

Verb compounding and antigrammaticalization in Hup (Nadahup, Brazil)

‘Grammaticalization’ refers to a set of historical changes that tend to pattern together and to proceed in a unidirectional fashion. While exceptions to unidirectionality do exist, the documented cases are rare and idiosyncratic, often resulting from structural collapse (e.g. loss of inflectional paradigms; cf. Haspelmath 2004, Heine 2003:582, Lehmann 2005:20, etc.). Language-internally or cross-linguistically productive processes of ‘antigrammaticalization’ (cf. Haspelmath 2004) or ‘degrammaticalization’ have so far not been accounted for.

Yet in Hup, an endangered language of the northwest Brazilian Amazon, we find what appears to be a language-internally unified, productive process of ‘deaffixation’ (by which a morpheme goes from more to less bound) – a type of counterdirectional change. This is illustrated in the following examples, in which the nonvisual evidential suffix in (1) is historically the source of the enclitic in (2):

(1) *ʔám=báb’=d’əh b’ɣyɨ? tɔhɔ-tuk-hɔ̃-h*
2sg=sibling=pl only finish-want-nonvis-decl
‘Your relatives will soon all die, I feel.’

(2) *náciya pæ̃-æy=hɔ̃*
boat go.upriver-dynm=nonvis
‘The boat is going upriver (I can hear it).’

This paper addresses the historical changes that led to this unusual state of affairs. First, compounded verb roots developed grammatical functions, resulting in a class of bound suffixes (a cross-linguistically typical occurrence in serializing languages); for example, the nonvisual evidential suffix in (1) is shown to be derived historically from the compounded verb ‘make noise’. Then, a subset of these suffixes detached themselves from the verb core and developed the ability to appear as enclitics or particles, enabled by language-internal morphosyntactic processes and a widening of their syntactic/semantic scope.

The Hup case illustrates that principled, productive exceptions to unidirectionality *do* in fact exist, at least within this one language. Moreover, deaffixation is made possible in Hup by verb compounding, which provides a framework for new morphology to arise through grammaticalization, but in which morphemes are fully bound before grammaticalization can even begin, and can only become *less* bound as their scope widens from the verb to the entire predicate. Accordingly, verb-compounding languages might be one place to look for *cross-linguistically* unified processes of antigrammaticalization.