Some reasons why we should pay more attention to the lexicon

Jorge Vega Vilanova
Universität Hamburg

In this talk, I will develop a new approach to language change and variation that tries to unify different well-studied processes in a feature-based framework. Adopting a strict derivational model to grammar, I propose that the lexical items (LIs), understood as bundles of phonological, semantic and syntactic/formal features, contain all information needed for the derivation of any sentence. According to this, I claim that the modification of these features explains most of the observed synchronic and diachronic variation.

Grammaticalization, syntactic change and (re-)paramatrization are usually seen as three independent phenomena. However, finding a common motivation for all of them would improve the explicative adequacy of our theories about variability, optionality and change. Following Baker (2008: 353), "all parameters of variation are attributable to differences in features of particular items (e.g., the functional heads) in the lexicon". This idea, which is known as the Chomsky-Borer Conjecture, accounts for parametric variation by just looking at the properties of the lexicon, not in the syntactic structure itself. In the same vein, diachronic change should be defined as changes in the feature composition of LIs over time. Following these premises, I propose a new definition of grammaticalization according to which the emergence of formal features is a last-resort mechanism to avoid the presence of doubled semantic features. More specifically, and contrary to what van Gelderen (2011) claims, the grammaticalization process does not imply the transformation of semantic material in syntactic material, but rather the replication of the first set of features in narrow syntax, allowing thus the subsequent deletion of the redundant elements. The general grammaticalization path for formal features is shown in (1), where [iF] means 'interpretable formal feature' and [uF] 'uninterpretable formal feature'.

(1)   Doubled semantic features [σ] > Doubled/Simple [σ] + [iF]/[uF] > Simple [σ] + Ø

This grammaticalization cline is applicable to a range of phenomena from the negation cycle, to the emergence of definite articles and verb agreement. The development of verbal morphology from free pronouns is a clear case. If the subject pronoun, which carries semantic φ-features, becomes obligatory and the presence of a topical full DP, with its corresponding doubled φ-features, gets generalized, this pragmatically marked structure can be reinterpreted as formal agreement, i.e., a pair of formal features [iφ] and [uφ] are introduced. Under these circumstances, the pronoun, now devoid of semantic features, can further grammaticalize until it is incorporated in the verbal paradigm as an inflectional affix. At this point, a previously non-null-subject language allows for null subjects. In other words, the grammaticalization of [φ] has led to new parameter values.

This approach has several further advantages. First, some properties of language change such as economy, unidirectionality, cyclicity… can be directly derived from the concept of feature-driven change. Furthermore, this view of grammaticalization strengthens the assumption of a

rigorous modularization of grammar with independent modules but at the same time motivates tight connections among them, although not in the way proposed by the Interface Hypothesis (e.g., Sorace 2006) – pragmatics/information structure is systematically related to syntax and syntactic change, the interrelation of syntactic change and morphological change is questioned. Last, this approach seems very promising for considerations about parsability, learnability and computational efficiency of language processing, besides giving a natural explanation for variability and optionality.

REFERENCES:

Baker, Mark. 2008. *The Syntax of Agreement and Concord*. Cambridge: CUP.

Van Gelderen, Elly. 2011. *The Linguistic Cycle*. Oxford: OUP.

Sorace, Antonella. 2006. Gradedness and optionality in mature and developing grammars. In *Gradience in Grammar*, Gisbert Fanselow, Caroline Féry, Matthias Schlesewsky & Ralf Vogel (eds), 106–123. Oxford: OUP.