

Grammaticalization as conventionalization of discursively secondary status: Isolating what is unique to grammaticalization, and deconstructing the lexical-grammatical continuum

While there is wide agreement about approximately what grammaticalization is, a more profound understanding faces two major challenges. One is that the presupposed distinction between grammatical and lexical is itself hard to get a grip on (e.g. Boye & Harder 2012: 1-6). The other challenge is that even with a theoretically anchored and well-defined distinction between grammatical and lexical, it is not clear that grammaticalization is a distinct type of language change rather than an epiphenomenon (e.g. Campbell 2001: 151; see also Section 4).

Boye & Harder (2012) offered a solution to the first challenge, arguing for an understanding of grammatical elements as defined by conventionalized discursively secondary status (roughly, attentional background status). However, they circumvented the second challenge. Rather than attempting to define grammaticalization as a diachronic phenomenon, they defined it in terms of its result, namely as “the diachronic change that gives rise to linguistic expressions that are by convention ancillary and as such discursively secondary” (Boye & Harder 2012: 22). This definition is problematic as it includes all changes under grammaticalization as long as the output is a grammatical (i.e. secondary by convention) element.

This paper has two aims: Firstly, it proposes a definition of grammaticalization which is still based on the understanding of grammatical elements in Boye & Harder (2012), but which targets the nature of grammaticalization as a diachronic phenomenon: Grammaticalization is the conventionalization of discursively secondary status.

Secondly, it discusses important implications of the proposed definition: 1) Grammaticalization basically applies to meaning. What is conventionalized as discursively secondary is basically a meaning; a sign is only ‘discursively secondary by convention’ by virtue of its meaning. 2) grammaticalization is a special case of a well-known type of change, viz. conventionalization. 3) Grammaticalization covers a restricted range of phenomena. For instance, changes like phonological reduction and semantic bleaching that are often associated with grammaticalization are external to grammaticalization. 4) Grammaticalization is not a type of overall development like, for instance *go* > *gonna*, but a small and well-defined part of such larger changes. 5) Grammaticalization is a gradual process to the extent that conventionalization is a gradual process. However, 6) the lexical-grammatical continuum must be deconstructed into other continua, including the conventionalization continuum, a splitting continuum (e.g. Heine & Reh 1984: 57), and a discourse prominence continuum. 7) Degrammaticalization (understood as a process in which grammatical elements give rise to lexical ones) is infrequent because it requires attention to discursively secondary (i.e. attentionally backgrounded) elements.

The paper is theoretical in intent, but invokes both standard examples of grammaticalization (e.g. the grammaticalization of future tense auxiliaries) and non-standard examples (e.g. what Jespersen 1922 called ‘secretion’) to illustrate its points.

References

- Boye, K. & P. Harder. 2012. A usage-based theory of grammatical status and grammaticalization. *Language* 88.1. 1–44.
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