A Natural History of Sign Language Negation

Workshop 9: Sign Linguistics

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I. Background. Studies on sign language (SL) grammaticalization (Sexton 1999; Pfau/Steinbach 2011) have demonstrated that most of the diachronic changes from lexical to functional element parallel those previously described for spoken languages (Heine/Kuteva 2002). Additionally, some modality-specific patterns have been identified, in particular pathways from gestural to functional elements (Wilcox 2007).

In this presentation, we take a generative perspective on the grammaticalization of negation, building on well-established cross-linguistic patterns and adopting ideas by Roberts/Roussou (2003), who suggest that grammaticalization is “reanalysis ‘upwards’ along the functional structure” (p.71). We argue that the genesis of negation in SLs follows Jespersen’s Cycle (JC, Jespersen 1917:4) according to which “[t]he original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in turn may be felt as the negative proper and […] be subject to the same development as the original word.” We show, however, that in SLs, JC has an interesting additional modality-specific flavor, as it involves the grammaticalization of a non-manual gesture resulting in a simultaneous realization of two negative elements.

II. From gesture to grammar. Headshakes commonly accompany spoken utterances as co-speech gestures signaling negation, uncertainty, or intensification (Kendon 2002). While the distribution of gestural headshakes appears unconstrained, it has been shown that in SLs (and even in homesign; Franklin et al. 2011), the occurrence of negative headshakes is constrained by syntactic structure and subject to language-specific constraints. It has therefore been argued that the headshake is a grammaticalized gesture (Pfau/Steinbach 2011). The question remains, however, how it entered the grammar.

We suggest the following scenario: Given that manual gestures commonly lexicalize in SLs (Wilcox 2007), we assume that first, a manual negative gesture is lexicalized as a negative adverbial $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$; as such, it adjoins to VP (1a). Second, this adverbial is accompanied sufficiently frequently by the gestural headshake, such that the headshake is reanalyzed as a lexical non-manual component of $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$ (1b) Thus, in a sense, the non-manual enters the grammatical system by being piggybacked by $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$. At this point, we reach a manual dominant system, i.e. a system in which (i) $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$ is obligatory and (ii) the non-manual only accompanies $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$ (Zeshan 2004). Third, $\text{NEG}_\text{adv}$ is reanalyzed as a negative particle $\text{NEG}$ that is merged in SpecNegP (1c), as has been suggested for LIS (2). Having entered the functional domain, the non-manual may dissociate from $\text{NEG}$ and turn into a negative affix merged in Neg° (1d) (Pfau/Quer 2007). As a suprasegmental affix, the headshake is capable of spreading over syntactically defined domains, e.g. VP in example (3a). In a final step, $\text{NEG}$ becomes optional (3b), yielding a non-manual dominant system, and eventually disappears (1e).
III. Jespersen’s Cycle. SLs, like some spoken languages, use two different negative expressions. However, unlike spoken languages, both negative expressions are grammaticalized gestures and can combine simultaneously. The scenario described above predicts that in SLs, JC starts with a lexicalized manual gesture. Only in a second step, the non-manual gesture enters the grammatical system. Since SLs prefer simultaneous morphology and only rarely develop manual affixes (Aronoff et al. 2005), it is the non-manual that survives JC while NEG becomes optional. Hence, SLs follow JC in a modality-specific way.

Examples

(1) a. \[ \text{NegP} \emptyset \left[ \text{VP NEG}_{\text{adv}} \left[ \text{vp} \right] \right] \rightarrow \text{lexicalized manual gesture adjoined to VP} \]
   b. \[ \text{NegP} \emptyset \left[ \text{VP NEG}_{\text{adv}} \left[ \text{vp} \right] \right] \rightarrow \text{negative adverbial accompanied by headshake} \]
   \[ \rightarrow \text{manual dominant SL (I)} \]
   c. \[ \text{NegP NEG} \left[ \text{Neg}^* \emptyset \left[ \text{vp} \right] \right] \rightarrow \text{NEG (plus headshake) merged in SpecNegP} \]
   \[ \rightarrow \text{manual dominant SL (II); e.g. LIS (2)} \]
   d. \[ \text{NegP (NEG)} \left[ \text{Neg}^* V^{+hs_{aff}} \right] \left[ \text{VP tV} \right] \rightarrow \text{headshake reanalyzed as affix in Neg}^* \]
   \[ \rightarrow \text{non-manual dominant SL (I); e.g. DGS (3)} \]
   e. \[ \text{NegP} \emptyset \left[ \text{Neg}^* V^{+hs_{aff}} \left[ \text{vp} \right] \right] \rightarrow \text{manual negator disappears} \]
   \[ \rightarrow \text{non-manual dominant SL (II); e.g. NGT} \]

(2) Italian Sign Language (LIS, Geraci 2005)

\[ \text{hs} \]
\[ \text{PAOLO CONTRACT SIGN NON} \]
‘Paolo didn’t sign the contract.’

(3) German Sign Language (DGS, Pfau/Quer 2007)

\[ \text{hs} \]
\[ \text{a. MOTHER BOOK BUY NOT} \]
‘Mother doesn’t buy a book.’
\[ \text{hs} \]
\[ \text{b. MOTHER BOOK BUY} \]
‘Mother doesn’t buy a book.’

References.
the syntax of negation and modals in German Sign Language (DGS) and Catalan Sign Language (LSC).