

Towards diachronic word classes universals

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In this paper we examine the correlation of variables that influence the process of grammaticalization or lexicalization of a word class. Word classes change when all members change in a coordinated way. From the study of 24 word classes originating from representative languages in the world, we derive three universal tendencies. The strongest of these tendencies correlates the word class size and the new acquired meanings: The greater the size of the target word class, the lower the number of new acquired meanings.

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1. Terminology and definition

A *word class* is a set of morphemes, clitics, independent words or multi-word expressions that share the same semantic-pragmatic, morphosyntactic and (sometimes) phonological properties. A word class minimally consists of one element and may be as large as the class of nouns or verbs, thus coinciding with the classical notion of *part of speech*. We are only interested in those word classes with more than one element at the beginning or at the end of the process. Affix classes (the class of items to which an affix is attached) are outside the scope of study except for two cases of lexicalization. First, if the affix fuses with the lexical items,¹ while the original items survive and contrast with the affixed items, then the affixed items form a new word class in our sense (see §2.1 for an example). Second, if the affixed items survive while the non-affixed items discontinue their use, then the affixed items become a distinct word class.

A *word class change*, in terms of grammaticalization or lexicalization, is a process whereby all members of the word class undergo coordinated semantic change (in addition to morphosyntactic and phonological changes). The key word is **coordinated semantic change**. It excludes for example the case of Chinese or English prepositions. The prepositions have undergone significant sound and semantic changes resulting in

1. This process is called “demorphologization” (Joseph and Janda 1988: 198–202).