

On grammaticalization processes in Ao: Sources, pathways and functional extensions

Alexander Coupe
Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

The Ao language of Nagaland (Tibeto-Burman, Northeast India) is particularly valuable for demonstrating historical processes of grammaticalization because it often maintains the older lexical meanings of morphemes alongside of their newer grammaticalized functions. Good examples of this are found among nouns originally expressing spatial orientations or meanings such as side, face and stomach; these now serve as case-marking clitics while retaining their older lexical meanings as nouns. These new case markers originally developed out of genitival N1-N2 constructions in which the N2 head of the compound lost its status as a lexical noun and cliticized to its host N1 as a dependent element. Such a development is consistent with cross-linguistically attested trajectories for the grammaticalization of relational morphology in head-final languages (e.g. Lehmann 1985, Aristar 1991). Similar grammaticalization processes are attested in the verbal morphology of Ao. A considerable number of suffixes expressing a range of adverbial, aspectual and modal meanings occur in the verb complex immediately following the verb root, a slot in the predicate template that is arguably the most important conduit for the grammaticalization of new verbal morphology. The vast majority of these suffixes can be shown to have related forms that are used to express similar meanings in their functions as main verbs, which is highly suggestive of a verbal origin for all the members of this category. Verbal compounding offers the most likely diachronic pathway for the grammaticalization of verbal suffixes from the erstwhile heads of these constructions, and is again consistent with the head-final syntactic organization of the Ao language. Attested grammaticalization processes applying to nominal and verbal morphology will be exemplified with a selection of examples sourced from narrative texts.

References

- Aristar, Anthony. 1991. On Diachronic Sources and Synchronic Pattern: An Investigation into the Origin of Linguistic Universals. *Language* 67(1): 133.
- Lehmann, Christian. 1985. Grammaticalization: Synchronic variation and diachronic change. *Lingua e Stile* 20: 303-18.