From grammar to discourse: Chitimacha participles in discourse and diachrony

Abstract

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In a discourse-based theory of grammaticalization, often called the "invisible hand" theory (Keller 1985; Waltereit 2011), grammar changes because speakers, aiming at greater expressivity, use the constructions of their language in slightly non-conventional ways to accomplish certain strategic communicative goals more effectively. As more speakers adopt the new use, its frequency increases until it becomes routinized as the new convention. This paper aims to illustrate and thereby provide support for this discourse-based theory of grammaticalization by detailing the history of the participles in Chitimacha, an isolate of the U.S. Southeast spoken in Louisiana.

Chitimacha participles are particularly interesting because of their highly polyfunctional nature, covering all types of subordination except reported speech, complement clauses, and certain kinds of temporal clauses. All other types of subordinate clauses are participial constructions using either the present/general participle *-k* or the past participle *-tu:t*. The *-k* participle also plays an important role in discourse, providing a means of participant tracking of same and different subjects, and of structuring the discourse into macro-units or distinct narrative events. These diverse uses of participles are not just a random smattering of functions, however, but rather connected in a principled way. Each function of *-k* can be shown to be the result of a stepwise semantic extension from other functions of *-k*. The original participial function of *-k* can itself be traced back through several more stages of grammaticalization, to a directional adverbial enclitic $=k$, forming a grammaticalization chain like the (abbreviated) one below.

LOCATIVE ADVERBIAL → TEMPORAL SUBORDINATOR → PARTICIPLE → DISCOURSE MARKER

Luckily, each of these functions has continued to operate synchronically in Chitimacha even while *-k* expanded into new uses, providing a rich insight into the history of this affix. What the synchronic data show is that, for each adjacent pair of functions, bridging contexts can be found where the function of *-k* was ambiguous between one or the other stage in the grammaticalization chain. It is precisely these ambiguous contexts that allowed for the gradual semantic extension of the functions of *-k*. The most recent function of *-k* – as a means of signaling discourse cohesion by extending dependency beyond the sentence (cf. Mithun 2008) – provides a particularly salient illustration of how minor, discourse-motivated, slightly non-conventional uses of the morpheme accrete until a drastically new function has emerged.

The fact that the history of the Chitimacha participle -k consists of a series of stepwise semantic extensions lends support to a theory of grammaticalization in which grammar arises from the routinization of discourse, and novel *uses* of grammar in discourse by speakers is therefore the primary driver of morphosyntactic change.

References

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