Syntactic lexicalisation as a third type of degrammaticalisation

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Grammaticalisation, the historical emergence of new items with grammatical function from earlier lexical items, is generally considered to be a unidirectional process. Much recent interest has, however, focused on degrammaticalisation changes that run counter to this general direction. This paper considers three cases of degrammaticalisation from Bulgarian and Welsh, involving shifts from pronoun to noun, and from preposition to verb. These cases exhibit a common set of properties, such as the central role played by syntactic reanalysis and pragmatic inferencing, that justify viewing them as examples of a new type of degrammaticalisation. Degrammaticalisation via syntactic reanalysis appears to be cross-linguistically rare, because it is constrained by two factors: the requirement that the item in question should have become grammatically or semantically isolated, and the requirement that it should match the phonological and morphological patterns of the lexical category.

1   GRAMMATICALISATION AND DEGRAMMATICALISATION

Central to the standard account of grammaticalisation is the idea that it is a unidirectional process. Lexical items may over time acquire a grammatical function, and items with a less grammatical function may acquire a more grammatical function, but not the reverse. However, much recent research has been concerned with challenging this orthodoxy, both by claiming the existence of extensive counterexamples to unidirectionality (Janda 2001), and by claiming that grammaticalisation itself is not a unified or explanatory process, but rather a frequent constellation of independent processes (Campbell 2001, Newmeyer 2001). This paper considers the existing typology of degrammaticalisations. It begins by asking what a convincing example of degrammaticalisation would look like, examining two putative types of degrammaticalisation widely discussed in the literature, and concluding that one, morphological lexicalisation, is of little interest to historical linguists. Rather the interesting cases of degrammaticalisation all involve reanalysis of some sort or another. To existing cases where former clitics or bound morphemes acquire greater positional freedom, this paper adds a third type, which I label syntactic lexicalisation.

1.1   Defining unidirectionality

What exactly does it mean to say that grammaticalisation is unidirectional? Under the strictest definition, grammaticalisation is of course unidirectional, rather in the way that Neogrammarian sound change is by definition regular. A change from lexical to grammatical is grammaticalisation, and a change from grammatical to lexical is not, so grammaticalisation always proceeds in the direction lexical to grammatical. This has been noted by a number of authors, for instance, Campbell (2001: 124–7). Clearly then the only falsifiable claim is not that grammaticalisation itself is unidirectional, but rather that degrammaticalisations, changes as a result of which items with a formerly exclusively grammatical function acquire a lexical function, do not exist.

Even this second hypothesis is not as testable as might first appear, because there is relatively little agreement about what conditions a change has to fulfil in order to count as a convincing example of degrammaticalisation. As a consequence, proponents of unidirectionality have tried to exclude most putative examples of degrammaticalisation either