Explaining grammaticalization (the standard way)[1]

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Since nobody knows how to draw the line between lexical expressions and grammatical devices, it is natural to suppose that, in some sense, the transition from lexicon to grammar is a gradual one. There is a continuum, it seems, bounded by purely lexical items on one end and purely grammatical items on the other, with many expressions lying somewhere between these opposites. This, at any rate, is the view that underlies the notion of grammaticalization, which by definition is a process of language change in which an expression moves away from the lexical pole and toward the grammatical pole. This type of change is quite common, but it turns out that shifts in the opposite direction, away from the grammatical pole and toward the lexical pole, are practically nonexistent. The asymmetry between grammaticalization and degrammaticalization is the topic of the following remarks.

There is a more or less standard view of grammaticalization, which has recently been challenged, in this journal, by Haspelmath (1999). The purpose of this note is twofold: I want to show how Haspelmath's criticism can be met and discuss some of the problems his own proposal runs into.

One of the best-known instances of grammaticalization is "Jespersen's cycle":

The history of negative expressions in various languages makes us witness the following curious fluctuation: the original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in its turn may be felt as the negative proper and may then in course of time be subject to the same development as the original word (Jespersen 1917: 4).

This process is exemplified by the history of French predicate negation (see e.g. Horn 1989; Hock 1991). Initially, negation in French was expressed by the particle *ne* (itself the product of a grammaticalization process), which preceded the verb:

(1) Il ne   {vais/va}.
     he NEG   go
     'He doesn't go.'

In the context of motion verbs *ne* was optionally reinforced by the substantive *pas* 'step' (in other contexts similar reinforcers were available):

(2) Il ne   {vait/va} pas.
     he NEG go   step
     'He doesn't go a step.'

In due course, *pas* shed its connotation of movement and was reanalyzed as being party to a discontinuous negative construction:

(3) Il ne   va pas.
     he NEG go NEG
     'He doesn't go.'

Finally, in present-day colloquial French, *pas* has come to be seen as the fulcrum of negation, and *ne* has been demoted to an optional element:

(4) Il va pas.
     he go NEG
     'He doesn't go.'

This development illustrates several features characteristic of grammaticalization phenomena. It all starts when a content word is employed for achieving a special effect in certain contexts, usually because a standardly available form is felt to lack in expressiveness. As the new usage catches on, it gradually becomes a standard form of expression itself, which may eventually replace the original one, and in the process the content word becomes increasingly fixed within its new syntactic frame and therefore less salient, while its semantic content becomes markedly less concrete. In brief, grammaticalization is a process of phonetic reduction, syntactic rigidification, and semantic abstraction.

It is often said, as I nearly did at the beginning, that in the course of grammaticalization content words turn into function words, but this is a misleading way of putting things, for two reasons. First, since there is no sharp divide between content words and function words, this formulation misrepresents a gradual transition as an abrupt one. Second, as illustrated by the history of French negation and emphasized by Hopper and Traugott (1993), grammaticalization is seldom a local process and often affects entire constructions. It isn't exactly wrong to say that French *pas* has turned from an ordinary noun into a negation particle, but it bears emphasizing that this statement merely summarizes a protracted and ramified course of events.

As it turns out, grammaticalization is an irreversible process. Although it is not logically impossible that a particle should gradually free itself from its syntactic environment, acquire an increasingly concrete meaning,

and finally emerge as an ordinary noun, this kind of thing rarely happens in practice. This discrepancy calls for an explanation: why is degrammaticalization so rare, while grammaticalization is quite common? There is a more or less standard answer to this question, which goes back at least as far as von der Gabelentz (1891) and sees grammaticalization as resulting from the interaction between two opposite forces: effectiveness and efficiency (also known as clarity vs. economy, force of diversification vs. force of unification, hearer's economy vs. speaker's economy, Q-principle vs. I-principle, and so on; this is a terminological free-for-all, apparently). On the one hand, speakers seek to make themselves understood and therefore strive for maximally effective messages, but on the other hand, there is a general tendency not to expend more energy than is strictly necessary and therefore to prefer economical forms to more elaborate ones. Grammaticalization begins when a form α that may be efficient but is felt to lack in effectiveness is replaced with a periphrastic, and therefore less economical, locution β calculated to enhance effectiveness. Then β gets the upper hand and wears down due to the general drive toward efficiency of expression, until it is weakened to the point where it has to be replaced by some γ.

   This is the standard view of grammaticalization, which has recently been challenged by Haspelmath (1999). Referring to the opposing forces of effectiveness and efficiency ("clarity" and "economy," in his terminology), Haspelmath asks himself and his readers,

The real problem is to explain why the conflicting tendencies do not cancel each other out, leading to stasis rather than change — why doesn't erosion stop at the point where it would threaten intelligibility? Or alternatively, why doesn't the tug-of-war between the two counteracting forces lead only to a back-and-forth movement? (Haspelmath 1999: 1052)

Haspelmath's position is that these problems cannot be solved within the standard framework, which therefore calls for rather drastic revision. I disagree, because I think it is fairly obvious how Haspelmath's questions can be answered without going beyond the conceptual resources of the received view.

   To begin with, whenever we speak of language change, of which grammaticalization is a special case, we refer to an emergent phenomenon. Language, in this connection, is a social entity; individual speakers don't count except insofar as they cluster around statistically significant means. To illustrate the importance of this point, consider the distinction between content words and function words. Grammaticalization studies perforce view this distinction as a continuum, because justice must be done to the observation that a content word may gradually turn into a function word.

There is no reason to expect, however, that this continuum is reflected as such in any single speaker at any time, and in fact studies in language processing and acquisition and linguistic disorders yield abundant evidence converging on the conclusion that, for individual speakers, the content/ functional distinction is a dichotomous one (see Cann 2000 for a recent summary). There is nothing paradoxical about this, of course, as long as it is kept in mind that the word *language* is polysemous and means entirely different things depending on whether it is applied to individual speakers or linguistic communities.

Effectiveness and efficiency are forces that act not upon public languages but upon individual speakers, in two ways. First, it is individual speakers who, in the utterances they produce, have to strike a balance between maximum effect and minimum effort. Second, the same forces constrain the development of speakers' idiolects, which must find an equilibrium between optimal discriminability (every meaning its own word) and excessive economy (the same word for all senses).

Speakers do not resort to periphrastic locutions because an expression as such has suddenly become ineffective, but because it isn't sufficiently effective for certain specific purposes. For example, it is a familiar observation that negative elements are usually not focused upon. In many if not most contexts, the focus in (5) will not be on the negation but rather on the main verb or the object, and this is what has enabled the negative element to accrete on the finite verb in the first place: if *not* had always been the main focus, it wouldn't have lost its independent status.

(5)   I haven't read *Pride and Prejudice*.

A linguistic form may start to erode as long as it serves well enough for most purposes, but once erosion has begun it may cease to be sufficiently effective for some purposes, and the need for an alternative form of expression arises. But as soon as an alternative has been found, it will start to compete with the older form, because efficiency doesn't like grammars in which the same or closely related functions are performed by different devices, and in many cases the older form will duly disappear.

This answers Haspelmath's first question: if it serves efficiency in sufficiently many contexts without compromising effectiveness, a linguistic form may erode to such a degree that it no longer achieves optimal effectiveness in all contexts. However (and this is Haspelmath's second question), why should a community of speakers that has reached this point invariably "decide" to introduce a new form instead of returning to an older, that is, less reduced, version of the existing one? More briefly, why should there be reduction followed by wholesale replacement rather than oscillation between forms? Givón (1975) suggests that it is because reduced forms

are PREDICTABLE while expanded forms are not, and he is taken to task for this by Haspelmath (1999: 1050) on the grounds that

[…] the accuracy of predictability is generally quite low. Although we can exclude certain changes, there is no way to predict, say, whether a [p] will be reduced to a [ɸ] or a [b], or whether *going to* will be reduced to [gɒnə] or [gʊŋə]. Similarly, the degree of predictability in lexical-semantic change is very low, and yet words change their meanings all the time. Thus, why shouldn't the preposition *on* become a noun ***owan* 'top' or 'head' for instance?

Although Haspelmath's point is well taken, I nonetheless believe that Givón's suggestion is on the right track. It is just that the notion of predictability invoked by Givón is a bit too stringent. There is a distinct asymmetry between reduction and expansion, which is just that there are far more alternatives one way than the other. It may be impossible to forecast whether a [p] will be reduced to a [ɸ] or a [b], but there aren't many more options besides these, which is why a [ɸ] or [b] is easily recognized as a reduced [p]. Now, how many ways are there of expanding a [p]? If the question makes sense at all, the answer must surely be, indefinitely many. Similarly, *on* would easily be identified as a reduced form of *owan* (had it existed), because there aren't that many ways of reducing *owan*, but it would be a lot more difficult to identify *owan* as an expanded form of *on*, since the number of alternative expansions is vast.

It is perhaps significant that Haspelmath (1999: 1052) criticizes the pervasive use, in studies on language change, of such terms as "erosion," "wear," etc., on the grounds that "[w]ords are not material objects, but they exist in our minds as a specific neural patterning […]," and concepts like erosion simply don't apply to such patterns, according to Haspelmath. However, even if sense can be made of the idea that the languages are constellations of brain patterns, this is not the kind of notion that is relevant to understanding language change, as I pointed out earlier on, since grammaticalization processes affect PUBLIC languages.

The upshot of the foregoing remarks is that there is no reason to give up the standard line on grammaticalization. This is my main point, but to round out these remarks I propose to have a brief look at Haspelmath's alternative picture. That is to say, what Haspelmath defends is really an extension of the standard framework: he proposes, in effect, that the conceptual apparatus of the received account be incorporated in a rather more elaborate machinery of "ecological conditions" and "maxims of action," which he borrows from Keller (1994). I will not review this system in detail but will focus on two maxims that are crucial to Haspelmath's account of grammaticalization. In addition to effectiveness and efficiency (dubbed by Haspelmath "clarity" and "economy," respectively),

Haspelmath introduces maxims of "conformity" and "extravagance," which are equally important to his account, although he lays more emphasis on the extravagance maxim:

4.   Conformity: talk like the others talk.
5.   Extravagance: talk in such a way that you are noticed (Haspelmath 1999: 1055).

Incidentally, I deplore Haspelmath's use of the term "maxim," because it provokes associations with Grice's theory of pragmatics, and, more generally, because it implies that the roots of grammaticalization lie in deliberate acts of individual speakers. Both implications are inappropriate, in my view. I don't think it is plausible to hold that, for instance, phonetic reduction is a consequence of individual speakers' conscious decisions, and therefore I fail to see how it could ever be derivable from maxims for action, properly understood. So as far as I am concerned, all subsequent tokens of the term *maxim* are enclosed in invisible scare quotes.

I regard Haspelmath's conformity maxim as a harmless addition to the standard framework; it may even be argued to be derivable from the effectiveness maxim (although such an argument would require a more precise definition of the maxims). The extravagance maxim is less innocuous, in my view, because unlike the other maxims it is entirely unrelated to what I take to be the principal function of language, that is to say, communication. As Haspelmath puts it, "the speakers' goal is not just being understood at the lowest possible cost, but rather being socially successful with their speech" (1999: 1056). Being extravagant, in Haspelmath's sense, is rather like wearing a conspicuous though tasteful tie or walking in an especially elegant manner.

According to Haspelmath, the process of grammaticalization is set in motion by a speaker who chooses to follow the extravagance maxim, that is, one who wants to be noticed, and who does so by using an existing word in a novel way, for example by saying *by means of a hammer* instead of *with a hammer.* This innovation catches on and spreads through the linguistic community, until eventually *by means of* has acquired the status of a complex preposition. This, in a nutshell, is Haspelmath's view on grammaticalization.

There are several reasons for doubting that this view is correct. To begin with, note that the maxims of extravagance and conformity are contradictories: a speaker who abides by one flouts the other. Which raises the question how a speaker decides that he should follow one rather than the other; Haspelmath has nothing to say about this. Furthermore, it remains unclear why a newly introduced form of words should be adopted by other speakers. Haspelmath maintains that such speakers follow the maxim

of conformity as well as the maxim of extravagance. He doesn't explain in detail what this is supposed to mean, but what he seems to have in mind is that his maxims are to be thought of as schematic. On this construal, the definite noun phrase in the conformity maxim does not necessarily refer to the speaker's audience but may alternatively refer to a third party, and the maxim of extravagance is similarly dependent on the context: what is extravagant according to some tastes may be routine to others. However, if this is how Haspelmath's maxims are to be understood, they are empty as long as it isn't explained how they are "instantiated" on any given occasion. In brief, as they stand Haspelmath's maxims do not yield any univocal predictions.

Another concern is that the beginning of a grammaticalization process rarely strikes one as being extravagant in any sense. For example, the first step in the history of the French *ne … pas* construction, when the substantive *pas* began to accompany negated motion verbs, does not seem like a particularly daring innovation to me. To be sure, Haspelmath is careful to water down the pretheoretical notion of extravagance by urging that it must "be interpreted very loosely" and "in a generalized sense" (1999: 1057), but even so I wonder if the first use of (2) in lieu of (1) will have contributed anything to the speaker's social status. And MOST instances of grammaticalization are like this: there may have been cases in which the process was initiated by a surprising linguistic innovation, but such cases are few and far between.

Yet another way of expressing my reservations about Haspelmath's extravagance maxim is by way of the following thought experiment. Consider an imaginary community of speakers who, without exception, NEVER feel the need to be socially successful; as far as their linguistic intercourse is concerned, they just want to attain their communicative goals, and that is it. If Haspelmath were correct, grammaticalization should not occur in such a speech community, or at any rate there should be considerably less of it than in real life. It seems to me that either way such a view of grammaticalization leads to counterintuitive results.

I suspect that what has led Haspelmath to introduce his maxim of extravagance is an unduly narrow conception of the familiar maxim of effectiveness (or clarity, as he calls it). It is tempting to assume that, say, an assertion is maximally effective if it is accurate and complete. This is not quite correct, however. Suppose that we wanted to be informed about, for instance, the geographical distribution of flower shops in Berlin. This information may be found in a telephone directory, which, let us suppose, is accurate as well as complete. But it is evident that a judiciously decorated map will be a great deal more effective (and clearer as well), despite the fact that it is bound to be LESS accurate. This example shows that

maximizing effectiveness is not just a matter of listing all relevant informa-
tion but is just as much a matter of selection and emphasis. Once this
point is appreciated, it will also be clear that there simply is no point in
introducing a maxim of extravagance in addition to the maxim of
effectiveness.

The process of grammaticalization begins at some point where available
linguistic resources are judged to lack effectiveness for certain purposes.
New resources are then introduced, which occasionally may be said to be
somewhat extravagant, in a suitably bland sense of "extravagant," but
more often than not deviate only slightly from standard expressions. This
is the received view of grammaticalization, and it seems to me the proper
view, as well.

Note

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