

*Principium incipiendi*: towards a cognitive  
motivation for ingressive ‘haptic’ verbs  
Sobre las bases cognitivas de los verbos ingresivos  
«hápticos»

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**Aims and scope**

The point of departure of this enquiry is the Latin verb *incipere* ‘to begin,’ a compounded derivation of *capere* ‘to seize.’ The former is a relatively abstract temporal-sequential lexeme with modal-like properties, while the latter refers to a mundane bodily action. Since they share the same root and the one is derived from the other, the discrepancy in meaning begs explanation. In order to frame and address the issue, we draw on two main strategies, a historical-typological comparison, which will allow us to gain an insight into the core properties and degree of entrenchedness of the semantic association at hand, and a theoretical analysis of the experiential and cognitive bases of that association in terms of embodied cognitive semantics. This will allow us to explain why such a shift should occur, which is the primary aim of this paper. It is beyond the scope of this work to offer an in-depth analysis of the historical evolution of any specific lexical item in terms of grammaticalization. We will instead suggest how it may have come about in broad terms to provide a common framework for individual cases. We argue that such a general framework is enough to posit an as yet unrecognized grammaticalization pathway (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2004: 286).

### **Semasiological background**

We have gathered data suggesting that a great many number of words for ‘begin’ evolved from haptic roots—roots signalling manual manipulation, especially seizing—with or without morphosyntactic derivation such as prefixation, suffixation or pronominalization. This suggests that while derivation may be a supporting factor, it is not entirely nuclear to the phenomenon. For one, we have found several cases of polysemy where a haptic root can mean either ‘seize’ or ‘begin’ without overt morphological changes. Also, no single type of derivation seems to be crucial in and of itself<sup>1</sup>. The only core component present in all cases is the use of haptic semantics as the symbolic input for the target meaning.

The figure 1 presents a sample of semasiological data for primary and secondary verbs meaning ‘to begin’ sorted according to their core etymological meaning. Note, in particular, how the haptic column is the most richly populated.<sup>2</sup>

### **Experiential bases of the semantic development**

Words like *incipere* index a fairly abstract concept belonging to the domain of temporal and sequential cognition. We know from the wealth of investigations in the linguistic and cognitive sciences that the abstract is usually apprehended and reasoned via metaphor. In particular, temporal expressions overwhelmingly go back to spatial and dynamic concepts, more directly-apprehensible domains of human experience. This principle, whose empirical validity has been demonstrated by a host of converging evidence from anthropology, linguistics, and experimental psychology, was first revealed through linguistic data. In language, space is systematically mapped onto time through a set of primary metaphors:

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<sup>1</sup> Although prefixation does play a typologically significant role, there doesn't seem to be any inner-linguistic, let alone cross-linguistic agreement as to their specific semantic aggregation. We deal with the addition of prefixes to haptic roots in terms of variations of prototypicality in the image-schematic structure of seizing acts (whether one approaches an object to seize it, takes it from within a container, grabs it from the ground, clutches it tightly, with one or two hands, etc.), which incidentally also explains the huge prefix variation for single roots, e.g. in Germanic.

<sup>2</sup> An asterisk has been added to mark those verbs whose etymological appurtenance to a given group is plausible though not undisputable.

**Figure 1. Beginning in Indo-European**

Languages	Ingressive movement roots	Haptic roots	Upward movement roots	Other dynamic roots
<b>Latin</b>	<i>Ineo Ingredior</i>	<i>incipio coepi* suscipio inchoo* sumo</i>	<i>surgo orior</i>	<i>committo</i>
<b>Sabellic</b>		<i>ceheft*</i>		
<b>Romanian</b>		<i>începe prinde (se) apuca</i>	<i>(se) lua</i>	
<b>Spanish</b>	<i>comenzar iniciar</i>	<i>emprender</i>		<i>ponerse a</i>
<b>Latvian</b>		<i>uzņemties</i>	<i>uznākt (uz)sākt</i>	
<b>Lithuanian</b>		<i>(pra)imti(s) griebtis</i>	<i>šókti stoti</i>	<i>pradėti</i>
<b>Russian</b>		<i>ять, брать(ся)</i>	<i>стать</i>	<i>поехали</i>
<b>Slovene</b>		<i>jéti</i>		
<b>Polish</b>		<i>jać</i>		
<b>Gothic</b>		<i>đuginnan*</i>	<i>ana/ dustōdjan</i>	
<b>Old Norse</b>		<i>hefja* (upp)</i>		
<b>Icelandic</b>		<i>taka</i>		
<b>Old High German</b>		<i>biginnan* (ana-)fāhan</i>		
<b>German</b>	<i>Eintreten Eingehen</i>	<i>anfängen anfassen</i>	<i>anheben aufnehmen s. aufmachen</i>	<i>antreten losgehen</i>
<b>Old English</b>		<i>on/ a/ beginning*</i>		
<b>English</b>		<i>take (to) get*<sup>i</sup></i>	<i>start* (a)rise</i>	
<b>Ancient Greek</b>		<i>ἄπτω ἐπιχειρέω λαμβάνω</i>		<i>ἄρχομαι*</i>
<b>Armenian</b>		<i>arnowm</i>		
<b>Albanian</b>		<i>marr zë*</i>		
<b>Avestan</b>	<i>aibigərað-</i>			
<b>Sanskrit</b>	<i>prakram-</i>	<i>(pra)ārabh-</i>		
<b>Tocharian</b>				<i>b aun a on*</i>
<b>Hittite</b>		<i>ap(p)/ ep(p)-(-za)</i>		

<sup>i</sup> Cf. uses like *we got chatting*.

1. Time units are points/perimeters in space: *hoc in tempore*.
2. Time is a line with a particular spatial orientation: *inferiores quinque dies*.
3. Time passing is motion through space: *sub finem adventare*.
4. Duration is length: *longa vita*.

Note, furthermore, that spatial concepts are not entirely literal themselves as they are often metaphorical elaborations from our most basic bodily experience, as can be seen by tracking the origins e.g. of spatial prepositions: Forehead → in front: *ante* < \**h<sub>2</sub>ent-i* «in the forehead's orientation/direction».

In this light, 'seizing' actually seems to be a fairly reasonable source domain for conceptualizing the beginning. Indeed, we interact with the world, and with our own body, first and foremost through haptic manipulation with our hands. Seizing can be, furthermore, conceived as the haptic action par excellence. This is supported by the existence of the infant's grasping reflex: upon contact with any object or surface, the new-born clutches tightly with her fingers, presumably to inspect and control whatever she has come in contact with. Correspondingly, the hand can be seen as an extended agent of our embodied cognition, the executer of our will to act (to exert force) upon objects in the environment, as Radman et al. (2013) have argued. The application of force is, according to Talmy (2000 (1): 409-470) the prerequisite of controlled agentive (causative) events and thus coincides with their temporal onset. Causal sequence and temporal sequence are intrinsically related in a gestalt-like fashion and arguably constitute a seamless conceptual and experiential whole.

### **Cognitive characterization of the semantic evolution**

Our hypothesis is that the semantic evolution is made possible by a conceptual metaphor linking the two concepts that we can phrase: TO BEGIN IS TO SEIZE, that is, a target meaning 'begin' is evocated by a source form 'seize'. The standard definition of metaphor in cognitive linguistics takes it to be a conceptual mapping linking two different domains of experience so that a source domain—typically a concrete concept—is used to reason about and linguistically encode the target domain—typically an abstract concept.

It has, however, been convincingly argued by Barcelona (2000), that most conceptual metaphors depend on more basic conceptu-

al metonymies which provide the cognitive contiguity necessary for a metaphorical mapping to take place.

Metonymy, indeed, is usually taken to imply a conceptual mapping or association between two subdomains of a single domain of experience within an ICM (idealized cognitive model) or semantic frame<sup>3</sup>.

On that basis, we hypothesize that TO BEGIN IS TO SEIZE is really a metaphor from metonymy which allows for a more realistic and smooth transition between the source and the target concepts, which takes place within a coherent, although abstract, frame: event structure.

Within the continuous flux of human experience, events are conceptualized, according to Croft's study on event structure (2012), along two main dimensions: the quality and the temporal dimensions, which are intimately intertwined in a gestalt-like fashion. Oversimplifying somewhat, we believe that our semantic association can be best explained as a mapping from the quality dimension to the temporal dimension, more specifically from force-dynamic structure to sequential structure<sup>4</sup>. The event chain has, prototypically, both a force-dynamic and a sequential structure. The former has to do with the application, transmission of and resistance to force, and the latter with the temporal ordering of single causal chunks, i.e. conceptually individuated subevents. In our case, seizing is often the first step of a series of such individuated chunks in a causal-chain. In other words, it coincides with the beginning of many events, namely those which involve application of force with the hands, whether for displacement, transference, instrumentalization, or any other sort of object manipulation. This cognitive contiguity lays the basis for a meaning shift from one domain to the other.

Following Koch's diachronic analysis of metonymy (1999), we interpret this shift as consisting in a metonymic inversion of the figure-ground relation between the force-dynamic pattern of hap-

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<sup>3</sup> That is, a dynamic conceptual representation in the form of a gestalt-like network that structures and constrains our understanding of events in terms of their salient participants, their relationships, roles, values, as well as scripts or narratives ordering how they typically unfold.

<sup>4</sup> Force-dynamics is a technical term used in Cognitive Semantics to refer to the way language captures and represents our folk understanding of physical force and causation.

tic interaction and its implicit temporal sequence in the experiential continuum (the gestalt frame). Such an inversion takes place through a reinterpretation of the linguistic signal in any of the many contexts where seizing implies, pragmatically, beginning anything. The reinterpretation which is triggered by contextual, communicative factors can then become entrenched through a phenomenon known as pragmatic strengthening (König & Traugott, 1988), whereby contextually retrieved knowledge becomes a regular part of the semantics of a linguistic sign. The new meaning first coexists with the original semantics (metonymic polysemy) and may then eventually replace it (metonymic semantic change).

As an illustration of how this may come about let us present a table inspired by Koch (1999:155):

**Figure 2. Metonymy in discourse**

Hearer	Message: <i>Grab a plate</i>	Haptic force- dynamic structure	Temporal- sequential structure
Initial interpretation	S1 Literally: «take it with your hands»	<b>Figure</b>	Ground
Reversed interpretation	S2 «Begin to eat»	>Ground	<b>&gt;Figure</b>

As can be seen, this is not a mere temporal metonymy, since the resulting interpretation does not have the linguistic sign refer to a subsequent event, but rather turns it into a modal-like verb which marks the transition into any event. That is, while S1 refers to seizing, S2 doesn't refer to eating but to beginning which does not, in itself, represent an event but rather an abstract event-structuring modality. The shift from S1 to S2 can thus be seen as metaphoric inasmuch as it maps a concrete concept «seizing» to an abstract one «beginning,» but since it implies specific contexts where there is an experiential frame-given contiguity (as per Koch, 1999: 149) between the source and target domains, it is also metonymically constrained, which allows us to confidently characterize it as a metaphor from metonymy or 'metaphonymy.' The contiguity only becomes transparent when one posits an abstract though very real frame: event structure.

Subsequently, the metaphonymy can be further extended to contexts where the original contiguity doesn't hold anymore, that is, S2 can come to be used in contexts where beginning does not imply seizing anything at all (e.g. in abstract events), giving rise to what we could symbolize with S3: a former haptic root meaning 'beginning' used in contexts where there is only indirect haptic interaction, *iter incipere*, or none at all, *sermonem incipere*. This is a metaphorical extension which makes it seem as though there had only been a simple metaphor all along, but as we have seen, the whole process is most likely metonymically grounded. Moreover, such beginning-verbs can suffer valence reduction yielding an intransitive use with no direct object, which in our case is likely to happen only after an S3 stadium has been reached, that is, when there is no implication of haptic interaction anymore—no remembrance of the original meaning of the haptic root: e.g. *ver incipit*. We can operatively tag this as S4, where there is not only no implication of haptic dynamics, but of any agentive force-dynamics at all<sup>5</sup>. Finally, S4 is de-semantized enough to take infinitival complementation: *loqui incipere*. While we make no particular claim as to the diachronic reality of the stages proposed, it seems nonetheless useful to single out these four constructional patterns. In Latin, it is difficult to assess their empirical validity because both *incipio* and *coepi* are already at an advanced stage of grammaticalization upon their first appearance in the written records. Both allow for transitive and intransitive constructions, both can be used with concrete and abstract DO's, and neither implies haptic interaction anymore (the original meaning of both *-cip-* and *-ep-*). Data from a third verb *suscipere* offers an interesting perspective on this: it can be used already with abstract DO to mean 'begin' both with contextually implicit haptic dynamics, *bellum suscipere* (read e.g. *arma suscipere* and thus *bellum incipere*), and without, *sermonem/animus/voluntatem suscipere*, but it cannot be used intransitively or with infinitives in contrast to *incipio* and *coepi*<sup>6</sup>. This suggests that *suscipio* is at an S3 stage, although this needs further investigation.

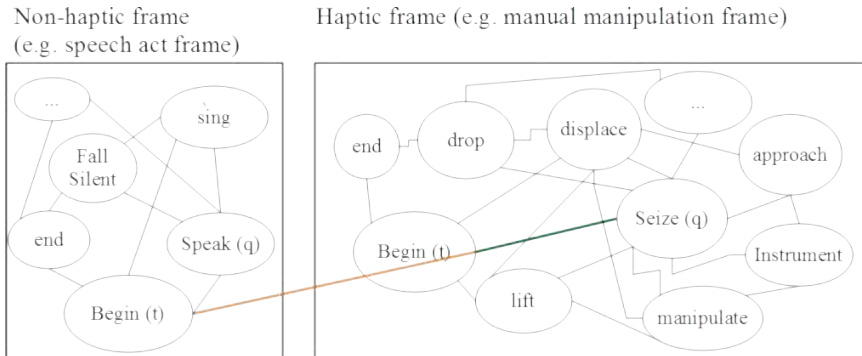
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<sup>5</sup> According to Talmy (2000:409-470), force-dynamics is backgrounded in intransitive, passive and ergative constructions.

<sup>6</sup> But cf. the extraordinary use in Cic. de Or. 3. 9.3. *qui hoc sermone, quem referre suscepimus, continentur*.

A useful way to capture the overall nuclear aspects of the metaphonymical semantic shift is a schematic frame-based representation:

### Figure 3. Metaphonymy in Frame representation



The input frame, to the right, is a haptic frame, i.e. it includes all the concepts relevant to a complex event where the q-dimension implies manual manipulation, including seizing as a frequent first step. The frame on the left is a non-haptic frame. Within the former a metonymy associates haptic dynamics (q-dimension) and sequence (t-dimension) identifying seizing with beginning linguistically. This is represented by the green line linking them. Subsequently, the mapping proceeds further to a second frame (represented by the yellow line), associating the newly created beginning-verb with non-haptic events, giving rise to the full-blown metaphor TO BEGIN IS TO SEIZE.

### Conclusions and further directions of research

The semantic shift *seize*→*begin* constitutes a fairly robust grammaticalization pathway which is cognitively grounded in the conceptual metaphor TO BEGIN IS TO SEIZE, which is, in turn, based on an experientially grounded metonymy linking the quality dimension with the temporal dimension within a haptic event frame. This is an instance of abstract temporal language originating from concrete language, which accords well with the overall evidence from the cognitive sciences.



The remarkable typological background for this diachronic evolution offers further support to contested etymologies such like *coepi* (arguably from IE \**h<sub>1</sub>ep-* «seize») and *incoho/cehefi* (arguably from Plt. \**kagh-* ‘seize, hold’).

The conceptual metaphor seems to be at the basis of synchronic lexical expression of ingressive aspect through collocations like *bellum suscipere* (undertake, begin a war), vs. *bellum gerere* (be at/wage war) and *bellum deponere/conficere* (end a war); *animus sumere, fugam capere* and other «light verb» constructions where haptic verbs can be interpreted as inducing an ingressive aspectual contour.

We hope this study will contribute to bolstering cognitive approaches to the study of classical languages to further elucidate the details of this and related phenomena. A follow-up study on verbs like *suscipio* and *sumo* will be necessary to confirm and extend the presented hypotheses.

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**ABSTRACT**

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Many words signalling the beginning of an event derive from verbs with the concrete meaning 'seize'. While other recurrent patterns exist, what we call 'haptic' roots seem to be the most common metaphorical source domain for encoding this temporal-sequential concept in Indo-European languages, laying the basis for a corresponding grammaticalization pathway. The present paper presents data from over 20 languages supporting the non-arbitrariness of this semantic shift and offers a theoretical account of the cognitive principles it rests upon.

**KEYWORDS:** *incipio*, grammaticalization, metaphor, metonymy, frames.

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**RESUMEN**

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Numerosos verbos que expresan el comienzo de un evento se retrotraen a raíces cuyo significado original es «agarrar». Aunque existen otros patrones recurrentes, lo que llamaremos raíces «hápticas» parecen ser la fuente metafórica más común para codificar este concepto secuencial-temporal en las lenguas indoeuropeas. Esto sienta las bases para el establecimiento de una correspondiente trayectoria de gramaticalización. Este artículo presenta datos de más de 20 lenguas que apoyan la no arbitrariedad de esta evolución semántica, y ofrece un modelo teórico sobre los principios cognitivos que la sustentan.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *incipio*, gramaticalización, metáfora, metonimia, marcos.