

Reanalysis and directionality

David Willis

Department of Linguistics, University of Cambridge

dwew2@cam.ac.uk

Much attention has been paid over the last twenty years to questions of directionality in the study of grammaticalization. Two central issues, whether grammaticalization is absolutely unidirectional and how the observed tendency towards unidirectionality is to be accounted for, have received much attention, both within the tradition of ‘grammaticalization theory’ and, more recently, within formal models of language change (Roberts 1993, Roberts & Roussou 2003). Much less attention has been paid to directionality in the study of reanalysis. In fact, it is often stated or implied that there is no directionality issue with reanalysis, since reanalyses may go in either direction (Haspelmath 1998).

This paper addresses the question of whether reanalyses can be unidirectional, arguing that many, but not all, types of commonly recurring reanalyses manifest unidirectionality. It will contrast data from reanalyses involving changes in CP-boundaries with those involving the nominal domain. Considering syntactic change at the clausal level, a number of hypotheses about the directionality of change seem to be highly plausible:

- (a) elements of main clauses can be reanalysed as belonging to embedded clauses but not vice versa;
- (b) reanalysis of clause boundaries never involves an increase in structure, measured as the number of phrasal projections;
- (c) a biclausal structure may be reanalysed as monoclausal but not vice versa.

Thus, reanalyses of CP-boundaries conforming to hypothesis (i) are frequently attested:

- (1) (i) English *for* (P > C): better [P for] me [CP PRO to die] > better [CP [C for] me to die];
(ii) Welsh *i* ‘to’ (P > C): cause [P to] the rain [CP PRO stop] > cause [CP [C to] the rain stop] (Miller 2002);
(iii) Irish emergence of nonfinite OV clauses: avoid evil [CP PRO to do] > avoid [CP PRO evil to do] (Disterheft 1984);
(iv) Finnish loss of subject-to-object raising from participial clauses (Timberlake 1977).

The reverse pattern of reanalysis, whereby an element of an embedded clause is reassigned to the main clause, is not readily attested. Although some of these cases are instances of grammaticalization, and hence the restrictions could be said to follow from whatever causes the general tendency for grammaticalization to be unidirectional, not all of them fall into this category. The changes in (iii) and (iv) above, for instance, do not involve grammaticalization.

In the nominal domain, on the other hand, it is much more difficult to demonstrate that common types of reanalysis are unidirectional. In fact, there is some evidence for the reverse. We find both reanalysis of pronouns as demonstratives/determiners in (2), and of demonstratives/determiners as pronouns in (3):

- (2) (i) English *them*, pronoun > demonstrative (*them days* ‘those days’);
(ii) Welsh *rhain*, demonstrative pronoun ‘those (ones)’ > demonstrative (*y dynion rhain* ‘those men (the men those)’).

- (3) (i) Common Slavic **onŭ* demonstrative (e.g. **onŭ domŭ* ‘that house’) > Russian, Polish etc. *on* ‘he’, pronoun;
 (ii) German *die*, definite article (*die Frau* ‘the woman’) > *die* ‘she’, pronoun etc.

There are also cases where structure seems to be gained:

- (4) (i) Middle Welsh *y meu i* ‘mine (the mine me)’ < earlier *y meu* presumably via the postulation of a null pronominal (*pro*), cf. Middle Welsh both *fy march i* ‘my horse (my horse me)’ and *fy march* ‘my horse’, the latter structurally [_{DP} *fy* [_{march_i} [_{*pro* t_i}]]].

The cases in (2) arguably also involve a gain in structure, at least in the sense that a null nominal head has to be hypothesized to reach the required reanalysis, for instance, [_{DP} [_D them]] > [_{DP} [_D them] [_{NP} [_N \emptyset]] in (2i).

In addition to substantiating the claim that reanalysis is partially directional, the paper will consider possible explanations for the patterns of directionality and non-directionality found. Some aspects of directionality (notably (b) and (c) above) follow from well-established principles such as some kind of ‘simplicity’ principle in language acquisition (in historical syntax, cf. the Least Effort Strategy, Roberts 1993). However, such a principle overpredicts directionality in preventing the creation of (additional) structure. It also does not readily account for the generalization above in (a) without additional assumptions. The cases in (2) and (4), on the other hand, seem to violate ‘simplicity’ principles. These, however, can all be analysed as involving the abductive postulation of null elements (typically *pro*) during the reanalysis period and beyond. This may represent a systematic exception to ‘simplicity’ principles.

References

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