

The grammaticalization of noun affixes: Toward a diachronic typology of empty morphs

Some languages contain items whose only apparent function is to signal that the word form in which they occur is a noun. Following Givón (2011), I will refer to these items as “noun affixes” (glossed “NA”). Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the phenomenon:

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|-----|------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| (1) | Onondaga (ono; Northern Iroquoian) | (2) | Comanche (com; Numic) |
| | <i>o-hyweʔd-aʔ</i> | | <i>tanna-pih</i> |
| | NA-horn-NA | | knee-NA |
| | ‘horn’ (Woodbury 2018: 284) | | ‘knee’ (Charney 1993: 48) |

As shown in (1), Onondaga has a “noun prefix” and a “noun suffix,” but only the latter is limited to marking nominal status (Woodbury 2018: 294). The item of interest in (2) is an instance of what is called the “absolutive” suffix in Uto-Aztecan. Langacker (1977: 77-78) states that these items are often semantically empty (as in Comanche), lexically specified, and primarily used in citation forms (i.e., omitted in many morphosyntactic contexts). Noun affixes that (fail to) appear under very similar circumstances are also described for, inter alia, Tacanan, Mande, Otomanguean, and Bantu (cf. van de Velde 2019: 247-255 for the latter).

In Greenberg’s (1978) model of noun/gender markers, such noun affixes fall into the final category, Stage III. This class consists of elements that were originally definiteness markers (Stage I) but subsequently develop into pure noun markers via an intermediate stage at which they mark definiteness and (specific) indefiniteness (Stage II). Based on case studies of noun affixes from the above-mentioned genera, I will refine Greenberg’s (1978) typology in several respects. First, I will posit that noun affixes may also derive directly from gender markers since some noun affixes show fading links to certain semantic classes as well as a paradigmatic organization, which is not plausibly inherited from definiteness markers. This calls into question Greenberg’s (1978) rigid division between definite articles that become gender markers and those that develop into pure noun affixes. In addition, I will show that late-stage noun affixes may be pressed into service for the creation of a minimal phonological word size, which is a topic that Greenberg (1978) did not consider.

Also unlike Greenberg (1978), I will highlight that Stage III noun affixes have major implications for grammaticalization theory. Specifically, grammaticalization is claimed to be initiated by semantic change (typically semantic loss), with formal change/loss lagging behind or not manifesting itself at all (Heine 2018; Bisang et al. 2020). This leaves open the issue of whether the “head start” that semantic loss has also means that it is completed prior to formal loss. My case studies will illustrate that noun affixes are crucial in providing support for this assumption given that they are among the rare units that have lost their entire original function (definiteness, etc.) but retained at least some of their form. As such, noun affixes shed light on how empty morphs might arise. By extension, it might follow that grammaticalization produces empty morphs relatively commonly but that it creates the opposite phenomenon, zero morphs, less frequently given that the form of zero morphs must have been lost prior to their function. This prediction is indeed compatible with our understanding of zero morphs, which tend to arise via reanalysis rather than via grammaticalization (cf. Bybee 2015: 102-105).

References

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