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Metaphorical Trajectories in Grammaticalization

The study of grammaticalization deals with language change where items become more grammatical. The first part of my project analyzed the process of grammaticalization and addressed its main features. The main debates in grammaticalization range from its nature to its status as a process. I examined the feature of unidirectionality, whereby change occurs only from lexical to grammatical and never the other way around. I also examined other main features: the role of frequency, and found that high frequency is a necessary condition for an item to become grammaticalized but not a sufficient one. Research in African languages has tested the fifteen most frequently occurring constructions and found that most of them did not become grammaticalized.

An important part of grammaticalization involves attrition: both phonological and semantic. Phonetic material is lost. Semantic content is also lost as items become more grammatical. For example, “going to” becomes “gonna” and “let us go” becomes “let’s go.” In terms of semantic content, an expression such as “going to” which originally meant “to leave in order to do something” acquired the more general meaning of future occurrence, volition, or intention.

My research focused on the intersection between semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive forces in grammaticalization. Specifically, I looked at metaphor and the trajectories that were observed to occur through time. Metaphorical trajectories consist of changes where human centered concepts such as body parts, objects, and events, are used to conceptualize more abstract, qualitative, logical, or propositional content. This change is also unidirectional; we rarely see abstract terms being employed to express concrete

concepts. Words for body parts such as “ahead of” and “at the back of” thus acquired spacio-temporal meanings as in “they’re ahead of us” and “we are at the back of the line.” The word “while” originally had a temporal reading used to indicate that X happened during a period of time or an event. It acquired a contrastive meaning as in: “while I like tennis, you like volleyball.” The word “since” also had originally a temporal meaning then developed a causal meaning: “since it is raining, I won’t go outside.”

In my analysis I argue against the idea that enhancement in expressivity is a motivating force behind metaphorical trajectories. This has been proposed and implied by various researchers. The first reason I provide against this idea is that outputs in metaphorical trajectories are not necessarily more expressive than inputs. If the change occurred in order to increase expressivity, it is natural to expect that the output will be more expressive than the input, but this is not the case. For example, “going downhill” does not seem more expressive than “going down the hill.” A second reason I provide is that non-metaphorically derived synonyms of metaphorically derived concepts are not less expressive than their metaphorically derived counterparts. One would expect this to be the case if the change occurs in order to enhance expressivity.

An alternative explanation for metaphorical changes might emphasize availability. The usual assumption is that because concepts are near us and surround us, they are then more graspable and more comprehensible, and hence more expressive. This assumption may be true, but it does not follow from the available linguistic evidence. It is possible that being around us simply means that it is more readily available in our memories. This does not necessarily mean that it is richer in expressivity, meaning, or semantic complexity. Furthermore, it seems that when we apply a metaphorical label, the target concept differs, as we have seen, where it applies to new domains and becomes

usable in new contexts, and as such it becomes more general, and more abstract. It is in this sense that it differs from the source concept, rather than in capturing the source concept's expressivity by virtue of a new label.