

On semantic change in grammaticalization: Why it is never metaphoric

We understand metaphor as a “conscious or voluntary shift in a word’s meaning” (cp. Matisoff 1991: 384).

Researchers like Heine et al. (1991) and Matisoff (1991) argued that metaphor is a fundamental mechanism of semantic change in grammaticalization. This idea has however been contested from the very start. For instance, Bybee et al. (1994: 24-25) argued that if metaphor would be a relevant mechanism under grammaticalization, we would expect to see semantic leaps, but these are rarely if ever found. Semantic change in grammaticalization tends to progress gradually involving small-scale reanalyses (in the sense of Hansen 2021).

The marginal position of metaphor in grammaticalization is in sharp contrast to the fact that metaphor is often considered to be one of the most important mechanisms in lexical change (e.g., Geeraerts 2015: 422; Blank 1997: 157). This remarkable difference between semantic change of lexical and of grammatical elements has to our knowledge received little attention, and it calls for an explanation.

Juge (2007) argued that metaphor plays a marginal role in grammaticalization because (as opposed to for instance pragmatic inferencing) it presupposes a high degree of speaker awareness of the metaphorically employed unit. Awareness is incompatible with the mechanisms of grammaticalization, since these are subconscious, he argues. We do not disagree, but Juge’s account begs the question why the mechanisms of grammaticalization are necessarily subconscious – or, at least, evade awareness – and why this is not the case with lexical semantic change. This question represents a fundamental challenge to linguistic change as both lexical semantic change and grammaticalization of lexical items have the same point of departure, namely lexical units.

In this paper, we offer an answer to the question. Our account takes its point of departure in a revised version of Boye & Harder’s (2012: 21) definition of grammaticalization. According to the revised definition, grammaticalization consists in the conventionalization of attentionally backgrounded status. This crucially entails that the input to grammaticalization is attentionally backgrounded, and we argue that this restriction on the input is what makes grammaticalization incompatible with metaphorically employed expressions. From a speaker as well as a hearer perspective, metaphor demands attention or awareness (cp. Juge 2007: 45): for a source concept to structure a target concept, speaker and hearer must pay attention to the internal structure of the concepts at play. Furthermore, novel metaphors will typically attract attention in that they are atypical ways of expressing oneself for which there arguably must be a reason based on the relevance maxim.

Our argument thus looks as follows: 1. A precondition for being grammaticalized is contextually being attentionally backgrounded. 2. Metaphor draws attention to the metaphorically used expressions. 3. Therefore, the metaphorical unit cannot lose the competition for attention and be conventionalized as having ancillary status.

We furthermore argue that based on our account, we can explain why also metonymy in a narrow sense (that is, as a conscious and voluntary process) seems to be marginal in grammaticalization. One of the consequences of our argument is thus that we should re-evaluate lumping pragmatic inferencing and metonymy narrowly defined together under the heading metonymy.

We argue that other approaches to grammaticalization are incapable to account for the same facts.

References

Blank A. (1997). *Prinzipien des lexikalischen Bedeutungswandels am Beispiel der romanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer Verlag.

- Boye, K. & P. Harder (2012). A usage-based theory of grammatical status and grammaticalization. *Language*, 88(1), 1-44.
- Bybee, J., R. Perkins & W. Pagliuca (1994). *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Geeraerts, D. (2015). How words and vocabularies change. In Taylor, J. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 416-430.
- Hansen, M-B. M. (2021). In defense of a pragmatic view of reanalysis. *Journal of Historical Syntax*, 5, 1-34.
- Juge, M. 2007. Metaphor and teleology do not drive grammaticalization. In J. Salmons & Sh. Dubenion-Smith (eds.), *Historical Linguistics 2005: Selected papers from the 17th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Madison, Wisconsin, 31 July - 5 August 2005*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 33-48.
- Matisoff, J. A. 1991. "Areal and Universal Dimensions of Grammatization in Lahu". In Elizabeth Closs Traugott & Bernd Heine (eds.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization II*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 383-453.