

Semantic Bleaching and Grammaticalisation

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Developing ideas in Roberts & Roussou (2003, Chapter 5), this paper looks at the semantic correlates of grammaticalisation, and hence attempts a semantic characterisation of functional categories. It has long been observed that grammaticalisation involves what can be intuitively characterised as ‘semantic bleaching’ (Gabelentz (1891) in Hopper and Traugott (1993:20)). For example, when nouns are reanalysed as determiners, they lose inherent descriptive content; when verbs are reanalysed as auxiliaries, they lose argument structure. Although “bleaching” is an intuitive and expressive description of this process, we naturally require a more precise formulation.

Following von Stechow (1995), we assume that semantic bleaching is the process of loss of non-logical meaning. The distinction between logical and non-logical meaning can be made in terms of permutation/isomorphism invariance, which we describe in detail, based on the work of Mostowski (1957), Sher (1996), Keenan (1996). We will not present a formal treatment of this concept though (for this, see the references given). Instead we will explore the implications this notion has for the semantic aspect of grammaticalisation, aiming at shedding some light on the nature of functional categories so that we can provide a logically restricted set of functional heads. The intuitive content of permutation/isomorphism invariance is as follows: permutation invariant meanings are meanings which do not depend on empirical facts for their contribution to truth; such interpretations depend purely on set-theoretic or numerical aspects of relations among referents, not on any intrinsic properties of the referents themselves. As Keenan (1996: 21) says “purely logical relations cannot discriminate one object from another but must treat them uniformly and thus must remain unchanged under systematic substitutions of individuals”. The major proposal of this chapter is that functional categories are restricted to permutation-invariant interpretations; in this sense they can be thought of as the logical categories of natural language. Hence, it is not an accident that grammaticalised material is semantically restricted in the way it is. Moreover, grammaticalisation of lexical material will typically involve the loss of non-logical meaning. We will pursue this idea in comparing the development of quantifiers/articles with the development of auxiliaries.