

ICHL 2007 Montréal
Plenary Sessions / Conférences plénières

Grammaticalizing number and definiteness in French based Creoles
Viviane Déprez
Rutgers University

Tradition views grammaticalization as the gradual change of a lexical item into a functional one. In the generative literature, grammaticalization has been modeled as the movement of a lexical head up the functional structure that dominates it (Déprez 2000, Robert and Roussou 2002). This paper argues for a more fractionalized approach to grammaticalization that brings the relevant changes down to the level of the grammatical features within lexical items, with semantic and structural variation following as derived consequences. Concretely, I propose that grammaticalization encodes a change in the *interpretability* of features, where *interpretability* is understood as legibility at the phonetic or semantic interface (Chomsky 2000). From *interpretable*, some feature(s) of a lexical item becomes *un-interpretable*, with the consequence that they must be eliminated under checking during the syntactic derivation. On Chomsky's view, content-full lexical items have largely syntactically inert *interpretable* features. Functional projections, in contrast, contain *un-interpretable* features that act as probes, attracting elements of similar feature content for checking. By changing the interpretability of some of its feature values, a lexical item in effect changes its status from that of an attractable independent argument or 'goal', to that of an attracting functor or 'probe' that drives the syntactic derivation. This approach to grammaticalization is here shown to provide an explanatory account of the surprising ordering variation observed in French based creole noun phrases. The paper further shows that changes in feature interpretability are linked to changes in semantic properties, explicitly coupling the grammaticalization of morphological features to specific semantic distinctions. The paper focuses particularly on the grammaticalization of number and definiteness in French based creole determiners.
