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New Directions in Grammaticalization Research

Edited by

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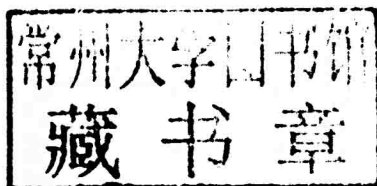
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Volume 166

New Directions in Grammaticalization Research

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Preface

Meillet and grammaticalisation

John E. Joseph

University of Edinburgh

The New Reflections on Grammaticalisation conference was held in 2012, exactly a century after Antoine Meillet (1866–1936) introduced the term *grammaticalisation* in an article entitled “L'évolution des formes grammaticales” (The evolution of grammatical forms). Some reflections on Meillet's own evolution may help contextualise the term historically and give us an insight into what it meant to him.

Meillet was born in his mother's family home in Moulins in central France, and grew up in the still smaller town of Châteaumeillant, about 100 kilometres to the west, where his father was appointed notary. When he was 11 his mother died, and his father moved back to Moulins so that his sons could attend its lycée (now the Lycée Antoine Meillet). In 1884 Antoine went to Paris to further his studies, first at the renowned Lycée Louis-le-Grand, then the following year at the Sorbonne. There he was especially inspired by the courses in Gothic and Old High German given by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), from whose teaching Meillet absorbed the principles of what would later come to be known as structural linguistics, in the wake of the posthumous publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916).

For the rest of his life Meillet credited Saussure with the outlook on language that characterised his own work and that of two generations of linguists for whom Meillet was the *grand maître*, including Joseph Vendryes (1875–1960), Robert Gauthiot (1876–1916), Marcel Cohen (1884–1974), Georges Dumézil (1898–1966), Lucien Tesnière (1893–1954), Émile Benveniste (1902–1976) and André Martinet (1908–1999) (for an overview see Chevalier avec Encrevé 2006). In all of their writings one finds an approach to linguistic problems from the point of view of the whole system, either synchronic or diachronic. The defining characteristic of Meillet's linguistic analyses was to focus on just those elements that appear strange or surprising in the perspective of the language system as a whole, and to delve into them as a key to a deeper understanding of the system and its operation (for more on Meillet see Bergounioux & Lamberterie 2006).

Starting in 1910, Meillet contributed a series of articles to *Scientia*, an Italian journal which he described as being aimed at “a wide but scientifically curious audience”, and not “specifically destined for scholars specializing in linguistics” (Meillet 1921:vii).¹ His 1912 article which introduced *grammaticalisation* was one of these. The idea that, in the history of a particular language or language family, certain bound inflectional morphemes had at an earlier stage been free lexical morphemes was far from new. To take one familiar example, the future endings of Romance verbs coincided too closely with the present tense of *habere* ‘to have’ for it to be a coincidence; and at least since Nebrija’s Spanish grammar of 1492 the idea was in print that Latin ‘synthetic’ futures such as *amabo* ‘I shall love’ had been replaced by new ‘analytic’ futures such as French *aimerai*, originally *aimer -ai* ‘I have to love’ (see E[lliott] 1892). The new insight offered by Meillet was that a range of seemingly diverse changes might be categorised together as being of this nature, and as constituting a single process occurring regularly and gradually across unrelated or distantly related languages.

The 1912 article marks a significant mid-point in Meillet’s evolution as a linguist. The previous decade had seen him appointed to a chair in the Collège de France, succeeding Michel Bréal (1832–1915). In the same period he was establishing his broader intellectual credentials as the principal linguist attached to the Durkheimian school of sociology and its journal *L’année sociologique*. 1903 had been the high water mark of the much publicised debate between Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Gabriel de Tarde (1843–1904) over the place of psychology within sociological research, and over what forms that psychology could and could not take. Durkheim and his associates won by default with Tarde’s death in 1904.

Meillet took pains to stay in line with Durkheim’s methodology, most strikingly in his article “Comment les mots changent de sens” (How words change meaning), in the volume of *L’année sociologique* for 1905/6.² It contains his clearest statements about why language fits the definition of a ‘social fact’ as Durkheim described it. Meillet presents as the driving force in historical change the movement from specialist dialects or argots, such as those of farmers or sailors, to the general language, identifying this as essentially a social change. He gives examples of what he will later call grammaticalisation, such as Latin *homo* giving the French impersonal *on*, but says here that “These cases where the essential agent

1. “un public large mais curieux de science”; “destiné proprement à des savants dont la linguistique est la spécialité”. These and the other translations which follow are mine.

2. Confusingly, the issue’s cover says “Neuvième année, 1904–5”, followed by the publication date 1906; but the internal pages of the issue say “*L’année sociologique*, 1905–6”.

of change is the grammatical form are of a rather rare sort" (Meillet 1905/6:10 [1921:240–241]).³

Meillet never ceased to proclaim the social nature of language, but by 1912 his focus had begun to shift away from sociological method, perhaps because he thought he had laid out all that was needed in that regard. His perception of the rarity of grammaticalisation changed as well. In the 1912 article it has come to occupy centre stage, displacing that movement of forms between social dialects which had been his focus in 1905/6. The 1912 article's two instances of the term *grammaticalisation* occur in its opening section and closing paragraph. Both are in scare quotes, which indicates their novelty, but without any other comment, suggesting that Meillet regarded them as self-explanatory. The sentence containing the first occurrence is reproduced in Figure 1.

nouveau. L'importance en est en effet décisive. Tandis que l'analogie peut renouveler le détail des formes, mais laisse le plus souvent intact le plan d'ensemble du système existant, la « grammaticalisation » de certains mots crée des formes neuves, introduit des catégories qui n'avaient pas d'expression linguistique, transforme l'ensemble du système. Ce type d'innovations

Figure 1. The first occurrence of *grammaticalisation* (Meillet 1912: 387 [1921: 133])⁴

The passage needs, of course, to be read in context, starting with the structure of the article itself. It opens by saying that two processes produce grammatical forms. The first is analogy. Meillet explains how analogy was the only explanation for exceptions to sound laws allowed by the Neogrammarians. Their single-mindedness, he suggests, was responsible for the lack of attention over the previous four decades to the second process, which he identifies as "the passage of autonomous words to the role of grammatical agents", in other words, grammaticalisation.⁵

3. "Ces cas où l'agent essentiel du changement est la forme grammaticale sont d'une espèce assez rare".

4. "Whereas analogy can renovate the detail of forms, but usually leaves the overall plan of the existing system intact, the 'grammaticalisation' of certain words creates new forms, introduces categories that previously had no linguistic expression, transforms the whole of the system".

5. "le passage de mots autonomes au rôle d'agents grammaticaux".

He gives the example of French *suis* ‘am’. It is, he says, autonomous in *je suis celui qui suis* (I am that I am), and still retains a certain autonomy in *je suis chez moi* (I am at home). But it “has almost ceased to be anything other than a grammatical element in *je suis malade* (I am sick), *je suis maudit* (I am accursed), and is only a grammatical element in *je suis parti* (I’ve departed), *je suis allé* (I’ve gone), *je me suis promené* (I’ve taken a walk)” (Meillet 1912: 385 [1921: 131]).

Intriguing are the things Meillet leaves tacit. Is it the first or second *suis* he is pointing to in the Biblical *je suis celui qui suis* (Exodus 3:14), or both? What about the clitic subject pronoun *je*, which from today’s perspective seems like a more clear-cut case of grammaticalisation than *suis*? His choice of words – “still retains”, “ceased to be” – clearly implies that originally ‘autonomous’ elements have over time lost their autonomy and become ‘merely’ grammatical. The concept of grammaticalisation as first used by Meillet thus meant loss of self-governance, becoming dependent on another element.

The dependence is clearly syntactic in the examples such as *je suis parti*, where *suis* has become an auxiliary, but it seems to be partly semantic as well. Some of his later examples will be more plainly semantic, as when he says that *petits* in *les petits enfants* “the little children” has grammaticalised into an ‘accessory word’ (*mot accessoire*), since, after all, all *enfants* are *petits* (1912: 388 [1921: 134]).⁶ Still other examples show the phonological weakening that often happens in parallel with grammaticalisation.

When Meillet argues that grammaticalisation is a more important process than analogy because it “transforms the whole of the system” (Figure 1 above), his concern with the system as a whole shows him thinking in a diachronic rather than a historical way, to invoke a distinction introduced by Saussure (see Joseph 2012: 383, 551–552). Grammaticalisation as Meillet describes it in 1912 has some points in common with what Saussure had taught the year before in some of his final lectures on general linguistics in Geneva. Discussing limits on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, Saussure noted that the evolution from Latin to French saw “an enormous displacement in the direction of the unmotivated” (Saussure & Constantin 2005: 233; compare Saussure 1922 [1916]: 184).⁷ For

6. This is with reference to another Biblical passage: *laissez venir à moi les petits enfants* (“Suffer little children to come unto me”, Luke 18:16). Meillet also uses this example to show how the causative *laisser* has become “en quelque mesure, un auxiliaire” (to some degree, an auxiliary). As DeLancey (2004: 1590) remarks, this shows how Meillet conceives of grammaticalisation as “a gradual process rather than a sudden categorial shift”. Meillet allows moreover that *laisser* and *petit* can each be a ‘principal word’ in other contexts, such as “*laissez cela*” (leave that) and “*apportez le petit paquet* (et non pas le gros paquet qui est à côté)” (Bring the little packet (and not the big one which is next to it)).

7. “un énorme déplacement dans le sens de l’immotivé”.

example, “friend” and “enemy” in Latin were the transparently related *amicus* and *inimicus*; but the French counterparts *ami* and *ennemi* are not perceived as related by French speakers. *Ennemi* “has reverted to absolute arbitrariness” (ibid.).⁸

This is not far from the example Meillet gives of Proto-Germanic *hiu tagu* “this day” grammaticalising to become Old High German *hiutu* and Modern German *heute* “today” (Meillet 1912: 392 [1921: 138–9]). English *today* is itself an example of this type, which again not everyone today would classify as grammaticalisation, though for Meillet these are core examples. When Saussure says in 1911 that “All the movement that evolution represents for the language can be summarised in a back-and-forth between how much is perfectly unmotivated and relatively motivated” (Saussure & Constantin 2005: 232–233),⁹ he again seems to anticipate Meillet’s position that grammaticalisation is the more important of the two processes of change because of its effect on the entire system.

In the wider context, by downgrading the role of analogy Meillet is letting his audience know that their impression of linguistic science may be out of date. In these years before World War I the general public still thought of linguistics as primarily German, so great having been the success of the *Richtung*. Writing for an Italian journal with French as its principal language, he could be sure of a sympathetic reception for the message that the German methodology was *passé*.

Meillet did not of course attend Saussure’s Geneva lectures, and the two of them had been in only sporadic contact since 1909. But as detailed in Joseph (2010, 2012: 318–327), the basic outlines of Saussure’s teaching on general linguistics was already in place in the courses he gave in Paris on Germanic linguistics and occasionally other subjects from 1881 to 1891, when Meillet (starting in 1887) was his student.

From about 1920 Meillet will go further still, in a shift likely prompted by his reading of Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916. Here Saussure said that English gives a much more prominent place to the unmotivated than German does, since German indicates grammatical relations through the inflections on nouns and verbs, whereas English does it through position and the use of auxiliaries and prepositions. In this sense, German is more ‘grammatical’ and inclined toward the motivated, while English is more ‘lexical’ and inclined toward the radically arbitrary.

8. “Il est rentré dans l’arbitraire absolu”.

9. “Tout le mouvement que représente pour la langue l’évolution peut se résumer en un va-et-vient entre la somme respective du parfaitement immotivé et du relativement motivé”.

In fact, one can distinguish as two contrary poles, as two currents antinomic to one another, reigning in all languages, the tendency to use the lexicological instrument or the tendency to use the grammatical instrument. [...] The ultra-lexicological type is embodied for example in Chinese, the ultra-grammatical type: primitive Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek.

(Saussure & Constantin 2005: 234; compare Saussure 1922 [1916]: 183)¹⁰

This becomes a leading idea in Meillet's later thought. In a coda dated 5 May 1920 which he added to his 1909 paper "Sur la disparition des formes simples du prétérit" (On the disappearance of the simple forms of the preterite) for its republication in his 1921 collection of papers, he says that

The essential feature of the morphological structure of Indo-European, and still of Latin, is that the word does not exist independently of the grammatical form: there is no word meaning "horse", there is a nominative singular *equus*, a genitive singular *equi*, an accusative plural *equos*, etc. and no element signifying "horse" can be isolated independently of the endings. On the contrary, in the modern type represented by English and, a bit less well by French, the word tends to exist independently of any 'morpheme': whatever role it plays in the sentence, in English one says *dog* and in French *chien*, where Latin had a series of forms depending on the cases. (1921: 156–7)¹¹

Soon he will depart quite dramatically from Durkheim and develop ideas about the psychological development of the Indo-European peoples from an early 'concrete' stage to a more advanced 'abstract' stage. In his paper on "Le caractère concret du mot" (The concrete nature of the word), presented to the Société de Psychologie in 1922 and published in the *Journal de Psychologie* the following year, Meillet wrote that "a Roman was not capable of naming 'the wolf in itself' [...]. The universal tendency of language, in the course of civilisation, has been to give the noun a character more and more independent of all its particular uses"

10. "En effet, on peut distinguer comme deux pôles contraires, comme deux courants antinomiques entre eux régnant en toutes langues, la tendance à employer l'instrument lexicologique ou la tendance à employer l'instrument grammatical. [...] Le type de l'ultra-lexicologique est par exemple dans le chinois, le type de l'ultra-grammatical: indo-européen primitif, sanscrit, grec".

11. "Le trait essentiel de la structure morphologique de l'indo-européen, et encore du latin, c'est que le mot n'existe pas indépendamment de la forme grammaticale: il n'y a pas un mot signifiant « cheval », il y a un nominatif singulier *equus*, un génitif singulier *equi*, un accusatif pluriel *equos*, etc. et l'on ne saurait isoler aucun élément signifiant « cheval » indépendamment des finales. Au contraire, dans le type moderne représenté par l'anglais, et, un peu moins bien par le français, le mot tend à exister indépendamment de tout « morphème » : quel que soit le rôle joué dans la phrase, on dit en anglais *dog* et en français *chien*, là où le latin avait une série de formes suivant les cas".

(1936 [1923]: 11–13).¹² In the discussion following the paper, Meillet insisted that the development of languages must go from the concrete toward the abstract, and that, in consequence, “The mentality of an Indo-European differs completely from a modern” (ibid., 17; see further Joseph 2014).¹³

Either Meillet presented very different visions of linguistic evolution to audiences of sociologists and psychologists, or his own mentality was evolving. Or perhaps a combination of the two. In any case, at the mid-career point of 1912, grammaticalisation too appeared to him very clearly as a move from the concrete to the abstract. But the meaning of these two terms is notoriously slippery, over both long and short stretches of time. In 1912 concreteness seems to have to do with *precision* of meaning and the *force* with which the speaker wants to emphasise it. This idea of force connects with the tendency of words, as they grammaticalise, to be reduced phonologically; and to the link which Meillet makes between phrases becoming clichés, ‘habitual’ collocations, on their way to grammaticalisation. He points out that syntactically significant word order too is the result of the same process. Describing how, in the English sentence *Peter hits Paul* or the French *Pierre bat Paul*, as opposed to *Paul hits Peter* or *Paul bat Pierre*, word order has taken on the character of a morpheme, Meillet has recourse to term *grammaticalisation* for the second and final time (Figure 2).

les rôles grammaticaux des deux noms. Ici, un ordre de mots devenu habituel pour quelque raison a pris le caractère de « morphème », c'est-à-dire de marque d'une catégorie grammaticale. La valeur expressive de l'ordre des mots, que l'on observe en latin, a été remplacée par une valeur grammaticale. Le phénomène est de même ordre que la « grammaticalisation » de tel ou tel mot; au lieu que ce soit un mot employé

Figure 2. The second occurrence of *grammaticalisation* (Meillet 1912: 400 [1921: 148])¹⁴

12. “Le français a un mot « loup » invariable, dont la forme est toujours la même, quelle que soit la phrase où ce mot figure, quelle que soit la façon dont on envisage l'animal [...]. En latin au contraire, il n'y a à vrai dire aucun mot qui signifie « loup » ; si l'on veut dire que « le loup est venu », on aura la forme: *lupus* ; si l'on voit des loups: *lupos* [...], etc. On ne peut pas considérer l'une quelconque de ces formes comme étant le nom du « loup » plutôt que les autres. [...]n Romain n'était pas capable de nommer « le loup en soi » [...] La tendance universelle du langage, au cours de la civilisation, a été de donner au nom un caractère de plus en plus indépendant de tous ses emplois particuliers”.

13. “La mentalité d'un Indo-Européen diffère tout à fait d'un moderne”.

14. “a word order having for some reason become habitual has taken on the character of a ‘morpheme’, that is of the mark of a grammatical category. The expressive value of word order that is observed in Latin has been replaced by a grammatical value. The phenomenon is of the same order as the ‘grammaticalisation’ of this or that word [...]”.

It seems in the end that it is the back-and-forth between, on the one hand, the urge toward forceful, original expression, and on the other, habit, plus the fact that only so many 'original' collocations are available, that pushes the process of grammaticalisation as Meillet saw it in 1912. It is interesting that he ends the 1921 reprinting of the article with a footnote directing the reader to works on stylistics, by Charles Bally (1865–1947) and the young Leo Spitzer (1887–1960).

Grammaticalisation in Meillet is only partly recognisable in its post-Chomskyan revival because Meillet did not think of cerebral functions as being neatly divided between those corresponding to a 'lexicon' and those corresponding to a 'grammar'. He would probably have been dubious of a metaphor projecting into the human brain two types of books which analyse language from different perspectives. At the very least he would have to forget its metaphorical nature, and to keep in mind that the lexicon/grammar divide is good when it enlightens and provides a useful principle for classifying our observations, but should be resisted if it starts to take control of our analysis, limiting what we can observe and how we go about explaining it.

Insofar as Meillet's introduction of grammaticalisation was not "specifically destined for scholars specializing in linguistics", it is not unlike Saussure's courses in general linguistics, which were for undergraduate students who lacked sufficient training in any particular language to pursue its philological study in depth. That fact forced Saussure to distil matters to their essence, and not to hide behind any technicalities or jargon; and, yes, to simplify, which was anguishing for Saussure because of how his perfectionism (attested to in Meillet 1913: 119–120, his obituary of his former teacher) would not allow him to *oversimplify*. Saussure could never have overcome that anguish enough to publish his lectures – and yet, it is precisely because of the elegance and clarity that he achieved in them that they spoke, and continue to speak, to a wide and diverse audience. Meillet's grammaticalisation is similarly generalised, similarly clear and elegant, and continues to inspire linguists today, when much of the highly specialised work of his time is (rightly or wrongly) considered outmoded and languishes unread.

Meillet travelled far and wide in his life. He died at the age of 80 in his father's old house at Châteaumeillant, and is buried in the family crypt at Moulins, the town where he was born. His body ended up where it started, but his intellectual and methodological trajectory as a linguist was linear rather than circular. Via his student Benveniste he would have a profound influence on a later generation of philologically-inspired philosophers, including Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Julia Kristeva (see Kristeva 2012). And, as the present volume shows, some of his most fertile ideas are only now coming into full bloom within mainstream linguistics. Grammaticalisation is far from being the only case in which old reflections can inspire new ones.

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Introduction

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In 2012, the University of Edinburgh hosted the *New Reflections on Grammaticalization 5* conference; the contributions to the present volume are based at least in part on presentations given at that conference. The conference was in part a celebration of grammaticalization, taking place as it did 100 years after Antoine Meillet (1912 first introduced the term; in the preface to the volume ('Meillet and grammaticalization'), **John Joseph** provides an account of Meillet's own understanding of the nature of grammaticalization developed over time. It is interesting to observe how some of the issues that Meillet raises in his early twentieth century papers still provoke debate today. For example, the relationship between analogy and grammaticalization is a central issue for Kiparsky (2012), while the on-going battle between formal and functional linguists regarding abrupt vs. gradual change is critically appraised by Newmeyer (2014). Joseph's chapter also outlines the influence of Saussure on Meillet, and suggests some of the ways in which Saussure's thinking may be aligned with Meillet's on the nature of linguistic change.

Since Meillet's landmark paper, grammaticalization studies have formed a central part of research in language change, perhaps most especially in the last thirty years. One key recent development that emerged at the conference, and is reflected in this volume, is that grammaticalization is increasingly understood to cover a much broader range of phenomena than the diachronic move from "lexicon" to "grammar" as originally understood by Meillet. In particular, grammaticalization now encompasses also gestures and prosody. Thus, from a narrow descriptive tool grammaticalization has broadened into a concept that helps researchers to understand a wide range of form-function pairings and their relationship in language, a move that was arguably enabled by the reinterpretation of grammaticalization in terms of constructions (see e.g. Gisborne & Patten 2011). In this volume, we present some of the latest thinking on grammaticalization, showcasing research which draws on a wide variety of languages and which seeks to refine our understanding of the concept of grammaticalization and related aspects of language change. In this introduction, we provide a brief summary of key issues raised in each contribution, while at the same time reflecting on some of the current issues in grammaticalization research in order to provide a context for the research presented in this book.