said to have become an affix or rather a clitic. The same phenomenon can be observed with *gonna*, *hafta* and *gotta*. Krug (2000) provides an extensive description of the grammaticalization of what he calls 'emerging modals'. Yet previous research on *want to/wanna* has failed to specify what predisposed it to develop from non-modal semantics in Middle English to an emerging member of the modal markers. This is what I set out to do.

In this paper I will bring together linguistic aspects of the motivations for language change that are generally kept apart. To this aim I will argue that the synchronic variation of *want (to)* reflects its historical developments and that it is possible to bring together the binary understanding of language variation (synchronic and diachronic) within a unified framework that reconciles form and meaning. I will show that the combination of such theoretical frameworks as mental space blending and Construction Grammar allows us to unify a broad range of complex cognitive mechanisms at work in language change and the resulting present-day polysemy.

### 1. The semantic compositionality of *want (to)/wanna*

Sweetser (1999) resorts to Fauconnier and Turner's 'mental space blending' (Fauconnier 1997, Fauconnier & Turner 1996, 2001) to reassert the centrality of semantic compositionality in language. She establishes a general compositional formula using the compositional semantics of the Adj.-N modification construction as a case study. We are about to see in what way the coexistence of the original uses of *want to* –lack, desire, volition– with more recent deontic extensions can be considered as an example of semantic compositionality. The following paragraphs will show to what extent primary scenes interact with frames, active zones and mental spaces when it comes to construing the semantic complexities generated by the intermediary status of *want to* on the VP↔modal auxiliary gradient.

### 1.1. Conventional metaphoric mappings

Sweetser (1990) contends that semantic change in general is from content to mental and to 'speech act' meanings, not vice-versa. The same kind of unidirectional mappings have shaped the extensions of *want (to)* over time :

I- Sociophysical world ('content') :

(9) *for wante of mylke*<sup>2</sup> (*Helsinki*) → lack

II- Mental world ('reasoning') :

(10) *He wants some milk / to drink some milk* → desire, volition

III- Discourse interaction ('speech acting') :

(11) *You don't want to drink that milk* [it is sour] → advice-giving

The motivation for those successive mappings is rather easy to delineate in semantic terms. It seems natural for anyone to desire what one lacks or needs and to express that desire in an agentive manner by means of volition. Of course, lack does not always entail desire – one may lack and need a flu vaccine without understandably relishing at the prospect of the vaccination itself. Still, one may reluctantly go to the doctor's and ask for the vaccination, prompted by a future benefit – e.g. being in good health – in which case volition does not have to presuppose desire. Conversely, desire does not necessarily induce volition, for we might well find an object, a person or a situation desirable – a villa on the Riviera, an expensive car, etc. – without actually wanting them. Mappings between a state of mind (desire) and an action or speech act (volition, advice giving) are not automatic even if in any case, *want (to)* constructions involve the prospect of some future benefit. The transition from volition to advice-giving and further to polite command is a matter of pragmatic inference. To be understood properly, (8) above requires pragmatic deduction in the appropriate discourse situation. Here, the speaker's strategy is best explained in terms of the following deduction : "it is in the interest of *you* to take the left lane so *you* should<sup>3</sup> do it". The speaker builds a predication that is presented to the hearer and biases the validation of the predication. Such an occurrence can be validated or not but in a *want to/wanna* construction, the hearer is the only one to be able to carry out the validation eventually.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of the kind for *want of + NP* or *V-ing* are not limited to archaic examples, cf. *for want of anything else*.

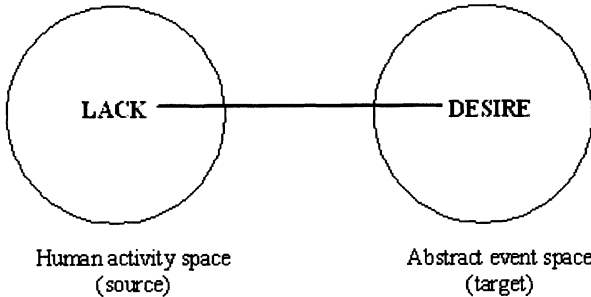
<sup>3</sup> The paraphrase in *should* indicates that we are in a deontic context, more specifically an advice-giving one.

### 1.2. From lack to desire : primary source and target concepts.

Drawing on Grady's extensive study on primary metaphors and primary scenes (1997) it appears that the transition from lack to desire involves a mapping between a source concept and a target concept. Primary source concepts are "a class of universal, experientially basic properties, relations, actions and processes, which have particular significance with our interactions with the world." (1997:151) whereas target concepts "are more subjective than source concepts, in the sense that they are more strongly tied to internal states." (1997:164)

Lack is a source concept in that it correlates with sensory input from the physical world, while desire is a good instance of a target concept by relating to responses to this input. We can therefore assume that the metaphoric mapping between lack and desire is as shown in Figure 1 below :

Figure 1



It is to be noted that lack is a source concept which also figures in another primary mapping that is often associated with *want to* constructions, except that this time *need* is the target concept. The motivations for these mappings relate to our own experience of lack and to our response to it rather than to its objective manifestations. In other words it is a dynamic primary scene that is involved here.

### 1.3. Semantic frames

On the other hand, it appears that the concepts of volition and advice-giving encode too much information to be accounted for merely in terms of primary scenes. Accordingly frames seem to be far more promising tools to account for the more complex meaning extensions of *want to*, for "[f]rames are typically represented as collections of related knowledge and experiences, whereas primary scenes are on a much more local scale, and may crosscut many such collections." (Grady 1997:197). As such, "frame structure is a powerful cognitive mechanism which underlies many instances of meaning extension (...)" (Sweetser 1999:134).

We can hypothesize that each subsequent stage in the evolution of *want to* is associated with a frame, such as the Volition Frame and the Advice-Giving

Frame. The former includes a volitional agent (generally in subject position), a desired entity (usually the object) and a hiatus or tension between the two ; the latter consists of some authority reference (rules, laws, etc.) an advice-giver and an advice-receiver.

It is reasonable to think that the primary mappings depicted above are more basic than the Volition Frame, which is in turn more basic than the Advice-Giving Frame.

#### 1.4. **Overlap, profiling and active zones.**

Even if the conceptualization in terms of a succession of mappings between concepts that are distinct but related gives us a clear idea of the semantic evolution paths of *want to*, one must admit that semantic overlap is the rule once the form appears in discourse.

- (12) *American authorities want to take blood samples from thousands of Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners (...)* (*The Times*).

In (12) the volitional property traditionally attached to the verbal notion of *want* is activated. At the same time, identifying the terrorists is presented as an emergency, something that needs to be done, and necessity is a property that should not be ruled out, along with lack – American authorities do not have blood samples – and desire – obtaining blood samples is presented as a future benefit. It is reasonable to think that the different interpretations associated with *want to* (lack, necessity, desire, volition, advice) coexist synchronically in its core meaning. Depending on the context, one or several specific senses will be activated. In (13) below, desire is the predominating activated property :

- (13) *I was wanting to leave.*

Contextual interpretation and pragmatic inference will not only profile a given instance of the *want to* constructions as a member of the appropriate frame but also elaborate some active zone<sup>4</sup> of the frame profiled.

More importantly, profiling the Advice-Giving Frame in the case of *want to* is often a matter of argument selection. Thus, an advice-giving usage in discourse very often relies first and foremost on the choice of *you* as the first argument subject :

- (14) *If you're looking for a very good collection of tunes to play on your low D whistle, you may want to take a look at this collection of 110 slow airs.* ([www.chiffandfipple.com](http://www.chiffandfipple.com))

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<sup>4</sup> Following Sweetser (1999), who gives the concept an expanded definition based on Langacker (1987, 1991), 'active zone' subsumes "not only parts or aspects of the entity itself but parts or aspects of the frames associated with it in the complex context of the particular utterance (...)" (1999:147).

When the arguments are co-referential (ie. the advice-giver = the advice-receiver), *want to* is more volitional :

(14') (...) *I want [me] to take a look at this collection (...)*

### 1.5 Mental spaces

Active zone phenomena can also concern “parts or aspects of the entity in another mental space” (Sweetser, 1999:147). Mental spaces as defined by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner as an abstract mechanism meant at describing the interconnections between separate domains of complex referential structures through connectors within and across spaces.

In light of Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of Mental Spaces, I claim that it is possible to account for the link between the synchronic polysemy of *want* (NP/*to*) and its diachronic evolution in terms of mental space blending. I contend that each stage in the semantic development of *want* evokes a space structured by some appropriate frame, and that the synchronic meaning of the whole is a successful blending of the two spaces involved. The nature of the blend will depend on the frame profiled. Thus when the Volition Frame is selected, a use like *She wants to eat an apple* might prompt us to associate the desire for an apple – because *she* does not have an apple to eat – with the agentive realization of that desire – on the ground that eating an apple is perceived by *she* as something good, hence something to benefit from (Figure 2). Of course, the number of zones to be activated from inputs 1 and 2 will depend on the context and the level of information to be conveyed. As shown above, (12) invokes more active zones than (13).

On the other hand, when the Advice-Giving Frame is profiled (Figure 3), a warning such as *you want to/wanna be careful* indicates that the speaker (S) identifies the blend as described in Figure 2 (i.e. input 1 in Fig. 3) with his or her own view on the situation (input 2, Fig. 3). In other words, S perceives that being careful is good for *you*, therefore *you* should be careful.

Input 1 and the blend in Fig. 2 together with the blend in Fig. 3 represent the successive stages in the semantic development of *want to*. Furthermore, blending enables us to represent the synchronic coexistence of those different stages in discourse. Thus the study of *want to* reveals that mental space blending can be a good way of conceptualizing synchrony and diachrony. However the problem with the representation of mental spaces is that they fail to represent morphosyntactic blends<sup>5</sup> and semantic blends within the same structure. This is where Adele Goldberg’s Construction Grammar comes into play.

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<sup>5</sup> And contracted realizations of WANT TO can be considered as blends at the morphosyntactic level.

Figure 2

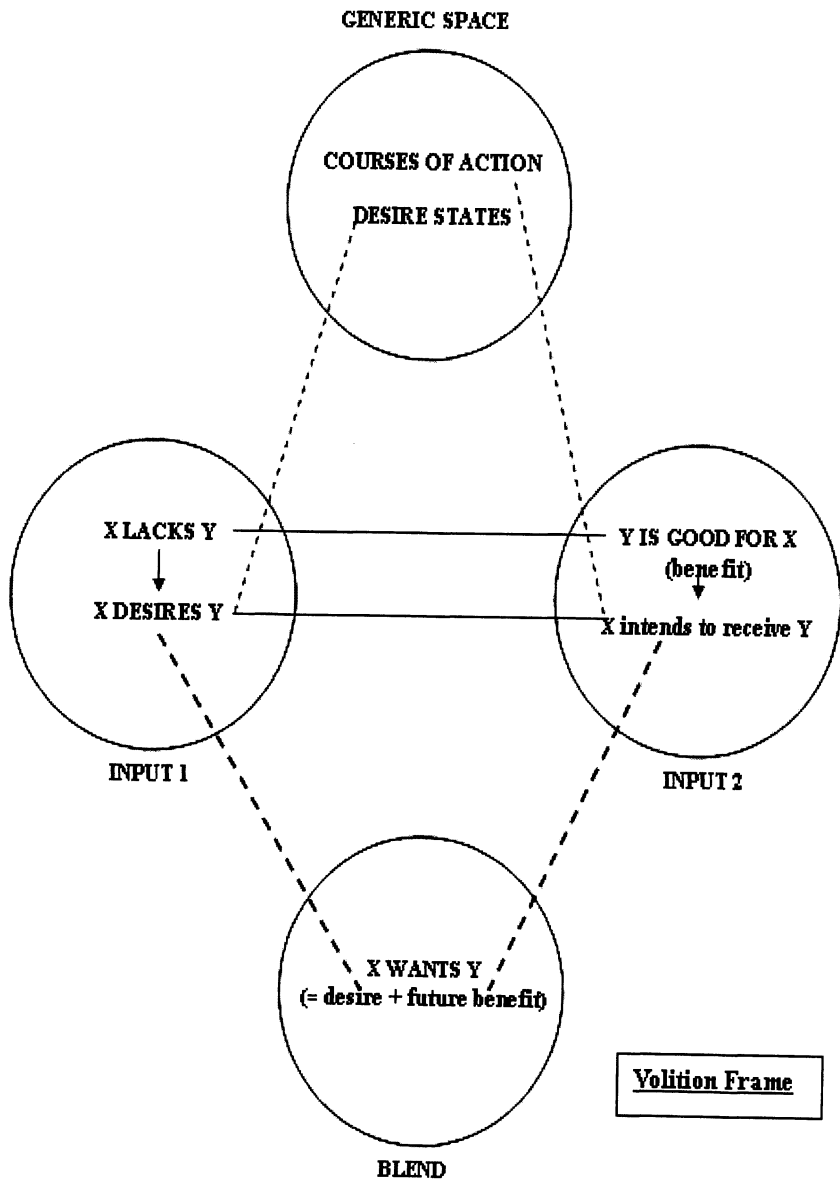
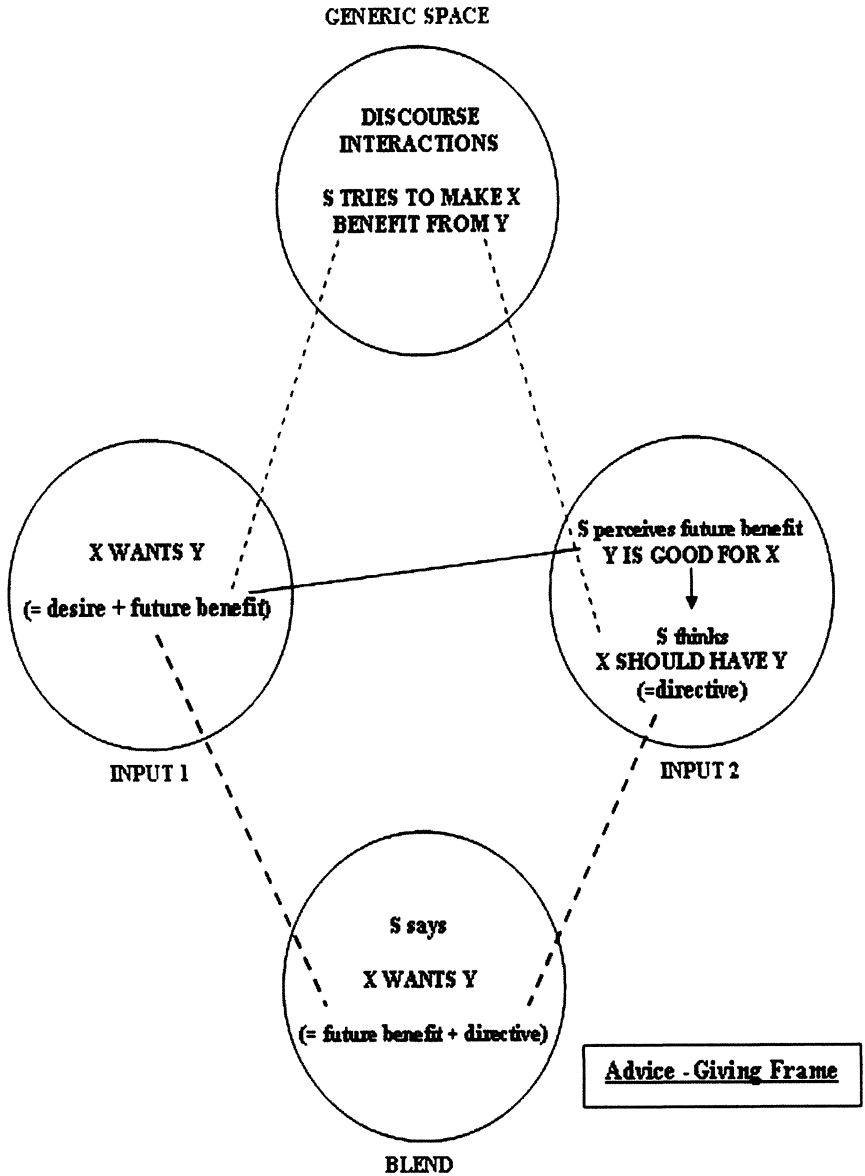




Figure 3



**2. The constructional compositionality of *want (to)/wanna*.**

So far Construction Grammar has proved the best theoretical frame to integrate form and meaning in argument structures. ‘Form’ in constructions has to do with any combination of syntactic, morphological or prosodic pattern whereas ‘meaning’ refers to lexical semantics, pragmatics and discourse structure. Drawing on Frame Semantics (Fillmore 1982), Goldberg defines constructions as follows :

Constructions : pairings of syntax and semantics that can impose particular interpretations on expressions containing verbs which do not themselves lexically entail the given interpretations. (1995:220)

We can posit four constructions which exist independently of the specificity of the verb *want* but which account for its uses :

- WANT (NP/TO) LACK : Potential Recipient lacks Patient → Subj V Obj
- WANT (NP/TO) DESIRE : Potential Recipient desires Patient → Subj V Obj
- WANT (NP/TO) VOLITION : Recipient intends to receive Patient at some future point in time → Subj V Obj
- WANT (NP/TO) ADVICE-GIVING : Agent intends to cause Recipient to receive Patient at some future point in time → [ ] Ag Subj Rec V Obj Pa (or Subj Ag / Rec V Obj Pa if Agent = Recipient)

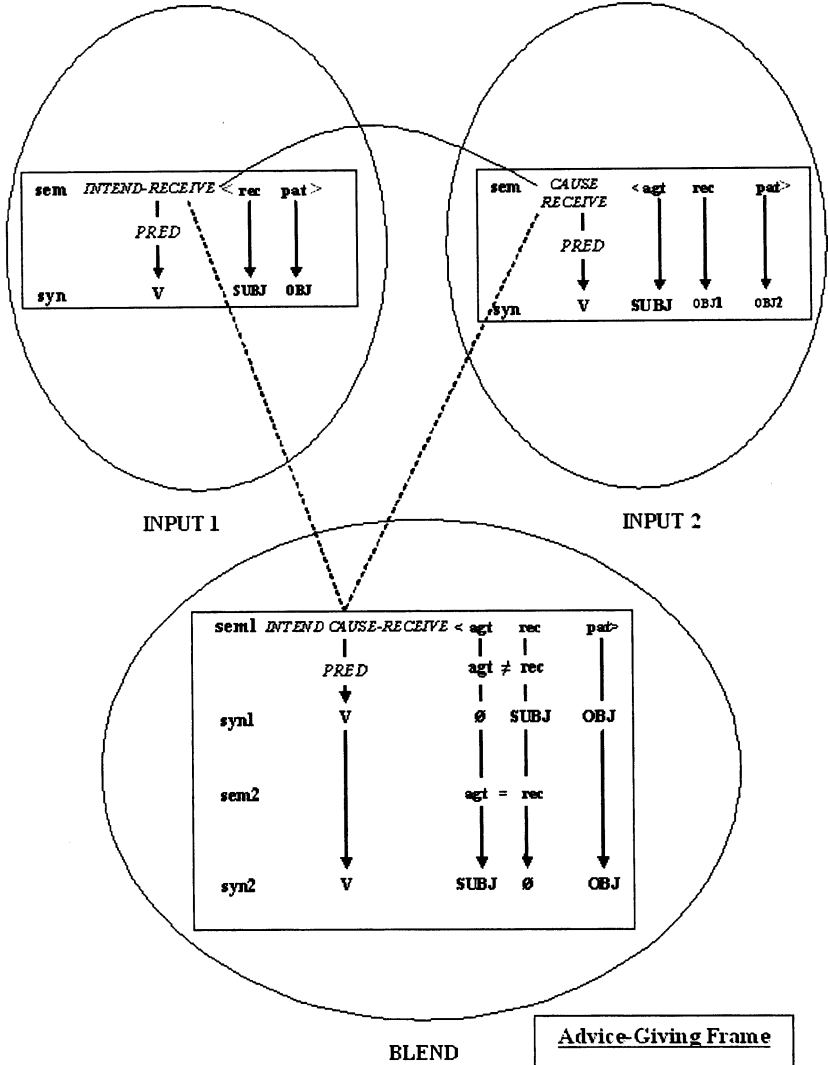
Those constructions are independent from the verbs they account for. For instance, the Volitional Construction also accounts for *want*, *wish*, *desire*, etc.

To capture relations among constructions, Goldberg posits asymmetric inheritance links between those which are related both semantically and syntactically : “That is, construction A motivates construction B iff A inherits from B” (1995:72). In other words, for C<sub>2</sub> to inherit from C<sub>1</sub> implies that C<sub>1</sub> dominates C<sub>2</sub> and that C<sub>1</sub> motivates C<sub>2</sub>. Those inheritance links apply rather well to the basic constructions associated with *want to* as the Lack Construction dominates and motivates the Desire Construction, which in turn dominates and motivates the Volitional Construction. But the transition from the Volitional Construction to the Advice-Giving Construction is more difficult to handle in terms of inheritance links. For it seems that another construction has to be taken into account, namely the Cause-Receive Construction of which (15) is an illustration.

(15) *I want you to be careful.*

I contend that the Cause-Receive Construction interacts with the Volitional Construction in a compositional way to yield the Advice-Giving Construction (Figure 4).

Figure 4 (the generic space is not analyzed here)



In this respect, *you want to be careful* is interpreted as the successful blending at the constructional level of *you want to be careful* (= intend receive, input 1) and *I want you to be careful* (= intend cause receive, input 2). When the Agent is not the Recipient, the advice-giving use of *want to* is a very convenient and polite way of getting someone to do something without sounding too obtrusive since the Agent does not appear at the surface level, which has the effect of leaving the

hearer the choice not to do it, at least at face value. In (3) above, the Agent is also the Recipient (cf. sem2/syn2 in the blend Fig. 4).

This is in keeping with the fact that, owing to its intermediary status, *want to* is increasingly computed as a single construction best analyzed as a “splicing together of a construction associated with its old behaviour and one associated with its new behaviour” (Tabor 1994:170), i.e. a ‘hybrid structure’, or what I choose to call a ‘morpho-syntactic blend’.

Thus advice-giving uses of *want to* prove to be instances of constructional compositionality rather than simple cases of polysemy. The combination of mental space blending and Construction Grammar paves the way for a unified representation of relatively complex cognitive mechanisms by bringing together not only synchronic and diachronic levels of analysis but also form and meaning.

### 3. Conclusion

The treatment of *want (to)* in the theoretical frame of grammaticalization is the first step towards a unified conceptualization of form and meaning as it shows in what way the structural marks of auxiliariation of *want to/wanna* at the phonological and morphosyntactic levels interact with pragmatic and semantic evidence that the form has been acquiring modal extensions. I have then intended to reassert the centrality of composition in language diversity (synchronically and diachronically) by showing that mental space blending is involved in the auxiliariation and modalization of *want to*. But one major problem with that theoretical construct is that it fails to integrate form and meaning. On the other hand one of the crucial assets of a constructional treatment of *want to* is to integrate form and meaning within the same means of representation. This possibility for *want to* to be used in a wide variety of constructions is precisely what must have predisposed the sequence to be grammaticalized as an emerging modal marker instead of *wish*, *intend* or *desire*. However, this is still a working hypothesis that requires confirmation, notably by analyzing in comparison the constructions associated with *have (got) to/gotta/hafsta* and *be going to/gonna*.

Interestingly, we can easily combine mental space blending and Construction Grammar when it comes to showing that the deontic uses of *want to* are best explained in terms of constructional compositionality rather than in terms of polysemy alone. In this respect there is hope for a unified, integrative cognitive approach.

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Guillaume Desagulier  
17 rue Camille Desmoulins  
75011 Paris, France

[gdesagul@etu.u-bordeaux3.fr](mailto:gdesagul@etu.u-bordeaux3.fr)