

Embodiment and Pragmatic Inferencing in Grammaticalization in Signed Languages

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While a number of studies have appeared on grammaticalization in signed languages (e.g., Janzen 1998, 1999; Janzen and Shaffer 2002; Pfau and Steinbach 2006; Shaffer 2000; Wilcox 2007) and others have looked at the role of iconicity (e.g., Frishberg 1975; Wilcox 2004), none has examined the role of pragmatic inferencing (Traugott and Dasher 2002) in any detail. However, pragmatic inferencing is key to understanding how grammaticalizing constructions take on new meanings and more grammatical-like functions in language. Discourse participants make inferences as constructions are used in novel ways, and when the novel usage begins to occur with some regularity and thus when inferencing in a certain direction increases in frequency, the new grammatical role of the item strengthens or becomes entrenched.

In this talk, we investigate the roles that pragmatic inferencing, embodiment, and iconicity play in grammaticalization in Irish Sign Language (ISL) and American Sign Language (ASL). We see pragmatic inferencing as a critical mechanism for grammaticalization in several areas of discourse, for example, in the grammaticalization of pronouns from gestural points, and as pronouns become able to reference not only entities present in the space surrounding the signer, but also non-present conceptualized entities, pronominal referencing increases in complexity because of elements such as perspective-taking. Second, we look at the area of clause combining, noting that overt coordinators, subordinators, and other connectives are somewhat rare in ISL and ASL. Instead we find numerous instances where clauses are not linked by an overt marker, but instead the relationship between clauses is made through pragmatic inferencing, and how this mechanism has led to eventual entrenchment in the grammar through frequency of use. Embodiment also plays a key role, because how the signer interacts with her environment, and in particular how the signer uses aspects of her articulation space, mirror a conceptualized, embodied expression of language. Finally, we also consider the role that diagrammatic iconicity plays in embodiment and in and embodied view of pragmatic inferencing, and show that it is key cognitive aspect in promoting inferencing in complex clausal constructions.

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