

Hieber, Daniel W. forthcoming. Category genesis in Chitimacha: A constructional approach. To appear in Kristel Van Goethem, Muriel Norde, Evie Coussé, & Gudrun Vanderbauwhede (eds.), *Categorization and category change from a constructional perspective* (Constructional Approaches to Language). John Benjamins.

A constructional approach to category genesis in Chitimacha

Abstract

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Category genesis is a potential problem for grammaticalization-based theories of diachronic change where analogization plays a key role. When diachronic changes result in the creation of an entirely new word class, there are no pre-existing words on which the analogy could have been based. How then does the category arise? Construction-based theories of diachronic change offer a solution in that they recognize the existence of schematicity, or “abstractions across sets of constructions which are (unconsciously) perceived by language-users to be closely related to each other in the constructional network.” (Traugott & Trousdale 2013:14). Using data from the under-described Chitimacha language (an isolate of the southeastern U.S.), this paper argues that a series of micro-level constructional changes (i.e. changes which affect the internal features of a construction without creating a new one; Traugott & Trousdale 2013), combined with an increase in schematicity across otherwise unrelated constructions, can lead to the subsequent creation of a new construction or form-meaning pairing in the language.

Chitimacha has a small class of preverbs whose members followed different diachronic trajectories and have origins in different word classes, and yet were all reanalyzed as members of the same, new category of preverbs. Since this was a new class of words, its emergence could not have been based on analogy to already-existing preverbs, at least not for its first members. Instead, the genesis of this category likely arose from analogy between similar constructions that all shared a potential ambiguity in interpretation. This sort of light paradigmaticity among unrelated forms (i.e. schematicity) allowed for a parallel and mutually-reinforcing process of constructionalization, giving rise to the category of preverb. These disparate words underwent neoanalysis (less accurately “reanalysis”; Traugott & Trousdale 2013) to belong to the same, new word class on the basis of their common constructional properties. This shows that the process of category genesis is not different in kind from the process of category change, in that both originate in analogization between different constructions.

References

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs & Graeme Trousdale. 2013. *Constructionalization and constructional changes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.