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DEVELOPMENTS OF GRAMMATICALIZATION THEORY: INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR CHRISTIAN LEHMANN

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PhD Professor Dr. Christian Lehmann[2] answers in the present interview some questions related to the grammaticalization theory and linguistic research. Regarded as one of the most influential researchers of language theory, he is the author of more than two hundred works, among which, the book Thoughts on grammaticalization (2002). He is also Professor of Comparative Linguistics in the University of Erfurt (Germany) and Member of the Permanent International Committee of Linguists.

EntreviSta: You are regarded as one of the pioneers who has been doing, since the beginning of the 1980`s, and your research is considered key reference in grammaticalization. Could you please talk a little about the development of this area of research and about its history in the Linguistic field?

Christian Lehmann: The idea of grammaticalization came up even in the earliest sporadic comparisons of Romance languages with Latin. The first extensive treatment is found in an 1818 book by the German philologist August W. Schlegel. The concept was assigned a permanent position in the theory of grammatical change and coupled with the term *grammaticalization* by the French comparative linguist Antoine Meillet (1912). In 1965, it was taken up and expanded by the Polish comparative linguist Jerzy Kuryłowicz in an oft-quoted article. Both Meillet and Kuryłowicz bridged, by their personalities and their work, the gap between general linguistics and comparative philology. Although both are highly respected among Indo-Europeanists, they unfortunately did not succeed in securing grammaticalization its due place in Indo-European linguistics. To this day, grammaticalization research sometimes meets with tenacious resistance on the part of Indo-Europeanist. As a result, grammaticalization research is, as a whole, not as solidly based on historical scrutiny and genetic comparison as would be desirable. Instead, it was reinvented by the US American typologist Talmy Givón in a series of publications since 1971, in which he made major theoretical contributions to

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the field. I combined these modern ideas with the typological and Indo-Europeanist tradition in my book of 1982 [2002], which for a long time was only available as grey literature and in which I ventured the first comprehensive treatment of the subject. The part of it which has most often been used by others is the attempt to operationalize the concept of grammaticalization to the point that linguistic items and constructions may be compared as to the degree of their grammaticalization. Since then, grammaticalization has become firmly established as a major trend in contemporary linguistics. Important contributions include the books (e.g. 1991) by the German africanist Bernd Heine and his cooperators and the textbook by the US American linguists Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott (1993). Among other things, we have had a series of four triennial conferences called New Reflections on Grammaticalization. Most of the functionally oriented branches of linguistics have by now incorporated the concept of grammaticalization. There have also been attempts to either integrate it into some of the formally oriented approaches or else to demonstrate its theoretical irrelevance, with little success so far.

EntreviSta: Could you please point out the developments of grammaticalization theory that have been taking place lately and talk about the future developments that are supposed to happen in the next few years?

Christian Lehmann: Recent research has focused both on empirical and on theoretical aspects of grammaticalization. Ever more areas of grammar have been scrutinized from that point of view, and it has turned out that even for languages with no documented history, a descriptive perspective informed by grammaticalization leads to a more adequate understanding of the functioning of their system. The theory is therefore often made use of in the description of endangered languages. It also plays a major role in areal linguistics and pidgin and creole linguistics, since it is both challenging and rewarding to disentangle general mechanisms of grammaticalization that are available to any human language at any time without inspiration from neighboring or substrate languages, from areal developments where, for instance, the idea of grammaticalizing a demonstrative to a definite article, the numeral one to an indefinite article and the verb 'have' to a perfect auxiliary spreads by language contact in an area like eighth century Francia in western Europe. The most exciting theoretical developments emerge from the investigation of degrammaticalization and the interplay of grammaticalization with other forms of grammatical change, as they allow us to assign a more precise place to grammaticalization in the workings of language and to identify its ultimate moving force.

Maybe the most important contribution of grammaticalization research to the development of the discipline of linguistics is that it has brought the diachronic perspective back into general and descriptive linguistics. For a long time since Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), an abyss separated work in the synchronic and in the diachronic perspective. They developed into entirely incommensurate directions, synchronic linguistics often being done as formal, culture-free system linguistics, while diachronic linguistics was often a branch of philology caring for minute historical and reconstructed details (with major exceptions like the work of Joseph Greenberg). Grammaticalization research has proved to be an enterprise that brings the two branches together, to strengthen the fruitful forces in both of them by cross-fertilization and thus to contribute to a more adequate view of language as an ever-evolving object. That is, unless I am mistaken, the major reason why it attracts so many young people who want to engage in linguistics.

EntreviSta: There is an increasingly strong movement regarding the study of grammaticalization through the prism of the grammaticalization of expressions and constructions, in other words, there is a theoretical and empirical displacement which focuses on larger segments of analysis. What are the consequences of this change in the linguistic research? Moreover, do you think the cognitive notions come to have a more important role in this model?

Christian Lehmann: It is true that in the age-old tradition of school grammar and historical linguistics, early grammaticalization research was very much focused on the single linguistic item. Sometimes that criticism was even raised against my 1982 book, although its model is explicitly based both on the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic relations contracted by the grammaticalized item and, in its last chapter, offers an attempt to see the grammaticalization of an item and the grammaticalization of the containing construction as two sides of the same coin. Be that as it may, it is true that since the advent of construction grammar, there has been more talk of the grammaticalization of entire constructions. This helps in understanding that not only grammatical formatives, but also grammatical rules and relations owe their origin to grammaticalization. At the same time, this means that the latter are no more universal than the former, a conviction shared by construction grammarians. The fact that there is no conflict between the essentials of the respective theoretical bases has had the consequence that much research in construction grammar freely integrates grammaticalization theory, and vice versa. An area where construction grammar is yet in need of catching up is in the integration of the diachronic perspective. If that is resolved, no major obstacle will be left to seeing construction grammar and grammaticalization theory as two aspects of the same approach to language.

Since Bernd Heine formulated some of the cognitive underpinnings for recurrent grammaticalization processes in the world's languages, grammaticalization has been an important ingredient in most cognitive approaches to language. This is partly, it must be said, a merit of the item-based approach in grammaticalization. Most grammatical theory in the structuralist tradition simply ignored grammatical meaning. Grammaticalization theory restores grammatical meaning to its proper place in linguistic theory. It is therefore little wonder that cognitive linguistics find more points of contact with grammaticalization theory than with more structurally oriented branches of linguistics.

EntreviSta: Many cognitive theories understand that meaning has specifically cultural and historical origins and, thus, origins which are not universal. Consequently, imagetic schemes, metaphors, metonyms among others, involve social or cultural specificities. In this context, how do you believe it is possible to operationalize the notion of linguistic variation in the emerging agenda of the grammaticalization of expressions and constructions?

Christian Lehmann: I do not see any incompatibility there. Meaning in the sense of Saussurean signifié is by definition culture-specific. By the same token, grammar is language-specific, as I said before. This does not exclude the existence of general principles of language activity that govern the evolution of language systems and of grammatical categories. One of the examples to illustrate this comes from early work by Bernd Heine, where he shows that phrases based on body-part terms are grammaticalized, in many languages, into adpositions. The noun 'back' frequently serves as a local adposition; but in cattle-raising cultures the adposition tends to mean 'on', while in other cultures it tends to mean 'behind'. This nicely shows that the general factors operative in grammaticalization, including metaphor, may well be universal, while at the same time the lexical fields chosen for grammaticalization may differ across languages, and semantic and distributional features of its source may be persistent in the individual grammatical formative. It is true that it is not easy to generalize, at the cross-linguistic level, over grammatical relations and constructions. However, even

those construction grammarians who have allocated themselves among the splitters freely make us of typological concepts such as indirect object, benefactive construction and causativization. The task of delimiting such concepts in a useful way, so that they neither induce us into glossing over grammatical differences among languages nor prevent us from seeing deep commonalities among them, this task comes up to all of us, researchers in grammaticalization and others alike.

EntreviSta: In 2002, you observed that there was a lack of recognition of the distinction between renovation and innovation, established by Meillet (1912), which has led to misunderstandings that seek to put into question the issue of the irreversibility of grammaticalization. How do you believe the concepts of innovation and renewal can be understood?

Christian Lehmann: Both concepts get their sense in a diachronic perspective. As it was observed by Coseriu (1958), the language system is the product and the static aspect of the constant systematization in which the speakers engage. They commonly do so in certain tracks defined by the type of their language. In other words, they do create the grammar, its categories, paradigms, constructions and formatives, but most of the time they do so according to available patterns. For instance, eight hundred years ago the idea crossed the Portuguese people's mind that they might grammaticalize a construction involving the verb meaning 'have' (*ter*) into a periphrastic perfect. And that is what they did, departing, with it, from the rest of the Romance languages. However, the idea was not that original after all, since all the Romance languages including Portuguese already shared a periphrastic perfect based on the verb 'have' (Latin *habere*), which had evolved, as I said, in the language-contact situation of the early middle ages. It provided a model for the Portuguese *ter* periphrasis. In this perspective, only just the individual auxiliary was replaced. That is what is called renewal of a construction or a category. Sometimes, however, a speech community departs from deep-trodden paths and creates a grammatical category that has no model in the immediately preceding language stage. That is then an innovation. For instance, no historically operative model is known for the evolution of the indefinite article in the Romance and Germanic languages. Ancient Greek could theoretically have served as a model for the grammaticalization of the definite article; but that, too, seems rather far-fetched. Innovations such as these are symptoms of an ongoing typological change, whereas renewal is original only at the surface, but actually deeply conservative. One could even go so far, as I have done in an article of 2008, to claim that such renewal as may be observed in current Portuguese replacing *estar* by *ficar* in many contexts is a measure to maintain the linguistic type.

In the phase where a language replaces an earlier grammatical formative by a new one, the latter is, of course, less advanced in grammaticalization than the former. That is, in fact, the whole point of the renewal. It happens, for instance, when prepositions replace the Latin cases or periphrastic verbs replace conjugation suffixes. We thus see something more grammatical succeeded by something less grammatical. These have sometimes been regarded as cases of degrammaticalization. That is, however, a misunderstanding. Grammaticalization is a continuous development affecting a linguistic sign as an object with a diachronic identity. Replacement of such an object by another one can never be grammaticalization. Instead, such cases illustrate the restarting of the never-ending spiral of grammaticalization.

EntreviSta: Still talking about the irreversibility of grammaticalization, one of the most debated issues in the theory of grammaticalization concerns the existence or not of degrammaticalization. Do you believe there is a theoretical support for the degrammaticalization process? In addition, what is the result of such implication in language theory?

Christian Lehmann: Grammaticalization is probably best conceived as a kind of routinization and automatization of expressions that once were expressive. Routinization and automatization of operations that we learnt in a step-by-step procedure is a frequent and necessary ingredient of our life. It is not easily reversible, nor is it necessary or useful to revert it. If one needs a less automatized, more freely manipulable procedure, there are always resources available at levels where units are selected and combined freely and consciously. To make use of these and, eventually, to recruit them for grammaticalization is much easier than to defreeze a grammaticalized construction. Once an item or a construction has been recruited for grammaticalization, no originality is needed to go on with their grammaticalization until they have become completely formal. The reverse process would require filling up a formal item with sense and force. One cannot exclude that this may happen every once in a while – every linguistic law so far discovered suffers from a couple of exceptions, due to the fact that language is a free human activity and not some instinct-determined behavior. However, as I have shown in an article of 2004, most of the examples that have been adduced are spurious, based on theoretical or methodological misunderstandings. A few come close to degrammaticalization, as when the Italian numeral suffix *–anta* (= Portuguese *–enta*) starts getting used as a noun with the meaning "years over forty". But even that did not start out as an inflectional suffix and is therefore not a totally clean case of degrammaticalization. More such examples are discussed in a book by Muriel Norde (2009). Since, as I said, every linguistic theory has to live with a couple of exceptions, they do not invalidate the theory of grammaticalization. They do, however, confine it by showing the limits of unidirectionality.

EntreviSta: There is a questioning, by some authors, about the status of grammaticalization as a theory (NEWMEYER, 2001, for example). Thus, can grammaticalization be understood only as a kind of linguistic change, which lives with other processes, such as lexicalization and phonetic change?

Christian Lehmann: In some publications, grammaticalization has been stylized as the making of the language system and thus been taken as the basis for a new approach to language. However, language is multifaceted, and no single approach can hope to grasp it as a whole. There are processes of synchronic and diachronic variation at all levels, some of them directed like grammaticalization, others fluctuating back and forth, like syncope and anaptyxis. Another force in synchronic and diachronic variation which is at least as powerful as grammaticalization is analogy; and very often it provides targets for grammaticalization processes. Yet another process of grammatical change is reanalysis, which often co-occurs with grammaticalization but, in its turn, presupposes analogy. It would not be wise to subsume all such different mechanisms of variation under grammaticalization, since that would imply loosing what is proper to grammaticalization. Admitting the coexistence of grammaticalization with other processes of grammatical variation and, of course, with processes of variation in the lexicon and in phonology does not detract in the least from the value of grammaticalization research. Quite on the contrary: if grammaticalization research should succeed, in the long run, to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the interaction of the various forces shaping linguistic systems, it will have done better service to the whole of linguistics than a so-called formal model which purports to account for the whole of language but in reality only accounts for a couple of syntactic constructions.

EntreviSta: Thank you very much for the interview!

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