

Encoded secondariness
A functional theory of grammaticalization and grammatical status

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In the last couple of decades grammaticalization research has questioned the possibility of distinguishing clearly between lexicon and grammar. In this respect grammaticalization research may be seen as a challenge in particular to mainstream generative linguistics (as acknowledged by Roberts & Rousseau 2003). Arguably, this challenge would be strongest if some sort of systematicity in the relation between lexicon and grammar could be demonstrated. Accordingly, works on grammaticalization have repeatedly stressed the uniformity of the various changes covered. Since grammaticalization changes are typically bound up with a recurrent cluster of diachronic processes – phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic – grammaticalization has been claimed to be a special kind of (superordinate) process, or in other respects a distinct phenomenon, in itself.

However, in recent years such claims have been challenged themselves (cf. *Language Sciences* 23.2-3, a special issue on grammaticalization). While the processes mentioned above perhaps typically do accompany grammaticalization changes, they do not always accompany them, and they are frequently found also with changes that cannot be claimed to involve grammaticalization (e.g. Campbell 2001). Since they can hardly serve as to define grammaticalization, paradoxically, those who wish to claim that grammaticalization is a distinct type of change, find themselves entangled in the self-same problem which they brought into focus in the first place: the problem of defining the distinction between lexical and grammatical elements.

If we want to save the idea of grammaticalization as a unitary phenomenon, this problem has to be solved. The present paper proposes a solution, generalizing a recent analysis of the grammaticalization of complement-taking constructions such as *I think* (Boye & Harder 2007). The centrepiece of the proposal is that grammaticalization and the grammar-lexicon distinction are rooted in the coding of discourse centrality (or ‘importance’): 1) linguistic elements are grammatical if they are coded as secondary in relation to some other linguistic element; 2) grammaticalization consists in the development of linguistic elements coded as having secondary status. The discourse distinction between primary and secondary goes with a cognitive distinction between foregrounding and backgrounding.

In the paper we argue that this proposal 1) is compatible with ‘prototypical’ cases of grammaticalization, such as the rise of Romance futures from Latin *habere*, 2) can be cashed out in operational criteria, 3) allows us to answer – or at least narrow down – a number of questions raised during the past decades of grammaticalization research, and 4) links up with a functional theory of the significance of grammar as a design feature of human languages.

References

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