

A comparison of grammaticalization processes of serial verb constructions in Ewe and Sinitic

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Research on grammaticalization commonly focuses on morphologically rich languages, but grammaticalization processes are not restricted to languages of these morphological types. They can also be found in isolating languages, which have little overt morphology. This has been shown by Bisang (1996) and Ansaldo (1999), *inter alia*, who studied grammaticalization patterns in South-East Asian languages. To investigate grammaticalization in isolating languages, however, the generally accepted definition needs to be adjusted. Not the change of a lexical (or grammatical) item into a (more) grammatical item is to be researched, but rather the use of a lexical item as a grammatical marker, needs to be investigated.

With this definition at hand possible grammaticalization processes can be uncovered in all languages, irrespective of their morphological type. In this study two isolating languages have been researched, to determine whether they show similar grammaticalization patterns. Since most isolating languages have serial verb constructions (SVCs), it is this grammatical construction which has been investigated. That is, the grammatical use of lexical verbs in these specific constructions is researched in Ewe (Gbe, Kwa, Niger-Congo) and Sinitic (Sino-Tibetan).

To be able to make a sound comparison between these unrelated languages, five specific SVC's have been selected which express basic grammatical roles, i.e. grammatical functions which may be expected to be present in most languages. The expression of these SVC's has been investigated through the consultation of various grammars, containing both synchronic and diachronic information. Research shows that four out of five SVC's are marked similarly in Ewe and Sinitic. That is, the expression of direction, comparison, introduction of a clause, and completion, is accomplished with the same lexical verb in both languages.

The question arises why these completely unrelated languages display similar grammaticalization patterns. Following Bybee *et al.* (1994:10), it is proposed that the semantic meaning of the verbs contributes to the grammaticalization of these items. Their basic meaning makes these verbs prone to be used in other, i.e. non-lexical, contexts. This follows from this study where primary verbs, such as 'go', 'surpass', and 'finish', can appear as grammatical markers as well. Also, SVC's as a whole are semantically indeterminate, which makes them quite susceptible to processes of grammaticalization.

Furthermore, there is a syntactic explanation for the encountered grammaticalization patterns. According to Bisang (1996:523), SVC's contain 'attractor' positions for grammaticalization, which holds that certain positions within these constructions attract linguistic items so as to grammaticalize them. The results of this study confirm this, that is, the grammaticalized verbs all occupy attractor positions.

But these accounts do not clarify why certain verbs are used similarly in Ewe and Sinitic. It is argued that the grammatical use of these verbs constitutes a development which is common to all (isolating) languages. Thus, the employment of these specific verbs to express these particular grammatical roles, is perhaps a probable and even predictable development of a(n) (isolating) language. Of course, more research is needed to validate the latter argument.

References:

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