Grammaticalization is defined as “a process whereby a lexical item, with full referential meaning, develops grammatical meaning” (Fischer and Rosenbach 2000: 2; see also Hopper 1991; Diewald and Wischer 2002). According to Rissanen, grammaticalization may occur both with native and borrowed items at any stage of the History of English, being developed from one single lexical item or a group of words (2000: 152). This is the case of by way of and by means of that, according to the OED, were first attested in English at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Their prepositional function is the result of a process of grammaticalization undergone by way and mean, which evolved from noun to preposition in these contexts. Once established in the language, they coexisted until the end of the seventeenth century, the moment when by way of was progressively obliterated as a result of the on-going diffusion of by means of in these environments.

Therefore, the present paper has been conceived with the following objectives: 1) to assess the grammaticalization process by which nouns such as way and mean developed prepositional functions for the expression of instrumentality; 2) to analyse the use and distribution of by way of and by means of in the History of English; 3) to investigate the distribution of these competing forms in terms of gender and social class. The source of evidence comes from the Helsinki Corpus of English, the Corpus of Early English Correspondence and the Old Bailey Corpus.

References