

When a polysemous word grammaticalizes, does it stay polysemous? Evidence from Vietnamese path verbs.

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Keywords: language change and grammaticalization; metaphor and metonymy; motion and space

Semantic extensions usually happen one at a time. For example, in Middle English, *dog* ‘domesticated canine’ metaphorically extended to indicate ‘worthless person’. Around 1900 the ‘canine’ sense extended image-metaphorically to mean ‘sausage’. When the ‘canine’ sense led to ‘sausage’, the ‘worthless person’ sense didn’t extend along with it (perhaps to denote some kind of human-shaped sausage). Previous extensions were unaffected by the new one.

Word meanings also extend via grammaticalization, which can simultaneously change a word’s grammatical category and its meaning. But does this kind of semantic change affect one word sense, like other semantic change, or can it affect multiple senses at once?

Evidence from Vietnamese path verbs suggests that several related senses can undergo grammaticalization together. Ten Vietnamese path verbs have grammaticalized into prepositions, which are now syntactically and phonologically distinct from their verbal counterparts (first author, 2018). Each of these path verbs has several senses that have carried over into their new prepositional uses.

For example, the path verb *ra* ‘go out/to’ has five distinct senses that were preserved by the preposition *ra* ‘out/to’: indicating motion to an outside area, a wider area, a distant goal location, a position to the front or the back of a region, or a goal location to the North. An example of the ‘distant goal’ sense of *ra* is in (1).

- (1) Cách nào *ra* đảo nhanh nhất?
way what V. go out far island fast most
‘What is the fastest way to get out to the island?’

When *ra* ‘go out/to’ grammaticalized into prepositional *ra* ‘out/to’, these five senses were maintained by the preposition. Example (2) shows the ‘distant goal’ sense of prepositional *ra*.

- (2) Đưa điện vượt biển *ra* đảo xa
bring electricity cross sea PREP.to island far
‘Bring electricity across the sea all the way to the island’

All the grammaticalized path verb senses previously occurred in contexts where they could be interpreted as either a preposition or a verb, as shown for *vào* ‘to enter’/‘into’ in (3).

- (3) Tôi rơi vào một cái lỗ
I fall enter one CL hole
‘I fall into a hole’ (Pace 2009: 56)

Since all the senses of the path verbs occurred in ambiguous contexts as in (3), in theory any of these senses could have undergone grammaticalization independently. But why, in this case, would all of the senses have grammaticalized at the same time? Surely the grammaticalization of one sense facilitated that of the others. Vietnamese path verbs suggest that when one sense of a word grammaticalizes, other senses may be dragged along into the new grammatical category – resulting, in Vietnamese, in verbal and prepositional polysemy networks that are almost identical.

References

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