Fundamental questions regarding linguistic cycles

Elly van Gelderen

Arizona State University

Starting in the 19ᵗʰ century, linguists formulated linguistic change as occurring in a cycle or spiral. Such a cycle describes a sequence of linguistic changes in which a word grammaticalizes and is replaced by another. In the words of von der Gabelentz (1901), "affixes grind themselves down, disappear without a trace; their functions or similar ones, however, require new expression". A well-known example of a cycle is the Negative Cycle where a negative word may `grind itself down' to be replaced by a new one. For emphasis, a new negative may also first be added to an already negative construction after which the earlier negative disappears. As is well-known, English and French had an earlier negative *ne* replaced by *not* and *pas*, respectively.

After a gap of research on cycles, the last two decades have seen a lot of renewed interest, e.g. Bacskai-Atkari (2014), Bácskai-Atkári & Dekány (2014), Bahtchevanova and van Gelderen (2016), Bouzouita et al (2020), Egedi (2014), van Gelderen (2011), Haspelmath (2018), Hegedüs (2014), Jäger (2012), Kiparsky & Condoravdi (2006), Larrivée & Ingham (2011), Mithun (2013), Vossen & van der Auwera (2014), and Willis et al (2013; 2021).

In this talk, I briefly provide an overview of some of this recent work, e.g. which cycles have been discussed and which frameworks have been used. I then summarize the basic questions that I think should be kept in mind: (a) where does the cycle start (grammaticalization or renewal), (b) are there macro cycles, such as the analytic to synthetic to analytic cycle, or just micro cycles, such as the negative and definiteness cycles, (c) is there a role for language contact, (d) what are the steps in a cycle, and (e) do cycles interact with each other?