

Grammaticalization and Typology in North America

Marianne Mithun

An intriguing issue highlighted in Narrog (to appear) is the relationship between grammaticalization and typology: the extent to which each shapes the other. Evidence of effects in both directions can be seen in languages indigenous to North America. Many show elaborate morphological structures, clearly the result of grammaticalization, but the nature of the elaboration differs across linguistic areas.

Grammaticalization can shape typology in a fundamental way. We know that a major factor driving grammaticalization is frequency. Frequency of expression of a distinction is something that even highly competent bilinguals easily transfer from one language to another: speakers accustomed to specifying location or direction in detail in one, for example, may tend to provide similar detail when speaking the other. The results can be seen in a linguistic area centered in Northern California, characterized by longstanding intense contact. Many of the languages of the area, some never considered to be related genetically even in the most ambitious schemes, show parallel verb structures, including elaborate inventories of directional suffixes. Their meanings vary from general ('hither') to specific ('on top of a full load', 'down over the edge'). At the center of the area the suffixes are old: small and general in meaning and reconstructible to the proto-languages. At the outer edges, similar distinctions are conveyed in verb-verb compounds whose second member is a verb of motion or position. The propensity to specify location and direction is still apparent in connected speech. Furthermore, in most of the languages, older suffixes are being renewed with adverbial locatives for added specificity.

Typology can affect grammaticalization as well. Another strong linguistic area, the Southeast, is home to all Muskogean languages, some Siouan languages, and isolates Natchez, Tunica, Chitimacha, and Atakapa. The languages are typologically quite similar, all basic SOV, with auxiliary constructions and postpositions. Speakers of all also show a propensity for specifying the posture/position of participants ('standing/vertical', 'lying/horizontal', 'sitting', 'in motion'). The distinctions were apparently brought into the area by Siouan speakers: they can be reconstructed to auxiliary constructions in Proto-Siouan. Similar distinctions are carried by auxiliaries and in some cases related aspect suffixes in the Southeastern languages, but they are innovations: the modern Muskogean positional auxiliaries are not cognate across the family. The prior existence of auxiliary constructions in these languages apparently provided a ready structure for the increasing expression of position.