

The modules of grammatical change

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Meillet's (1912) original definition describes 'grammaticalization' as the acquisition of grammatical functions by a lexical morpheme (1). After grammaticalization came on the agenda of linguistic research in the late twentieth century, the term was often used in a variety of wider senses including the development of grammatical morphemes or constructions in general, irrespective of its source (2). Another common use of the term refers to the existence or emergence of a grammatical category in a particular language, irrespective of how the morphological material coding that category came into being (3).

- (1) «[Grammaticalisation c'est l']attribution du caractère grammatical à un mot jadis autonome.» Meillet (1912: 385).
- (2) «Grammaticalization is defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms [...], and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms. [...] [G]rammaticalization theory is concerned with the development of grammatical forms. Its primary goal is to describe how grammatical forms arise and develop through space and time.» Heine (2003: 163)
- (3) «Tense is the grammaticalized expression of location in time.» Comrie (1995: 1244a)

Many of the currently controversial issues in the context of grammaticalization are, I assume, owing to the lack of a uniform idea of what exactly the notion of 'grammaticalization' comprises. The most influential attempt to precisely define 'grammaticalization' are the 'parameters' postulated by Lehmann (1982). A critical review of these parameters will reveal, however, that they are based on values whose roles in language change are too diverse to be used as equal measures. For instance, both attrition and "semantic bleaching" are comprised into one parameter, i.e. treated as one and the same phenomenon. Moreover, one of Lehmann's values ('variability') concerns grammatical categories whereas others ('weight', 'cohesion') concern morphological material. These points might raise doubts about the applicability of the postulated parameters.

As a consequence, I shall propose a delimitation of the notion of 'grammaticalization' to Meillet's original concept (1), thus reducing the concept to a change on the functional/semantic level. Other micro-processes that potentially, but not necessarily, co-occur with grammaticalization (in this narrow sense) are to be located on different linguistic levels and should therefore be treated as distinct processes. These are e.g. attrition (phonology); re-analysis, univerbation (morphosyntax), but also phenomena like, 'functional reduction' (Norde), 'innovation' (Lehmann), 'renovation' (Lehmann) or 'deflexion' (Norde).

Since grammaticalization and any of these other processes are potentially, but not necessarily, linked with each other, we may view all these phenomena as different modules of what is cross-linguistically possible (i.e. empirically attested) 'Grammatical Change'. Each language-specific instance of a change then consists of a set of one or more of these modules.

Viewing grammatical change as modular results in a more fine-grained perspective, which will, as I shall claim, provide a new impetus for a number of currently debated issues – such as the role of unidirectionality in language change, implicational relations between different types of change – and for some broader theoretical questions as e.g. which components of linguistic change are (generally or in tendency) acquisition-based and which are (generally or in tendency) usage-based.

References

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