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Grammaticalization and language evolution: Focusing the debate

Antonio Benítez-Burraco*

Department of Philology, University of Huelva, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Reconstructions of the languages spoken by first modern humans based on grammaticalization theory rely on the assumption that the involved cognitive capacities and the motivations for grammaticalizing a language were the same in the past as today. Nonetheless, subtle changes in the brain and in behaviour have occurred during recent human history that might have affected early grammaticalization processes. Comparative studies in the domains of animal cognition, paleogenomics, and cognitive disease can help discern the consequences of these changes and ultimately, refine our view of the dynamics followed by language change in the remote history of our species and of the nature of early prehistoric languages.

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1. Introduction

As noted by many scholars, the evolution of language posits a formidable challenge to our current understanding of language, and particularly, to the methodologies we have used in the past for analysing language facts and language change. Because the available evidence is scarce and indirect, and because it derives from different fields of research, from genetics to archaeology to zoology, it is obliged to make inferences of all sorts to gain some knowledge about how language evolved in the species and how languages changed in our remote past. Not surprisingly, these inferences have been subject to criticism (Botha, 2001; see Botha, 2016 for a detailed discussion).

Grammaticalization theory deals with language change, specifically, with the way in which linguistic items change in use and start to convey grammatical meanings or reinforce their grammatical roles. Usually, it is concerned with the origins and the evolution of specific linguistic constructions found in modern languages (Narrog and Heine, 2011:1–18). Nonetheless, it has been argued that it might help as well push linguistic reconstruction back to the past and formulate hypotheses about language (and languages) in prehistory that are testable, at least in present-day specific contexts (see Heine and Kuteva, 2002, 2007; Smith, 2011, among many others).

Because grammaticalization theory builds on attested language facts and validated linguistic methodologies, it is expected to not have the shortcomings of multidisciplinary approaches to language evolution. However, as reasoned by Heine and Kuteva (2007: 28), the testability of their hypotheses about early languages relies on the assumption that "with regard to language change, human behaviour was essentially the same at the stage when early language arose as it can be observed to

* Departamento de Filología, Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Huelva, Avda. de las Fuerzas Armadas s/n, 21071 Huelva, Spain.
E-mail address: antonio.benitez@dfesp.uhu.es.

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be today". Importantly, we need to assume that the same cognitive abilities involved in the grammaticalization of present-day languages were involved in the grammaticalization of early languages. Putting it differently, the assumption is that human cognition has remained substantially the same from the times in which our species emerged.

In this paper our main criticism is not against grammaticalization theory per se, which we find a useful tool for reconstructing some of the changes occurred in the structure of the grammars of languages. It is not either against the non-uniformitarian view of languages. The late twentieth century consensus has been that all languages are roughly equal in terms of overall complexity (Fromkin and Rodman, 1983; Dixon, 1997). Even if subparts of their grammars differ in complexity, their overall complexity is kept in balance as a result of a series of 'trade-offs', or perhaps more essentially, because of the biological nature of the faculty of language that enables to acquire them, which is more or less the same in all human beings (Moro, 2008). Nonetheless, increasing evidence suggests that the degree of language complexity might differ cross-linguistically, mostly in response to external factors, such as the intensity of the contacts with other languages, how isolated their speakers are, how many speakers the language has, the tightness of the social networks they are engaged in, or the number of adult learners of the language (Bolender, 2007; McWhorter, 2007; Wray and Grace, 2007; Lupyan and Dale, 2010; Trudgill, 2011). Specifically, grammaticalization has been hypothesised to augment the complexity of languages, because it can increase the number of categories, or the number of irregularities (Givón, 1975). Interestingly, language complexity might be influenced by cognitive patterns, if processing preferences bias language learning and use, and ultimately, what becomes grammaticalized (Bornkessel-Schlesewsky and Schlesewsky, 2009). Following Newmeyer (2003:75) we too "have no reason to believe, and every reason to doubt, that the functionally-motivated aspects of grammar have remained constant over time". Accordingly, we do not rule out the possibility that prehistoric languages differed qualitatively from present-day languages and that grammaticalization played an important role in increasing the complexity of modern languages.

Our main criticism will be, instead, against the purportedly uniform nature of modern human cognition over time. Hence, we will concern with the putative effects of subtle changes in human brain and cognition on grammaticalization processes. In truth, uniformitarism can be found in other areas that are also important for the evolution of languages. As noted by Smith (2011: 143), "non-nativists [accounts of language evolution] are also committed to uniformitarianism, but in the sense of uniformity of process: the mechanisms of cultural evolution which yielded linguistic change in early language are the same as those yielding linguistic change in modern language, and investigations of these mechanisms can provide insights into prehistorical qualitative linguistic change; it is in this respect that the study of grammaticalization is most relevant for evolutionary linguists". Historically, uniformitarianism has been claimed to exclude catastrophism, but modern evolutionary theory tends to view biological change as resulting from smooth changes punctuated by periods of innovation (Gould, 2002). Recent studies suggest as well that the processes underlying evolution, including the types of variation, may be not invariant through time (Erwin, 2011).

Regarding the scope and the arguments presented in the paper, we wish to add several notes of caution.

First, we are not claiming that grammaticalization can account for all aspects of language evolution in the human clade. On the contrary, some sort of change in the hominin brain and some effect of this change on hominin cognition and linguistic abilities are acknowledged even by the most ardent defenders of grammaticalization theory. These changes are expected to account for our species-specific ability to acquire and use languages, that is, our language-readiness (see Boeckx and Benítez-Burraco, 2014a, 2014b for a hypothesis).

Second, and related to this, our focus is put on the last chapter of a long story, that is, the evolution of modern languages as acquired and used by a brain that was already language-ready. Obviously, the history of language is much longer and many prerequisites for language can be found in other animals (de Waal and Ferrari, 2010), and of course, in extinct hominins (Mithen, 1996, 2006, d'Errico et al., 2003). By this reason, we are not considering comparative evidence of inter-specific differences in cognitive abilities that can be important for grammaticalization (but see Heine and Kuteva, 2007 for discussion). Likewise, we are not concerned either about the most recent page of this last chapter, when human beings split into several groups and occupied the whole Earth (and interbred in some areas with different extinct hominin species). The reason is that all these human beings were already language-ready and exhibited modern behaviours. We do not expect significant differences, neither linguistic nor cognitive, between them and present-day human beings. Accordingly, we will be concerned about what happened between the split from Neanderthals and Denisovans (roughly 200.000 years ago) and the Out-of-Africa event (roughly 100.000 years ago) (López et al., 2016; Pagani et al., 2016). As hypothesised by Tattersall (2009), during this period, our species-specific cognitive abilities might have laid unexploited, plausibly until modern language emerged.

Third, although our focus will be put on the genes and the brain, we are not conflating genes, brain, cognition, and language. These aspects need to be differentiated, regarding grammaticalization, and more generally, language evolution. Accordingly, we do not expect that changes in specific genes, like the sort we will highlight in the paper, account for changes in specific aspects of grammaticalization. Genes do not work like that. This effect, if any, will be always indirect, via the impact of gene mutations on broad cognitive abilities, otherwise not specifically linguistic, but with a clear role in acquiring, using, and grammaticalizing a language. Related to this, because not every aspect of thought depends on language (Carruthers, 2002), we are not adopting a reductionist approach to this problem (cognition is necessarily linguistic), but a cognitivist approach (language is grounded in cognition).

Finally, we are not conflating language evolution and biological evolution either. On the contrary, cultural evolution is expected to have played a major role in the emergence of modern languages, accounting for key design features of human

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