

Is cliticization an intermediate stage between free lexeme and affix status?

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Typical textbook accounts of grammaticalization claim that cliticization is an intermediate stage between free lexeme and affix status (e.g. Hopper & Traugott 2003: 7; Narrog & Heine 2021: 279). For example, free personal pronouns are said to become clitic pronouns first before they turn into person-number affixes on verbs. The process of cliticization and affixation is sometimes called “coalescence” (e.g. Haspelmath 2011), suggesting that it is gradual. In this presentation, I will challenge the claim of intermediate clitic status primarily on conceptual grounds, and also on the basis of examples from a wide range of languages.

I will begin by pointing out the conceptual problem of positing a continuous scale (or “cline”) from lexicality to affixhood (or even from discourse through syntax and morphology to zero, as in Givón 1979) without at the same time providing a clear way of measuring an item’s position on the scale. The scalar view may have intuitive appeal for some linguists, but in its current form, it cannot be subject to any sort of rigorous quantitative testing.

Free forms are typically distinguished from bound forms (clitics or affixes) by the criterion of independent occurrence (e.g. Zwicky & Pullum 1983: 502), and it is clear that when a free form (e.g. a noun or a verb or a demonstrative) grammaticalizes, it usually becomes a bound form. But does it generally become a clitic before it becomes an affix?

Spencer & Luís (2012) provide a comprehensive discussion of phenomena that have been treated under the “clitic” heading, but they do not end up with a coherent picture of the nature of clitics. The term “clitic” has been said to be an “umbrella term” (Zwicky 1994: xiii), so perhaps only some types of forms treated under this heading should occur on the grammaticalization cline. However, the most typical clitics do not seem to become affixes, and the most typical affixes do not seem to derive from elements usually called clitics.

The most typical clitics are promiscuous elements (i.e. elements that can occur on phrases of different types) and occur in an unexpected position (e.g. 2nd clause position). Such “Wackernagel clitics” (as found in Pashto or Tagalog) are unlikely to become affixes, as affixation requires a stable host. Other common promiscuous clitics are coordinators (e.g. Latin *=que*) or discourse particles, and again these do not seem to become affixes.

The most typical affixes are case, number and gender affixes on nouns, and tense-aspect and person affixes on verbs. Most of these do not derive from elements that are usually called clitics. Case affixes are generally thought to derive from adpositions (e.g. König 2011), and tense-aspect affixes from auxiliary verbs (e.g. Bybee & Dahl 1989). The grammaticalization origin of number and gender affixes is often unclear, though articles seem to play an important role; and articles are not usually regarded as clitics either. It is only in the case of person affixes on verbs that an origin in promiscuous pronominal clitics seems reasonable; especially the Romance object-indexing affixes (e.g. Monachesi 1999) do go back to earlier “promiscuous” forms, though even here, it is not entirely clear whether they were clitics before they became verb-attached.

The “clitic” label is often used also for elements that are not as integrated with their host root as other affixes (e.g. Finnish possessive person suffixes, Toivonen 2000), so perhaps the old idea of an intermediate clitic status in grammaticalization should be replaced by a special role of a new category type such as “loose affix”. However, even with such a weakening of the original claim, it is not clear that “tight affixes” generally derive from “loose affixes” (for example, number affixes and aspect affixes have less clear grammaticalization origins than definiteness or person affixes, and the latter tend to be less tight). There is thus a lot of work that needs to be done before the proposal of a “scale of grammaticalization” can be tested and supported in a rigorous way.

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