From space to time and beyond:
On the grammaticalization patterns of *a/one step away from*

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Cross-linguistically, spatial expressions display a conspicuous propensity to undergo figurative meaning extensions, thus frequently giving rise to grammatical markers (cf., among others, Petré et al. 2012; Budts & Petré 2016; Brinton & Inoue 2020). Drawing on exhaustive diachronic material derived from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), complemented with a synchronic sample of attestations (N = 200) extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), this paper provides an account of a hitherto unexplored, incipient grammaticalization change of the aforementioned kind, namely that affecting the multiword string *a/one step away from*, whose lexical semantics implies a small distance in physical space. The specific research objectives include determining the order of functional developments undergone by the scrutinized expression as well as delineating its distributional characteristics.

It will be argued that with the conventionalization of the closeness inference invited by its stative space-based uses around the middle of the 20th century, *a/one step away from* first acquired the function of a prospective aspect exponent (cf. (1)–(2)), pointing to the subject's temporal proximity to the initial boundary of an ensuing situation (cf. Comrie 1976: 64; Heine 1994: 36), then that of a similitude marker (cf. (3)–(4)), conveying a qualitative resemblance between the subject and the complement (cf. Fortescue 2010: 127), and finally that of a degree modifier, more specifically, an approximator (cf. (5)), communicating that the subject just barely fails to attain some gradable (bounded) property invoked by the associated predicate (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 599). Notably, this chronology likewise finds reflection in the synchronic gradience of *a/one step away from*, in that among its grammaticalized tokens, which amount to slightly more than half of the random COCA sample (106/200, i.e. 53%), aspectual uses make up the largest proportion (74/200, i.e. 37%), followed by similative occurrences (28/200, i.e. 14%) and degree modifier attestations (4/200, i.e. 2%).

(1)   When she patters to the center of a stage, smooths down her dress, poises her small hands like a tiny coffee-colored ballerina, and starts out on a husky, whispery ballad, she seems only **a step away from being a Maxine Sullivan or an Ella Fitzgerald**. (COHA, 1948)

(2)   "Take two people," he had said. "Two people genetically identical. Damage one of them so badly that he is helpless and useless -- to himself and to others. Damage him so badly that he is always only **a step away from death**." (COHA, 1963)

(3)   The Japanese say the Chinese tested missiles with ranges of 450 to 650 miles three years ago. They believe the Chinese are working on satellite launchers with a 1,200-mile capability, only **a step away from the intercontinental missile**. (COHA, 1966)

(4)   I use Notepad. It's **one step away from writing it on yellow sticky-notes**, but it meets my needs. (COCA, 2012)

(5)   He is all smiles and charm. He keeps talking. Olivia's silent, her face **one step away from broken**. (COCA, 2012)

Formally, the ongoing character of the discussed change translates into a pronounced tendency for the closeness implications inherent in *a/one step away from* to be foregrounded by means of reinforcing items, such as *only*. At the distributional level, the analyzed instance of grammaticalization further manifests itself in the highly confined determination and modification patterns of the partially decategorialized noun *step*, which combines solely with emphasizers, including *one*, and the indefinite article, while at the same time rejecting definite determiners and purely qualitative adjectives. These restrictions are nevertheless counterbalanced by the entire expression's compatibility with inanimate subjects as well as host-class expansion to abstract NPs, verbal gerunds, and adjectives.

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