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Could be it's grammaticalization – Potentials of innovation in spontaneous language use

This talk is about 'potential grammaticalization', that is, cases where change along known grammaticalization paths would seem expectable but has not (yet) unfolded. The case study investigates the English epistemic phrases *(it) could be* and *(it) might be* and their potential development into sentence adverbs in analogy to *maybe*. These phrases can occur in adverb-like position and function in informal language use, e.g. *(it) could be something good has begun*, often with the pronoun *it* omitted. But to what extent does their usage indicate innovation or an emerging convention of adverbial *could be / might be*? How are they differentiated from *maybe*?

I present a corpus study and a set of small experiments investigating these questions. The results suggest that some grammaticalization mechanisms are at work, even in the absence of diachronic change and irrespective of item frequency. On the other hand, there is little evidence of conventionalization of adverbial *could be / might be*, and also no clear signs of semantic or pragmatic differentiation. I conclude that weak conventions leave room for variability; rather than undergoing continuous change, some forms have a proclivity to be continuously re-innovated as micro-steps on a grammaticalization path, but this is not enough to drive change beyond existing conventions.