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# From grammaticalization to expressive constructions: the case of

*histoire de + inf.*

*Dominique Legallois*

## **Abstract**

My concern is the relationships between grammar and expressivity which have always remained represented a minority, if not a marginal, interest in linguistics. The paper deals with the construction 'P, *histoire de inf.*' (*Prends quelques jours de repos, histoire de te changer les idées* 'take a few days' rest, just to have a break from everything'). It is shown, from a diachronic perspective, that the construction expresses an attitudinal meaning, the speaker's stance. The paper argues that, although expressivity and attitude meaning have usually been relegated to a secondary role by the prevailing formal grammatical approach to language, they have long been viewed as relatively important by certain linguists (for example, Bally). Expressivity is part of the grammatical system to a much larger degree than is usually presumed.

## **1. Introduction**

My concern in this paper is the relationships between grammar and expressivity, which have always represented a minority, if not marginal, interest in linguistics. According to Bühler's or Jakobson's model of the functions of language, expressivity (or affectiveness) is related to the speaker's attitude, but the question about the relationships between this function and linguistic forms should also be asked; if not, expressivity would be only a psychological feature which would not concern linguistics. In other words, can some linguistic forms conventionally express an affective content? The answer is undoubtedly affirmative with regard to prosodic, morphological and lexical units whose expressive dimension is intrinsic. What about grammar, however?

In the last decade, researchers in cognitive linguistics (Hübler, 1998) and, more specifically, Construction Grammar, have shown interest in this question (Kay and Fillmore,

1999, Foolen, 2004). It is in the overall framework of such approaches that I would like to inscribe my analysis of a particular construction in French, belonging to the informal register: *histoire de* + inf. This construction is typically used in the following configuration ‘X, *histoire de* Y’ (where X is a main clause and Y an infinitive or subordinate clause):

- (1) *on va leur téléphoner, histoire de voir s' ils sont là*  
we go-FUT them ring story to see if they are there  
‘let's ring them up, just to see if they're there’<sup>1</sup>

In the first section of the paper, I will describe the main formal properties of the complex preposition *histoire de*, which, except Legallois (2007), has never been the subject of a linguistic study. Then (section 3) I will rely on the textual database Frantext in order to consider some enlightening quantitative data; if *histoire de* + inf fundamentally pertains to oral and informal speech, Frantext, which only consists of written texts, provides us with very useful occurrences for an understanding of the grammaticalization process and the diachronic development of the construction. In addition, some texts in Frantext give evidence of the relevance of the maxim of extravagance or expressivity which is crucial to the grammaticalization mechanism: using an innovative form, the speaker wants to be noticed. This anthropological and social dimension of expressivity must not be confused with the linguistic dimension, even if it is related to it. The linguistic dimension is a question of forms, and it is precisely those grammatical forms I would like to discuss in the case of *histoire de* + inf. To this end, Construction Grammar gives an appropriate model to study the expressive dimension of language, but, as we will see, it also offers some necessary concepts for explaining phenomena such as construction productivity and numerous coercion effects (section 4).

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<sup>1</sup> I systematically, albeit roughly, translate *histoire de* by ‘just to’.

In section 5, I will present Charles Bally's thought about expressivity in grammar. I will argue for the originality of Bally's thought, giving further examples of grammatical expressivity. His "stylistics" anticipates some of the tenets of Construction Grammar. I will then finish this chapter by presenting both a methodology and a set of properties related to expressive grammar. Following the British corpus linguistics tradition, specifically Sinclair's approach to semantics, I propose that the notion of *Extended Lexical Unit* (ELU, a recurring pattern of co-occurring items centered on an invariable core word and characterised by an identifiable pragmatic function) offers a particularly interesting perspective for exploring the relationships between grammar and expressivity. To illustrate the notion of ELU, I will take briefly the example of the 'passive *pour avoir Ven*' structure, devoted to expressing a sanction (punishment or reward), although it very often expresses in some genres either the speaker's indignation regarding an undeserved sanction or the speaker's incredulity regarding a disgraceful situation.

## **2. Description**

### *2.1 Formal description*

The use of the noun *histoire* 'story', 'history' in the complex preposition is particularly disconcerting. The nominal item is semantically opaque, and nothing, at first sight, can explain this use. Before suggesting a semantic explanation grounded in corpus and quantitative data, I describe here the main formal properties of *histoire de*.

*Histoire de* introduces a purpose clause and it is in many contexts semantically equivalent to the simple preposition *pour* 'to', 'for'; the two units can therefore often be used interchangeably:

(1') *on va leur téléphoner, pour voir s' ils sont là*  
 we go-FUT them ring to see if they are there  
 'let's ring them up, to see if they're there'

The same can be said about a whole range of complex prepositions (*en vue de, afin de, dans l'objectif de, dans le but de, dans l'intention de*, etc.) that could be translated by the English complex preposition 'in order to':

(1'') *on va leur téléphoner, dans le but de voir s' ils sont là*  
 we go-FUT them ring in the aim to see if they are there  
 'let's ring them up, *in order to* see if they're there'

*Histoire de* can also be used as a subordinating conjunction (*histoire que* lit. 'story that'), when there is no co-referential relation between the subject of the main clause and the subject of the embedded clause: in this case, the subjunctive is used in the subordinate clause;

(2) *Je lui conseille de prendre quelques jours de repos, histoire qu' il se change les idées.*

I him advise to take a few days of rest story that he himself change the ideas

'I advise him to take a few days' rest, just to have a break from everything'.

Only a human agent can be the controller of the infinitive or the subject of the subordinate clause. The infinitive or the embedded verb necessarily denotes an action.

Through a comparison with other complex prepositions, such as *dans l'objectif de* (lit. 'in the objective of'), *dans l'intention de* (lit. 'in the intention of'), etc. the status of *histoire de* is problematic: these prepositions are instances of a more abstract schema, or a collocational networks (Renouf and Sinclair (1991) '*dans+NP+de*' '*in+NP+of*' where the noun is a 'shell

noun' (Schmid, 2000, Legallois, 2008) that can be freely modified by adjectives; for example: *dans la louable intention de* (lit. 'in the praiseworthy intention to').

The same holds for *afin de*. When modified, the nominal item of this prepositional locution can be "defrosted": *à la seule fin de* (lit. 'to the only end to') but *histoire de* allows no such modifications. In addition, *histoire* has become semantically opaque, and it usually has a zero determiner. All these observations lead us to the conclusion that *histoire de* is typologically a hapax.

Thus, among the large number of complex prepositions in French, one cannot identify productive patterns or collocational networks to which *histoire* could be related. One cannot suppose an analogy with another form, either, since *histoire de* has its own formal features. This particularity can be explained, as we will see further, by the specific path of grammaticalization followed by the preposition. In addition, one should note that the locution is peculiar to French: no other Romance language has developed such a form with the equivalent of *histoire*.

Finally, the syntactic behaviour of *histoire de* + inf. is particularly noteworthy since the form almost systematically occurs in detached construction, usually to the right side of the main proposition, but one also finds some occurrences with *c'est* 'it is':

(3) *c'est histoire de se changer un peu les idées*

it is story to oneself change a little the ideas

'It is just to have a break from everything'

As will be shown in section 3, this syntactic structure has played a significant role in the establishment of the construction.

## 2.2 Quantitative description

In order to trace the development of *histoire de* + inf. and to provide a quantitative description, an analysis of diachronic corpus data is, of course, necessary. The task is rather difficult, however, since the construction is strongly associated with colloquial oral register, and there are no direct diachronic data on oral speech. The only large corpus available which spans almost five centuries is the database Frantext. It consists of 239 475 540 words of 3975 texts ranging from classic works of French literature to various kinds of non-fiction prose and technical writing, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries; even if oral texts are absent from Frantext, the literature provides us with very interesting documents on spoken language because it sometimes represents fictitious but realistic conversations. Actually, naturalistic and realistic novels offer a relatively comprehensive picture of the processes and developments at work in the grammaticalization of *histoire de* + inf.

I extracted all 398 occurrences of *histoire de* + inf. from the novels of the tagged version of the Frantext database. The first occurrence is found in an 1831 novel, in a *c'est* construction where *histoire* is used with the definite article *la* (the 'a' elides before 'hi'):

- (4) *C' était, mon lieutenant, l' histoire de rire...* pour lors j'en arrête une par les cheveux et je l'embrasse... (Sue, Atar-Gull, 1831)
- it was my lieutenant the story to joke
- 'It was, lieutenant, *just to joke*...I stop one girl by pulling her hair and I kiss her'

The second occurrence dates from 1837, and it is used in the structure that is nowadays typical:

- (5) 'Qu'ils entrent', dit la femme, 'je leux y dirai la chose, *histoire de rire* !' (Balzac, Histoire de Cesar Birotteau, 1837)
- 'let them come', said the woman; 'I'll tell them the thing, *just to joke*!'

I will examine the enunciative and contextual parameters of the first occurrences in section 3.2.; for now, I would like to provide some quantitative facts offering valuable insights into the gradual development of *histoire de* + inf. I divided up the corpus, which dates from 1831 to 2000, into five periods of 30 years and nineteen for the last. The histogram below shows that, except for a drop between 1892 and 1921, the use of the construction becomes gradually more frequent until we see a steep peak in the last period.

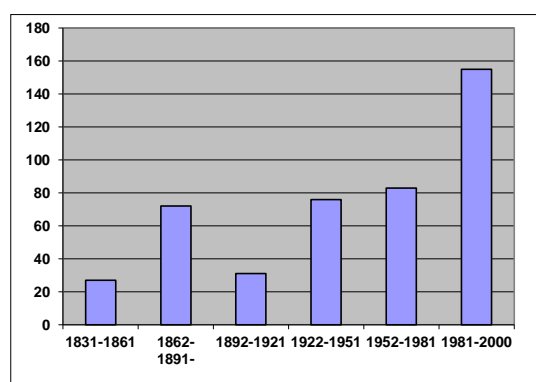


Figure 1: Histogram of frequency of *histoire de* + inf per 10 million words.

Therefore, the use of *histoire de* + inf. increases dramatically, but we have to relativise the figures with respect to the nature of the corpus: we must keep in mind that the increase takes place in novels, not necessarily in oral conversation. In other words, the data do not necessarily demonstrate a general increase but rather a better integration of the form in a particular genre. One can only suppose that this integration is correlated with a general development, but this is just a plausible hypothesis which is not directly observable from the data gathered. The study also shows another development, however, which is more certainly



related to a global increase: the diversity of infinitives used in the construction. The histogram below shows the *type-token* ratio of verbs per periods (as a percentage).<sup>2</sup>

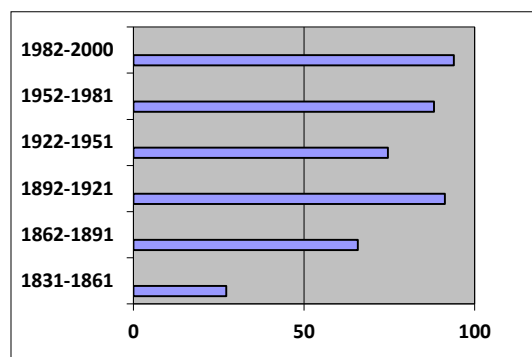


Figure 2: Type-token ratio of verbs per periods

A significant increase in verbal diversity can be observed from the second period on; this demonstrates both a significant productivity of the construction and a generalisation of the use of *histoire de* + inf.: the more a structure is lexically open, the more it is used. The semantic nature of the infinitives will be examined in section 2.3.

As already observed, the first period has a weak verbal type-token ratio; the reason is that there is, in the early occurrences, a strong collocational relationship between the complex preposition and the verb *rire* ‘to laugh’, ‘to joke’; the following table shows the distribution of *rire*:

	1831-1861	1862-1891	1892-1921	1922-1951	1952-1981	1982-2000
<b>Rire</b>	82.54 %	14.47 %	8.69 %	6.77%	1.19 %	0%

Table 1: Frequency of *rire* / frequency of the construction

<sup>2</sup> The number of different verbs, divided by the total number of *histoire de* +inf.

In the first period, *histoire de rire* is a collocation which constitutes the majority of the realisations. We detected two examples of *histoire de rire* in a *c'est* construction, with the definite article, again in E. Sue and G. Sand:

(6)... si Alfred savait cela ?

Ne m'en parlez pas [...] Alfred est jaloux comme un Bédouin ; et pourtant, de la part du père Joseph, c'est l'histoire de rire, en tout bien, tout honneur. (Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris*, 1843).

'...If Alfred knew that?

- Don't tell me! Alfred is jealous as a Bedouin ; and yet, from the père Joseph, it was just to joke, with good intentions'

(7) - Oh ! Je voyais bien que ce monsieur ne voulait pas m'offenser ; c'était l'histoire de rire. (Sand, *Jeanne*, 1844)

'- Oh ! I could see that this gentleman didn't want to offend me; it was just to joke'.

Interestingly, examples (4), (6) and (7) exhibit the same contextual and enunciative characteristics: characters in the dialogues are of humble birth (soldiers, domestics); the context is about jesting, badinage – a man has made no serious advances to a woman. *Histoire de rire* is obviously uttered in informal situations. The collocation remains undoubtedly significant today, since dictionaries still record it but, in Frantext, its frequency has decreased dramatically since the second period; the last period shows no occurrence. *Histoire de rire* has been a victim, as it were, of the openness of *histoire de* + inf. to a greater verbal diversity. Again, however, it is essential to keep in mind that the figures only concern the novel genre, and only suggest the importance attributed to an informal construction in a written genre.

### 2.3 Insignificant processes and weak quantification

If one looked at the infinitives, it would be clear that most of them, in spite of their diversity, have the same semantic property; consider the list of the more typical verbs or verbal expressions: *rigoler* (informal) ‘to joke’; *causer* (informal) ‘to chat’; *dire* ‘to say’; *boire* ‘to drink’; *manger* ‘to eat’; *passer / tuer le temps* ‘to pass /to kill the time’; *prendre l’air* ‘to get some fresh air’; *souffler* ‘to have a break’; *se dégourdir les jambes* ‘to stretch one’s legs’, *faire quelque chose* ‘to do something’. These verbs refer to actions which I call *insignificant processes*: the term means that these actions are not very important; they are, in essence, ordinary, negligible. For instance, ‘to have a break’, ‘to have a drink’, ‘to stretch one’s legs’, are not, to say the least, spectacular actions. They are inconsequential for the participants.

Moreover, 78 concordance lines display some units related to weak quantification; adverbs (*un peu* ‘a little’) or indefinite determiners (*quelques* ‘some’, ‘a few’): *histoire de s’égayer un peu* ‘just to enjoy themselves a little’, *histoire de gagner quelques mètres* ‘just to gain a few metres’; or the weak value can be expressed by the modifier of the verb: *histoire de causer un instant* ‘just to chat for a moment’, or by its object: *histoire de dire quelque chose* ‘just to say something’. This value is totally in congruence with the insignificance of the processes. Thus, an example such as: *histoire de boire plusieurs verres* ‘just to drink several glasses’ is most unlikely, whereas: *histoire de boire quelques verres* ‘just to drink some/a few glasses’ sounds quite natural, because of the argumentative orientation of *quelques* which leads to the conclusion ‘it’s not much’. The same function is performed by the adverb *juste* ‘just’ which is relatively frequent:

(8) On a commencé par piquer une bagnole, comme ça, *juste* histoire de faire un tour  
(Blier, les Valseuses, 1972)

‘We began by pinching a car, like that, just to have a go’.

*Juste* consists in assessing the propositional content (“it is not important”) and leads the hearer to conclude “not to worry” (Leeman, 2004).

Insignificant verbs, weak quantifiers or adverbs are all “downtoning” or “softened” expressions which strengthen the force or the impact of the purpose. But this value is not only related to these terms; it is first expressed by the pragma-semantic dimension of *histoire de* + *inf.* itself, as I will show in section 4. For now, I trace the path of the construction’s grammaticalization.

### **3. Grammaticalization**

#### *3.1 A possible scenario*

I propose to offer an explanation of the rise of *histoire de*+ *inf.* Again, Frantext provides a rewarding insight:

(9) Comment entretiens-tu la petite ? Je puis donner quelque chose au moins; c’est l’histoire d’acheter quelques livres de moins (Mirabeau, Lettres originales écrites du donjon de Vincennes pendant les années 1777-1780).

*c’ est l’ histoire d’ acheter quelques livres de moins*

it is the story to buy some books less

‘How do you support the little one? At least, I can give you something; I just have to buy fewer books’

The occurrence belongs to the epistolary genre. The author, Mirabeau, is a noble whose language is formal. The extract was written fifty years before the appearance of the earlier uses of *histoire de inf*. Although the structures are homologous, a “purpose” interpretation would be a misinterpretation: what Mirabeau says is that he proposes to send his mistress some money, and this has the consequence that it will prevent him from buying as many books as before. In other words, in order to ‘give something’ to his mistress, Mirabeau will have to save money by buying fewer books. *C’est l’histoire d’acheter quelques livres de moins* means, however, that it is not a real loss for Mirabeau, that the sacrifice is not so important. The form used in (9) is, in fact, particularly unusual: one can identify in it a more canonical pattern; *c’est l’histoire de + Qt +N* (where Qt is a quantifier). The usual form would be *c’est l’histoire de quelques livres (de moins)* (lit. ‘it is the matter/question of a few books fewer’). This expression, also used with the noun *affaire* ‘matter’, means that the time needed to execute the action is relatively unimportant. The quantification is expressed by *une ou deux* ‘one or two’, *quelques* ‘some’, ‘a few’, or by the noun itself ‘second’, ‘instant’.... *Affaire* was first preceded by the indefinite article *un* ‘a’:

(10) Dubut attendra vos ordres pour les vitres et les serrures ; c’est une affaire d’un moment. (Mme de Sévigné, Correspondance, 1675-1680, 1680)

*c’est une affaire d’un moment*

it is a matter of an moment

Dubut will wait for your orders concerning the panes and the locks; it can be done in a matter of a few minutes

then, in the eighteenth century, by the definite article (even if the indefinite is still found today):

(11) *Cette explication étoit l'affaire d'un moment.* (Prévost, *Le Philosophe anglois*, 1739).

This explanation was 'the matter of a moment'

'this explanation only took a few minutes'

The expression is derived from a temporal evaluation assessing the effort needed to perform an action:

(12) *Un audacieux petit coquin [...] qui, ayant la tête cassée dix fois le jour, disoit : c'est l'affaire d'un emplâtre.* (Prévost, *Lettres angloises*, 1751).

*c'est l'affaire d'un emplâtre*

it is the matter of a plaster

'An audacious little rascal [...] who, having his head cracked ten times a day, said: all it takes is a plaster'.

The plaster is unquestionably conceived as a thing easy to apply; this implies that 'having own head cracked ten times a day' does not matter. Example (9) is similar to (12), except that Mirabeau uses the verb *acheter* 'to buy' in order to make explicit the underlying process: in fact, *c'est l'histoire de quelques livres* would be too ambiguous – 'to write' or 'to sell' would be theoretically possible even if contextually irrelevant. Thus, the explicitation is quite necessary, in spite of the unusual use of the infinitive.

The rise of *histoire de + inf* can therefore be explained as follows: 'c'est l'histoire de (Inf.) Qt. + N' means that to perform the action needs little effort or time commitment. The consequence of that, by pragmatic inference, is that the process is considered of little consequence.

### 3.2 *C'est l'histoire de rire* and *extravagance*

*Rire* 'to joke' could be seen as the typical inconsequential process: to joke is, in principle, without effects or consequences for the participants. It is also the insignificant process *par excellence*. Logically, *rire* is 'attracted' by the construction; so, I propose that the transition from 'c'est l'histoire de + (inf.) qt. + Nom' (evaluation) to 'c'est l'histoire de + inf' (purpose) is the product of the use of the collocation *histoire de rire*, 'c'est l'histoire de rire' probably expressed the evaluation of an action in the same way as 'c'est l'histoire de quelques minutes', with the same pragmatic implication: it is not important, it is not serious. Insofar as *rire* is used principally in informal situations (for example, in jesting or badinage contexts, as seen below), *histoire de rire* has become an informal expression.

As noted before, literature can offer a relevant account of the role of *histoire de rire* in the grammaticalization of the complex preposition: in F. Soulié's serialised novel, *Les mémoires du diable* (1837), one chapter deals with a facetious character, Ganguernet, who, after every bad or inappropriate joke, exclaims *histoire de rire* ! Only this chapter was translated into English, in 1844.<sup>3</sup> I use here this translation; notice that *histoire de rire* was systematically translated by the phrase, 'a capital joke':

(13) Ganguernet shouts out his everlasting refrain: 'A capital joke!'

(14) that phrase, which he appended like a moral to everything he did, that detested phrase, 'A capital joke', sounded in my ears as doleful and sombre as the Trappists' motto, 'Brother, we must die!'

(15) A day came, on which his famous words, 'A capital joke!' was to be pronounced over a tomb.

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<sup>3</sup> In the *New York Monthly Magazine*. The chapter was first published in French on December 1837 in the newspaper *La Presse* under the title 'Ganguernet, histoire de rire'.

Ganguernet utters seventeen times his “famous words” *histoire de rire*: throughout the novel, he is the only character to use the expression. Ganguernet is exactly what Haspelmath (1999), referring to Keller (1994), calls a speaker “who wants to be noticed”. In fact, Ganguernet’s discourse perfectly illustrates the maxim of *extravagance*, “talk in such a way that you are noticed”, which, according to Keller and Haspelmath, has a huge part in the mechanism of grammaticalization (Meillet, 1912) ; this maxim participates in the “invisible-hand process” in grammaticalization, that is to say, the causal unintentional consequence of individual intentional actions.

Undoubtedly, Ganguernet is a speaker who wants to be socially well-known; his famous sentence is a motto, whose particularly attractive newness is likely to promote Ganguernet’s social success. Extravagance, as depicted in *Les Mémoires du Diable* with the character of Ganguernet, is the manifestation of an anthropological and social expressivity. There it concerns external linguistics, but expressivity can also be a matter of linguistic units. In this case, it concerns internal linguistics. In (13)-(15), *c’est histoire de rire* is expressive and thus provides the speaker with the means to be expressive. But it was not yet a purpose clause. It simply expressed an evaluation of a situation or action. It means roughly ‘it is nothing but a joke’. It becomes relatively rapidly a purpose expression because *rire* is an intentional action, i.e. an action that can be planned. So, in a first reanalysis, *c’est l’histoire de rire* is no longer used only as an evaluation, but also as a motivation of a process. There are two main consequences of that: 1- *c’est l’histoire de rire* being understood as a purpose clause, *l’histoire de* is reanalysed as a complex preposition (whose equivalent is *pour*); 2- since it is a complex preposition, there is double erosion: (a) the loss of the article *l’* (‘the’) and (b) the loss of the *c’est* expression for the detached structure.



Paradoxically, the extraposition results in a relative integration into the ‘main’ clause  
X: *histoire de rire* becomes a part of the sentence (X, *histoire de rire*).

The transition from an evaluative function to an expression of purpose no longer allows French speakers to perceive conceive a direct relation between ‘c’est l’histoire de + qt +N’ and ‘X, *histoire de* + inf.’).<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3 The specificity of grammaticalization

I would now like to summarise schematically the whole process on the basis of a constructed example:

**Function 1:** Evaluation of the effort (or time) needed to perform X

(16) Je vais rendre visite à Paul, *c’est l’histoire de quelques pas*

it is the story of a few steps

‘I am going to visit Paul, (to do that) it’s just a few steps’ →

(17) Je vais rendre visite à Paul, *c’est l’histoire de faire quelques pas*

it is the story to do a few steps

‘I am going to visit Paul, (to do that) it’s just a few steps to take’ →

**Function 2:** Expressing the purpose Y as a motive for X

(18) Je vais rendre visite à Paul, *c’est l’histoire de faire quelques pas*

it is the story to do a few steps

‘I am going to visit Paul, it’s just to take a few steps’ →

(19) Je vais rendre visite à Paul, *histoire de faire quelques pas*

story to do a few steps

‘I am going to visit Paul, just to take a few steps’.

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<sup>4</sup> One can see that at the same time as *histoire de rire*, another hapax appears: *pour de rire* (lit. ‘for of joke’), which is grammatically ‘monstrous’ and a synonym of *histoire de rire* as it belongs to childish language.

The grammaticalization of *histoire de* has two specific characteristics: first, as seen above, the locution has not followed the typical schema of the nominal purpose prepositions like ‘dans le but de + inf’. Second, the grammaticalization here is unusual because of the categories of the items implicated: it is not a relation between a lexical unit and a grammatical one, but an (indirect) relation between the locution *c’est l’histoire de Qt N* and a complex grammatical form. Despite these peculiarities, *histoire de + inf.* seems to satisfy the five properties proposed by Hopper (1991), which underlie the initial and the later stages of grammatical forms:

1. Layering: the grammaticalization of *histoire de* does not eliminate old forms (the purpose prepositions); it participates in the field of expressing purpose, bringing its own specificity.
2. Divergence: *c’est l’histoire de qt N* and *histoire de + inf.* coexist, but speakers do not consider them as related<sup>5</sup>.
3. Specialisation: *histoire de* is singled out for a grammatical function: I will show below that the specificity is, in fact, just as pragmatic as grammatical.
4. Persistence: there is still in *histoire de +inf.* the idea of a limited process; the limitation is concerned here with the motivation of the X process.
5. Decategorialisation : as seen above, decategorialisation concerns here phraseological units. *C’est l’histoire de qt N*, as a clause, has an autonomous status, but *histoire de + inf* appears more grammaticalised since it becomes a subordinate clause. Furthermore, in *c’est l’histoire de qt*, *l’histoire de* is less decategorialised (it is not a preposition) than *histoire* in *histoire de + inf.*

#### 4. A Construction Grammar account for *histoire de + inf.*

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, we don’t expect the speakers to make the connection.

*Histoire de Y* is indisputably a formal idiom, both lexically partially filled and partially open, with a unique syntax and semantics. So, it is not the status of *histoire de* + inf. as a construction that I would like to defend but, rather, the relevance of the Construction Grammar theory (e.g. Goldberg, 2006) to account for a single unified representation of the construction. I have shown that

1. *X, histoire de Y* shares some properties with other constructions, specifically with “c’est l’histoire de qt + N”). In Construction Grammar, constructions are assumed to be related in networks.

2. *X, histoire de Y* is a schematic form which is abstracted from the exemplar *histoire de rire* ‘just to joke’. The relation specificity / genericity is central to the mechanism of productivity in Construction Grammar.

3. Coercion is a process by which the meaning of a lexical item conforms to the structure in which it is embedded (Michaelis, 2005); it is a mechanism very productive in the use of the construction. As we will see, many infinitives are not, in principle, compatible with the meaning of the form, but nevertheless are very often used.

4. *Histoire de* + inf. is also productive in another way: by analogy, the form is extended to some unusual but real occurrences in which *histoire* is replaced by another noun (*affaire*, ‘matter’, *question*, *façon* ‘way’, *manière* ‘manner’).

5. A Construction Grammar approach accounts for pragmatic dimensions, considering them directly integrated in the whole meaning of the construction; therefore, pragmatic effects are not the result of inference, but are expressed by the form. We will see that *histoire de* + inf. is a case of ‘expressive’ or ‘affective’ syntax; it is an intrinsically expressive grammatical form.

Points 1 and 2 have already been tackled in this study, so I am now going to deal with points 3, 4 and 5.

#### 4.1. Coercion

We saw that the infinitives introduced by *histoire de* usually refer to insignificant processes; however, some processes are objectively and intrinsically ‘substantial’:

(20) Mais il faut leur faire peur, *histoire de* les décourager de recommencer (San Antonio)

‘But it is necessary to frighten them, just to discourage them from doing it again’

To discourage someone from doing something is definitely not an action without consequences, unlike ‘to kill the time’ or ‘to have a drink’. It is obvious, however, that *histoire de* + inf. coerces the verb so that we interpret *histoire de les décourager de recommencer* as an insignificant purpose. More precisely, *histoire de* is a hedge downplaying the importance of the purpose. The speaker justifies a process (‘to frighten someone’) which can shock, setting out a purpose, objectively substantial but moved by a “reduced” or “modest” intentionality. So a possible gloss would be: without other prospect / intention than to ‘discourage them from starting again’. The underlying intentional dimension of the construction is often exploited in order to produce ironical utterances:

(21) Je saute du plume, me cogne le petit orteil au pied de la table, *histoire de* commencer la journée par une douleur (Lasaygues. Vache noire, hannetons, 1985)

‘I spring out of bed, and bang my little toe, just to start the day with a pain’.

‘to start the day with a pain’ is a significant and consequential process. Furthermore, this process is, usually and logically, unintentional; it would be absurd of the agent to plan it. So, there is a semantic conflict between the meaning of the verb and the semantics of the

construction: *histoire de* + inf. exerts a double pressure over the infinitive. The result of this double shaping is the obvious ironical effect:

1. It shapes the process so that this process is felt to be insignificant.
2. It shapes the process so that this process is felt to be intentional.

The coercion mechanism in untypical occurrences leads us to observe the manifest constructional dimension of *histoire de* +inf. Coercion is methodologically an extremely useful process, revealing a holistic functioning of linguistic structures and the autonomous pragma-semantics of constructions. This methodological process should not be confused with the property of openness: whereas coercion is concerned with a priori recalcitrant data, openness is about a general semantic extension of the items integrating the construction. A very interesting phenomenon concerning *histoire de* + inf. is a kind of total openness that leads the form towards an adverbialisation. Frantext only retrieves one example of “total” openness, but the phenomenon is relatively common in oral speech:

(22) Il attendit pour voir si un con en treillis rirait de son esprit. Il lui aurait fait faire une petite marche de nuit, *histoire de*. (Vautrin, *Bloody Mary*, 1979).

‘He waited in order to see if an idiot in combat fatigues would laugh at his wit. He would have obliged him to have a little night march, *just like that*’ (lit. ‘just to’).

This  $\emptyset$  complementation is a kind of maximal openness: no infinitive needs to be used, since *histoire de* +  $\emptyset$  is a reduced but sufficient form to express the central meaning of the construction “without having a real or strong intention”.<sup>6</sup> In this case, there is no other motivation for the process X other than its own existence. This absolute usage tends to

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<sup>6</sup>Again, the usage is ironical.

produce an adverbialisation, which can be marked more formally by the deletion of the preposition *de* (as a case of apocope) :

(23) Mais bon dès que j'ai le temps je ferai quand même une petite video [...], juste histoire comme ça (Internet)

*juste histoire comme ça*

just story like that

‘But, as soon as possible, I will make a little video, just like that’.

This use systematically requires the presence of enunciative markers (*juste, comme ça*).

#### 4.2. Productivity and analogy

If analogy, in theory, is completely theory-neutral, it unquestionably takes on its full meaning in functional as well as cognitive usage-based approaches. So, in Construction Grammar, analogy is a fundamental concept, and the case of *histoire de* + inf., again, is rather original. Although the form is a semi-idiomatic construction, it shows, however, a partial productivity concerning the noun that is used as the core of the complex preposition; indeed, other nouns besides *histoire* can be sporadically found:

(24) Lola, bien partie, Musyne aussi, je n'avais plus personne. C'est pour ça que j'avais fini par écrire à ma mère, question de voir quelqu' un (Céline, Voyage au bout de la nuit, 1932)

*question de voir quelqu' un.*

question to see someone

‘With Lola gone for good and Musyne too, I had nobody left. That’s why I finally wrote to my mother, just to see somebody’ (translation R. Manheim).

(25) Le père pensait que c'était une conversation comme ça, manière de dire quelque chose pour rompre un moment le silence (Clavel, Les fruits de l'hiver, 1968)

*manière de dire quelque chose*

manner to say something

'The father thought that it was a conversation like that, just to say something in order to break the silence'.

(26) Il relate de petites histoires [...], façon de meubler le silence (Rheims, Les greniers de sienne, 1987)

*façon de meubler le silence*

way to furnish the silence

'He recounts some little stories [...], just to fill the gaps in the conversation'.

(27) Vous voilà toute pimpante, ce matin, mademoiselle Anna, et si fraîche qu'on voudrait mordre dans vos belles joues, ma parole... Affaire de rire naturellement (Le Progrès illustré, 1893)

*Affaire de rire naturellement*

affair to joke naturally

'You are very smart, this morning, Miss Anna, and so fresh that we would like to sink our teeth into your cheeks... just to joke of course'

The nouns *question*, *manière*, *façon* ('way') (Lauwers, 2006) can integrate the construction without substantial difference of meaning with *histoire*; the same types of insignificant

processes are used, the same pragmatic effects are present, and the nominal item undergoes the same decategorialisation.

One must acknowledge that these uses are infrequent, compared to *histoire*. However, the productivity is real, even if it is observable only in some idiolects. It is based on an analogy with the semi-idiom *histoire de* + inf.: it is indeed inconceivable to consider a more abstract or schematic pattern which would subsume the different specific realisations with *histoire*, *question*, *façon* and *manière*. The analogy and the productivity are motivated by the fact that *affaire* and *question* are synonyms of *histoire* in the expression *c'est une affaire / histoire / question de minutes* (lit. 'it is a matter/story/question of minutes').

Apart from the indefinite article, this expression is the same as the construction which was the basis for *histoire de* + inf. : *c'est l'histoire, l'affaire d'une ou deux minutes*.

The use of *manière* is another story. It is in fact motivated by an expression relatively close to *histoire de* inf.: *par manière de* + N (lit. 'by kind of + N.') (Legallois and Schnedecker (2009):

(28) Dans le premier acte, le roi de Maroc, par manière de récréation, tua cent esclaves maures (Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, 1732).

*par manière de récréation*

by manner of recreation

'In the first act, the king of Morocco, killed one hundred Moorish slaves'

One of the semantic classes of nouns selected by *par manière de* is the class of the 'insignificant' nouns. The more frequent items are: *distraktion* 'leisure', *blague* 'joke', *plaisanterie* 'joke', *passe-temps* 'pastime'. The analogy is therefore motivated by the semantic identity between the infinitives in *histoire de* + inf. and the nouns in *par manière de*



+ N. The use of *façon* can simply be explained by the fact that this word is synonymous with *manière*.

Therefore, *histoire de* + inf. is a schematic construction abstracted from *histoire de rire*, but it is also a schema-based model by which other forms are produced, by analogy. Even if this productivity is very limited concerning the nominal item, the theoretical conception, according to which constructions and lexemes are organised in networks, is perfectly illustrated here.

### 4.3 Expressivity

One of the basic tenets of cognitive linguistics and Construction Grammar is that lexis and grammar form a continuum: the consequence is that language consists of assemblies of symbolic structures; both lexical and grammatical units carry meaning. It is on this basis that I would like to examine the *expressive* meaning of grammar. As we know, lexis and prosody can be expressive, but, in the Construction Grammar frameworks, it is conceivable that some grammatical structures can be seen as intrinsically expressive. To deal with this question, I must give a general definition of *expressivity*.

Expressivity could be seen as related to two properties: *energeia* and *enargeia*. These two notions, belonging to the ancient tradition, can be translated approximately as *vivacity* (energy) and *vividness*, respectively. *Energeia* and *enargeia* quite often complement each other, but can also be autonomous: they are characterised by their indexical nature; they *exhibit* or *manifest* qualities rather than *mean* them.

In the *enargeia* mode, linguistic or discursive devices allow us to “perceive” certain tactile, auditory and visual aspects of a scene and thus make the scene concrete, perceptible in the representation. It is the “bringing-before-the-eyes” device whose dimensions have been

studied by the rhetorical tradition. I will not discuss this mode here; it is enough to say that it is constructed by figures of speech such as hypotyposis or onomatopoeia.

*Energeia* refers to the vivid, animated aspects of things expressed in discourse; this expressivity is produced, among the more classical devices, by rhythm, intonation, lexical repetition, metaphors, markers of subjectivity, etc. *Histoire de* + inf. is an expressive grammatical form in this context; its expressivity is dependent on *energeia* because the construction vividly exhibits a particular attitude of the speaker (his subjectivity). In a way, the construction is a linguistic incarnation of this attitude, of this “way of being”. The attitude is very difficult to describe: it consists in a kind of detachment from the speaker, with regard to the motivation of the process X. In other words, the construction makes sensible, or manifests, the speaker’s assessment of the motivation for X: all this could be glossed as “You don’t have to search further than the purpose expressed by Y to understand the motivation for X”.

This attitude is not signified, but shown or signalled. This expressive function cannot be performed either by *pour* or other complex prepositions such as *dans l’objectif de*, *afin de*, although these prepositions can express weak purposes:

(29) Tu arrêteras aux Boulevards, histoire de prendre un pot...

‘You will stop at the Boulevards, just to have a drink’

(30) Tu arrêteras aux Boulevards, pour / afin de, prendre un pot...

‘You will stop at the Boulevards, to / in order to have a drink’

In fact, (30) is relatively neutral concerning the attitude of the speaker: no subjective manifestation is expressed. On the other hand, in (29), the speaker exhibits with *energeia* a subjective attitude and shows that his intention is limited to the (insignificant) action ‘to have

a drink’, and that there is no point in searching for other motivations than ‘to have a drink’ for the process ‘to stop at the Boulevards’.

The meaning of the construction *histoire de* + inf. can therefore be expressed as “X is motivated by a purpose in which intentionality is limited (the purpose is insignificant): furthermore, the construction exhibits an expressive and subjective attitude from the speaker toward the purpose; this attitude consists in a detachment from the justification of X”. This can be verbalised in this way: there is no purpose other than Y to perform X.

## **5. Expressive grammar**

### *5.1. The stylistics of Charles Bally*

Although expressivity and attitude meaning have usually been relegated to a secondary role by the prevailing formal grammatical approach to language, they have actually been seen as important by some linguists for a long time. Foremost amongst these linguists is Bally (1865-1947). Not only did he attempt to define and theorise about a linguistic discipline entirely devoted to expressivity, but he also exemplified what an ‘expressive grammar’ could be. Any work well-versed in the relationships between grammar and expressivity necessarily meets Bally’s propositions.

Bally (1905, 1909, 1913) states that affectivity, emotion and volition are fundamental categories of human experience, more fundamental than intellectual experience. Consequently, Bally distinguishes two modes in language: the lived mode (*le mode vécu*), i.e. the subjective mode of expressivity, affectivity, volition and emotion, which is related to the direct experience of life; and the pure mode (*le mode pur*), the objective mode of intellectual thought. This distinction is more complex than the ordinary dichotomy between Reason and

Passion; its motivation is phenomenological and is indebted to the French philosopher Bergson.

Contrary to the Saussurean tradition, Bally divides the *langue* in two fields, corresponding to the linguistic units related A) to the *intellectual language* (Saussure's *langue*), more precisely to the expression of pure mode, and B) to the *spoken language*, which is neither the *parole* (individual act), nor spoken or oral discourse, but the set of conventional linguistic devices devoted to the expression of the *lived mode*.

The *langue parlée* is studied by *stylistics*. Again, the notion of *stylistics* is peculiar to Bally: it is not the study of individual features related to an author, but the study of linguistic expressive devices related to a community. Therefore, *stylistics is linguistics*. Particularly, *stylistics* deals with what the French tradition has termed for some time *affective syntax*.

I present briefly two cases of affective syntax dealt with by Bally. The first is the form *en + verb*. The clitic *en* in this usage comes from an ancient pronoun which has lost its anaphoric function to become a pre-verbal particle. *En* is combined with a limited set of aspectual verbs: *arriver* 'to end up', *finir* 'to finish', *venir* 'to come', *passer* 'to go through', etc.:

(31) j'en arrive à croire que/à me demander si...

‘I'm beginning to think that/to wonder if...’;

(32) on n'en finira donc jamais avec ce type !

‘will we never have done with this guy’

(33) il va falloir en passer par ses exigences

‘we'll just have to do what he says’

All these combinations express an attitude of the speaker; this vivid attitude (*energeia*) takes several values, like *exasperation* or *enthusiasm*.<sup>7</sup> One could compare:

(34) j'en aurai bientôt fini avec lui

(35) j'aurai bientôt fini avec lui

'I'll be done with him soon'

In (34), enthusiasm or exasperation (according to the context) is manifest but in (35), no specific attitude is shown. As Bally puts it: "'en' becomes the conventional symbol of affective nuances" (Bally, 1925:7).

Bally advocates the idea that the speaker's attitude to what is said is coded in *grammar* and that *affective syntax* must be studied as a set of expressive linguistic devices, in the same way as lexis or prosody.

The second example I would like to present is very striking, since it belongs to the cases studied in Construction Grammar (Fillmore et al., 1988, Lambrecht, 1990, Taylor, 2002), the *incredulity response construction*, illustrated by:

(36) Him write a novel!

The first part of the construction is a tonic pronoun, and the verb is not actualised (it lacks tense and agreement markers). The pronoun and the verb phrase constitute separate phonological phrases, each associated with a rising intonation. As Taylor (2002: 568) puts it:

The ungrounded clause refers to a situation that has already been mentioned, or that was hinted at, in previous discourse. The possibility of this situation being true is dismissed as absurd.

It is amazing that Bally, in 1905, provided exactly the same type of example:

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<sup>7</sup> The list of verbs preceded by the non-anaphoric clitic *en*, is, in reality, larger than the list suggested by Bally. My purpose is simply to illustrate Bally's approach.

(37) *Moi, que j'ose opprimer et noircir l'innocence?* (Racine, *Phèdre*)

'I, to dare to oppress and blacken innocence?'

Bally (1905: 8) writes (in my translation) that “the indignation which emanate from the verses are not in the words, but in the form of the sentence”.<sup>8</sup>

One must acknowledge that Bally's approach to grammar had little influence on the field of theoretical linguistics of the twentieth century. Some scholars, however, have recently worked on the expressivity of grammar again, in the light of cognitive linguistics and Construction Grammar. I am thinking particularly of A. Hubler's 'expressivity in grammar' (1998), explicitly influenced by Bally. This book deals with English syntactical facts such as possessive dative, ethical dative, present perfect, get passive, and shows how these grammatical devices are directly related to the expression of the speaker's attachment to the propositional content. In the Construction Grammar framework, Foolen (2004) has demonstrated that the expressivity of phrases such as *a giant of a man* or *that idiot of a doctor* is much more exhibited by the binominal noun phrase construction itself than by the affective value of the first noun.<sup>9</sup>

## 5.2 Extended lexical unit

Although Construction Grammar and cognitive linguistics offer a favourable framework for tackling the expressivity of grammar, I would like to set out some principles deriving from the British linguistics corpus tradition. These principles are in line with Construction Grammar (Legallois, 2006) and provide us with a systematic methodology very useful for the description of expressive devices. The British “contextualists” (Sinclair, 2004, Stubbs, 2001) state that units of meaning are not words, but rather ‘extended units of

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<sup>8</sup> Again, the value of the expressivity is certainly not stable: incredulity, surprise, indignation.

<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, other works on ‘expressive grammar’; notably Kay and Fillmore (1999) or Fried (2011).

meaning' (EUM), that is, regular patterns that involve both lexical and grammatical realisations. These patterns are the normal carriers of meaning; they have an obligatory core, which can be lexical and also grammatical, and a discourse function. They are made up of four categories of co-selection, namely:

1. Collocation: the relation between the core and individual word-forms which co-occur frequently with it.
2. Colligation: a kind of collocation, but it involves the relation between an item and grammar; for example, the grammatical pattern in which a word fits or the frequent grammatical configuration in which the EUM is used.
3. Semantic preference: the relationship between the core and semantically-related words in a lexical field. Semantic preference is the abstract level of a collocation.
4. Semantic prosody: the discourse function of the EUM, generally related to the speaker's evaluative attitude. It is a "consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (Louw 1993: 157). Semantic prosody is a suprasegmental dimension (hence the term *prosody*) which directly concerns attitudinal or pragmatic meaning and therefore expressivity, although it must not be confused with it.

The methodological tenets of contextualist linguistics offer great advantages in that they provide an analytical grid for studying grammatical expressivity. Therefore, in this framework, the construction *histoire de* + inf. is unquestionably an EUM: it has the four properties; at the collocational level, we saw the role played by the collocate *rire* in the grammaticalization of the form, but the construction has other collocates such as *voir* ('see'), *dire quelque chose* ('say something'), etc. Some adverbs and indefinite quantifiers are also used frequently with the core *histoire de*. Colligational properties are essential to the

construction: the detachment gives the opportunity to the speaker to express his/her attitude; furthermore, the integration of *histoire de* + inf. into the “main” clause allows the stability of the purpose relation. The semantic preference is obvious: the EUM has a strong attraction for a class of verbs I have called insignificant verbs. These verbs participate in the genericity of texts and their informal tonality. Finally, EUM exhibits a semantic prosody, that is, a particular attitudinal function whose nature is expressive.

In order to show again the relevance of the EUM model, I would like to deal briefly with another expressive construction: the causal form ‘Passive *pour avoir* V-en’ observed in only two Internet pages. This search has been conducted on the search engine *alltheweb*, with the simple request *pour avoir* ‘for having’ (lit. ‘to have’). I only mention the results with the infinitive perfect on the right side of *pour*.

(38) Poursuivis pour avoir été solidaires (Libération)

‘Sued for having showed solidarity’

(39) Buemi pénalisé pour avoir gêné Rosberg (toilef1.com)

‘Buemi penalised for having blocked Rosberg’

(40) Condamné pour avoir critiqué Nespresso (Libération)

‘Condemned for having criticised Nespresso’

(41) Licencié pour avoir rechargé son téléphone (le Parisien)

‘Fired for having recharged his phone’

(42) Un jeune homme a été arrêté pour avoir intentionnellement vomi sur un policier  
(20minutes)

‘A young man was arrested for having intentionally vomited on a policeman’.

(43) Somalie: amputé pour avoir volé 300 \$ (bivouac-id.com)

‘Somalia : amputated for having stolen 300 \$’



All the examples are headlines. The passive value is expressed by a simple past participle (except (42)); (39) is still neutral concerning the causal relation between the two clauses, but seven sentences exhibit a particular enunciative attitude to the relation between the consequence clause and the cause clause. Of course, the value of this attitude is in part determined by the lexical content and its affective value (*viré* ‘sacked’), but a kind of contagion occurs: thanks to repetition, both the lexical specificity and the context seem to have frozen the form. Therefore, an expressive construction arises, which becomes autonomous. This process is directly related to genres and socio-discursive practices. For this reason, (39) is not really expressive. In this example, there is a balance between the consequence and the cause. Sentence (39) is from an Internet site devoted to Formula 1. It is an informational site and not intended for expressing opinions that involve the *lived mode* of the speaker/writer.

As regards the other utterances, the picture is different. They are taken from from broadsheets (*Libération, le Parisien*) or tabloids (*20minutes*), where the writers express their opinions about the facts, situations or events they report on. For example, (38), (40) and (41) exhibit indignation since the consequence clause expresses an abnormal sanction with regard to a civic action (38) or a benign action (40) and (41). The four categories of co-selection defining EUM can be mentioned: identifying collocations is difficult, given the weak number of occurrences in this small survey, but we find twice the verb *condamner* (‘to condemn’) to the left of *pour*. More generally, however, the semantic preference goes to verbs of social sanction or coercion (‘to condemn’, ‘to fire’, ‘to arrest’...). At the colligational level, these verbs are used with the past participle, with a passive value. The sentence in the examples above has a ‘nominal’ structure. The semantic prosody is strongly marked, even if its value is

not always constant: very often, indignation is expressed, but in tabloids the construction is used to exhibit a kind of incredulity about a sensational situation.

The construction is very dependent on the register and the textual genre, but its frequency shows that it is entrenched as a whole, with its own discursive properties. It is obvious that this study will have to be continued, particularly in terms of larger corpora. The aim here was to demonstrate again the relevance of the notion of EUM. This notion shows two things: first, grammatical devices can be tackled in a corpus-based approach by identifying the relations of co-selection, specifically collocation, colligation and semantic preference, which can be relatively easily extracted by software and analysed. Second, the relations of co-selection are directly related to phraseology. Expressive grammatical patterns are constructed on the *open-choice principle* (Sinclair, 1991). As a consequence, expressive grammar can be viewed as a matter of phraseology. Such is the case for *histoire de* + inf. but also for all the expressive constructions mentioned in this chapter. Furthermore, these constructions have grammatical, semantic and pragmatic properties that are not fully predictable from their subparts. The phraseological nature of expressive grammar is the reason why Bally, who introduced the definition of phraseology in 1905, was also the first to consider expressivity/*energeia* in grammar.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the general approach of Construction Grammar is a fruitful framework for analysing such a construction as *histoire de* + inf. This framework offers a large set of relevant notions that perfectly grasp the properties and the singularities of the construction: analogy, with the use of *affaire/ question/manière/façon* + inf.; coercion, that is to say, the force exerted by the whole construction on the ‘significant’ infinitive, in order to

make it ‘insignificant’; the relation between specific and schematic forms, for example between *histoire de rire* and *histoire de* + inf.; exemplar, which is a stable model of interpretation (*histoire de rire*); the pairing of form and meaning, in that the meaning is semantic and pragmatic, and the pairing is related to a register. Above all, we showed that full attention must be given to the relationship between grammar and expressivity: expressivity plays a fundamental role in grammaticalization, and literary can sometimes illustrate this phenomenon (see Ganguernet). Expressivity is part of the grammar system to a much larger degree than is usually presumed, however, and the Construction Grammar approach is designed, with the help of its holistic conception, to capture this suprasegmental dimension. In addition, I have demonstrated that the concept of EUM could also be fruitful for studying the varied phenomena which support the relevance of the *grammaire affective* claimed by Bally. I hope that both the material and the analysis delivered in this chapter will contribute to a rediscovery of lost territories of expressivity.

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