Grammaticalization and Tai Syntactic Change

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In the past decade *grammaticalization* has become established as a promising direction in linguistic research. The term refers to lexicosyntactic or morphosyntactic processes whereby more content-oriented lexemes, such as nouns or verbs, come to take on grammatical functions. In inflecting languages, content lexemes have been found to evolve into bound morphemes marking categories like tense, aspect, or case relations. For languages like those in the Tai family, other pathways can be seen: nouns and verbs may come to take on the functions of closed-class items such as prepositions, auxiliaries, or conjunctions. A number of shifts classed as grammaticalization have been widely observed across languages. Linguistic change propelled by cognitive processes such as metonymy or metaphor may account for some of this commonality, and such shifts may point to “natural” or cognitively-based universal tendencies.

General linguistic theory and Tai linguistic research in particular would each stand to gain from investigating the nature of grammaticalization in Tai languages.

First, on the general side, some Tai input could be of benefit in testing and refining universal hypotheses or in suggesting new lines of analysis. The effect of sociolinguistic factors in grammaticalization is an especially important area. For general theory, Tai languages are a valuable, but under-utilized, resource. With a spread of synchronic data increasingly accessible, comparative reconstructions of high plausibility can be made for Tai. Further provided is the important potential of cross-checking from a written tradition. A reserve of diachronic/philological resources is available—but still little used in linguistic research. Several Tai varieties have phonologically based writing systems of long standing, and datable documents may reach back as far as 700 years. For pursuing cross-linguistic generalizations in linguistic theory, few non-Indo-European languages have what the Tai family provides.

Secondly, in the other direction, Tai linguistics stands to gain new research perspectives and insights. It seems likely that grammaticalization theory will provide solutions to quandaries raised by earlier approaches, such as whether Central Thai has “prepositions” and, in general, how to delimit the membership of closed syntactic classes. Constraining the elaboration of structurally determined homonyms is a related issue. In the same vein, pseudo-problems may be unmasked. Awareness of new critical factors in the operation of grammaticalization throughout the Tai

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1Some of what follows took shape in The Role of Theory in Language Description, a conference of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, organized by W. A. Foley (Ocho Rios, Jamaica, October 1987), in which Christian Lehmann’s contribution was especially relevant to what is developed here. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, July 1993, where Conference participants provided useful suggestions. Particular gratitude goes to Praneet Kullavanijaya, Wilaiwan Khanittanan, Marybeth Clark, and Robert B. Jones for comments and encouragement and to Ulrike Kölver and Lev Morev for making their work available to me.
languages may dispose of some heavily theory-dependent issues taken as “problems” in other frameworks.

What follows is of necessity programmatic in scope, a survey-overview of key issues. This paper is thus more a raising of questions than an answering of them definitively.

1. GRAMMATICALIZATION: BACKGROUND ISSUES

In this section general features of grammaticalization are reviewed, including a brief summary of historical issues. Some illustrations utilize Tai data and are a prelude to further Tai considerations in later sections.²

1.1 Grammaticalization, Synchronic Derivation, and Polysemy

Grammaticalization as a term was apparently introduced by Meillet as early as 1912 and was used subsequently by Indo-Europeans such as Kuryl’owicz, but hardly by others outside that field. More recently it has been critically restored and reapplied by scholars such as Lehmann, Heine, and Reh. From the 1980s the term and the type of analysis it implies has gained acceptance in English-based linguistics, two notable applications in English syntax being Brinton (1988) and Sweetser (1990). Grammaticalization was the focus of an important international conference in 1988 organized by Givón, a leader in the field. Papers from that conference (Traugott & Heine, 1991) taken together are now a useful resource in the development of a critical approach to grammaticalization. Heine, Claudi, and Hünnemeyer (1991), emphasizing African material, and Hopper and Traugott (1993) also review these current developments.

As these studies indicate, linguistic typology is one factor in recognizing general tendencies of grammaticalization and in determining how principles are realized. Inflectional languages have been widely found to exhibit certain affix-creating

²TRANSCRIPTION NOTE. Since phonetic detail is not generally at issue in this paper and data from several Tai varieties are compared, a uniform straightforward adaptation of the Thai Royal Institute system is used, with vowels as follows:

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\begin{array}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
i & [i] & u' & [u] & u & [u] \\
\hline
e & [ɛ] & ɔ̆ & [ɣ] & o & [ɔ] \\
\hline
æ & [æ] & a & [a] & o' & [ɔ] \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Phonologically long diphthongs are ia [ia] u’a [uɭa] ua [uə]; otherwise length is shown by a colon. Some Tai languages have a centralized offglided vowel [au], e.g., for items cognate to Central Thai bài ‘give’; this is indicated here by -au’, e.g., in *hau’C1 ‘give.’ As the preceding ‘give’ forms indicate, tones are either shown in the Haas system for Central Thai or etymologically in the case of comparisons across Tai languages. Etymological tone class is shown with subscripts using the system of Li (1977); e.g., A2 refers to a Central Thai mid tone, C2 to a high tone, etc., but to other regular tonal values in different Tai varieties. This system has required superficial changes in quoted data. Initial glottal stop is not indicated in this transcription. (In References, a closer version of the Royal Institute system is used except for names where author’s preference is known.)
principles, but relatively isolating/analytical languages, such as those in the Southeast Asian region, will favour instead lexical derivations which imply periods of transitional lexical polysemy and related syntactic alternation.

In the Tai context, one could well ask: is not grammaticalization simply syntactic derivation? Why the need to use new “jargon”—and a rather unwieldy seven syllables at that?

As the terms are generally used now, many cases of synchronic syntactic derivation would indeed be instances of grammaticalization. In particular, cases involving reanalysis from open-class content status (e.g., noun or verb) to—or at least in the direction of—closed-class function-word status (e.g., auxiliary, preposition, conjunction) would be considered grammaticalization, but using the latter term implies some extra interests. To consider an instance of syntactic derivation to be grammaticalization would be at least to open the question of diachronic change. The historical background of the formation might be traced and the pathway compared cross-linguistically.

Another set of interests evoked by the term grammaticalization concerns cognitive motivation: is the shift in some way propelled through a general cognitive process such as semantic extension along the lines of metonymy or metaphor? Is there a widely attested semantic tendency involved? Cross-language comparison and generalization along this line of inquiry would be larger projects.

In more formal logical terms: some, but not all, cases of syntactic derivation should be considered grammaticalization, and some, but not all, cases of grammaticalization should be considered syntactic derivation. The relationship is one of partial overlap.

Given that Thai is especially rich in figurative tropes, including metaphor and metonymy, for the term grammaticalization to be useful it must be restricted to the production of the type of abstract functional linguistic relationships typically associated with closed syntactic classes or inflectional affixes. For example, the extension of a body-part noun like lāng ‘back’ to a preposition-like spatial marker is common throughout languages of the world. This is clearly to be included under grammaticalization and is taken up below. To be excluded however are many other figurative formations, such as metonymic extensions like Thai fay:

‘fire’ >> ‘light’ >> ‘electricity’ ( >> inner emotional ‘spark’).

The contrast can also be brought out through Thai animal terms as applied figuratively to humans. The use of sū’a ‘tiger’ to mean ‘outlaw, robber’ is a simple case of metaphorical extension. By contrast, the use of nū: ‘mouse, rat’ to indicate a person of junior status should be considered at least incipient grammaticalization. The latter form has clearly acquired some pronominal characteristics in Central Thai, although we might not wish to go so far as to claim it has become fully a pronoun. The critical point is that for many speakers nū: functions as a contrasting component in a limited first-person/second-person reference set, with semantic relations tying nū: firmly into the network of other “true” pronouns like ku: or chān. In this way nū: is becoming grammaticalized in a way that sū’a is not.

Also probably to be excluded from grammaticalization are instances of open-class structural polysemy and similar semantic/syntactic derivations like the following:
(a) lexical forms that can serve as noun or verb, such as thây ‘plough’ or tho:(rasâp) ‘(tele)phone’ (where English equivalents and those in many other languages are similarly cross-categorical); ³
(b) nominalizations with compounding heads such as
   (i) khô’:-, (cp. noun khô’:, ‘node, joint; item’), as in khô’:-sô’:p ‘examination’(< sô’:p ‘to examine, take an examination’);
   khô’:-tôk-long ‘agreement’;
   (ii) kham- ‘word’ as in kham-thâ:m ‘question’ (<thâ:m ‘ask’)
   kham-tô’:p ‘answer’;
   (iii) semantically varied nominal compounds in hûa- ‘head’ (see Juntanamalaga, 1992).

Are these to be considered cases of grammaticalization? While the prefixal nominalizing components ka:n- and khwa:m- represent quite advanced cases of grammaticalization, (i)-(iii) above would seem borderline, or better, incipient “pre-grammaticalization.”

At the other end of the spectrum, the Thai bound form nák- seen in nák-bin ‘aviator’ (cp. bin ‘to fly’) and nák-sû’ksâ: ‘student’ (cp. sûksâ: ‘study, learn’) represents what the general literature would probably consider another case of grammaticalization, albeit involving language contact. In this instance, a Khmer form meaning ‘person’ (Old Khmer anak) has been loaned into Thai, ultimately coming to function as a fairly general agent prefix. ⁴ Few modern Thai speakers would be aware of this development and perhaps none would now use nák freely in conversation as an independent noun meaning ‘person.’ So for contemporary Thai speakers, there is no (longer?) synchronic polysemy or an impression of syntactic reanalysis associated with this particular form. It is thus in a state of “post-grammaticalization.”

1.2 The Ideological Background

Before a review of some current approaches to grammaticalization, a note on related ideological issues is in order. One feature of linguistic scholarship of the 19th century and before was an urge to identify certain languages, normally those of

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³Since the process appears to be productive within a restricted semantic field, as shown by new-arrival “fax” functioning both as noun and verb (again, in each language), we are dealing with what Sapir (1921) called a “grammatical process”; but this should be distinguished from “grammaticalization.”

⁴Varararin (1984, p. 167) indicates that the agent-prefix usage can be traced to Old Khmer. In Thai, sparse inscriptive evidence (Ishii, et al., 1989) suggests that nák- was originally borrowed into Thai as a bound prefix in Khmero-Indic loans like nák + prâ:t ‘learned person’ (attested 15th century), nák + bun ‘pious person’ (16th century). We can speculate that this compounding pattern was later extended analogically to nák + (Thai, etc.) noun or verb, as above, where it is still semi-productive; nák-kho’:mphiwthoe: ‘computer expert, hacker.’