Grammaticalization in East and mainland Southeast Asian languages

Walter Bisang (University of Mainz)

Processes of grammaticalization are assumed to have the same properties across the world’s languages. This assumption will be critically analyzed from the perspective of East and mainland Southeast Asian languages, consisting of Sinitic, Tai-Kadai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Chamic (Austronesian). As will be shown, grammatical markers differ from standard assumptions on products of grammaticalization in the following way (Bisang 2011, 2015):

• Limited co-evolution of meaning and form: There is some cross-linguistic variation in the extent to which more abstract grammatical meaning is paralleled in linguistic form. This will be checked for Lehmann’s (1995) six parameters for measuring the autonomy of the linguistic sign.

• Pragmatic inference is more relevant even in markers that express abstract grammatical concepts. This manifests itself in at least two ways: (i) The information provided by these markers is not obligatory (e.g. radical pro-drop, non-obligatory expression of tense-aspect, number, (in)definiteness, etc.). (ii) The meaning of one and the same marker stands for more than one grammatical category. In both cases, the concrete meaning of the marker needs to be pragmatically inferred from context.

• There are paths of grammaticalization which seem to be area specific (e.g. ‘come to have’-verbs; Enfield 2003).

Observations like these support the conclusion that there is a certain cross-linguistic variation in processes of grammaticalization. From the perspective of complexity, many products of grammaticalization in EMSEA languages are characterized by a particularly high degree of hidden complexity which seems to be a characteristic of this area (Bisang 2009, forth).

References:


