

How synchronic gradience makes sense in the light of language change (and vice versa)

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The present paper argues

- for a diachronic view on synchronic gradience (with Denison 2001, but pace Aarts 2004, whose perspective on gradience is exclusively synchronic),
- for the use of quantitative data to trace the gradualness of the change leading to the observed synchronic gradience, and
- for the importance of semantic-functional overlap as constituting gradience (as evident in bridging constructions), pace Aarts (2004), who restricts gradience to morphosyntactic overlap only.

These claims will be substantiated by a case study on constructional gradience. In Rosenbach (2006, 2007) I argued for synchronic gradience between constructions with *s*-genitives (*John's book*) and noun+noun (N+N) constructions (*museum shop*) in English. In this approach construction types are defined by the prototypical mapping of semantic features to morphosyntactic structures, and any 'disturbance' in this prototypical mapping (i.e. mismatch) will result in synchronic gradience. In particular, there is evidence for *s*-genitives and noun modifiers exhibiting non-prototypical animacy (and referentiality) values (cf. e.g. *the chair's leg*, *Bush administration*).

Such synchronic 'mismatches' may look odd or exceptional from the perspective of present-day English, but they appear to have good historical reasons: Quantitative studies have shown that *s*-genitives have gradually extended to inanimate noun classes while noun modifiers have gradually come to include animate noun classes from early Modern to present-day English (Rosenbach 2007). That is, the observed present-day mismatch has gradually emerged over time. This process has been facilitated by the existence of various bridging constructions, i.e. certain non-prototypical sub-types of the two constructions, which share semantic and/or formal properties of both *s*-genitive and N+N constructions.

- For example, constructions with determiner *s*-genitives may diachronically lexicalize to N+N expressions (e.g. *St. Valentine's day* > *(St.) Valentine day*). The resulting lexical NN expression thus inherits the animacy value of the original determiner *s*-genitive phrase. In addition, synchronic 'layering' between the lexicalized and non-lexicalized expression leads to the co-occurrence of two construction types for a single construction token.
- Throughout Middle and early Modern English – and in northern English even beyond – we find *s*-less genitives, which share all morphosyntactic and semantic properties with determiner *s*-genitives but which lack the possessive 's, thus being overtly identical to N+N constructions (e.g. *the man name*).

The diachronic semantic extension of *s*-genitives and noun modifiers, together with the existence of various bridging constructions in the history of English, leads to the emergence of new, non-prototypical subtypes of *s*-genitive and N+N constructions in Modern English. Rather than having two distinct construction types (*s*-genitive constructions and NN constructions), English exhibits two 'construction families' whose non-prototypical members partly overlap with each other, semantically and functionally.

Under the present view, synchronic gradience between categories (intersective gradience) is not something unexpected (- and thus extremely rare, cf. Aarts 2004), but rather a

phenomenon we would in fact expect in the light of diachronic processes such as grammaticalization, where (lexical) categories gradually develop into (grammatical) ones, unless one wishes to ignore the many 'in-between' steps and subscribe to wholesale and instantaneous reanalysis (cf. also Haspelmath 1998).

References

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