Grammaticalisation processes in Flemish Sign Language

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Following Hopper & Traugott (2003 [1993]: 232), grammaticalisation can be defined as "the change whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions." Grammaticalisation processes have not been studied very extensively in sign languages yet. Pfau & Steinbach (2006) give a very interesting survey of studies that have focused on grammaticalisation processes in sign languages, but Flemish Sign Language (VGT) was not one of them. Within the Deaf community in Flanders about 5000 - 6000 people (Loots et al. 2003) claim to have Flemish Sign Language as their first or principal language. After lengthy negotiations, VGT was officially recognized by the Flemish Parliament in April 2006. VGT clearly is a fully-fledged sign language in its own right, and is genealogically related to amongst others French-Belgian Sign Language (LSBF), French Sign Language (LSF), American Sign Language (ASL) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). The common ancestor of these daughter sign languages is Old French Sign Language (OFSL). However, it is impossible to use historical data to look at grammaticalisation paths since there simply are very few historical grammatical data as OFSL was never written down. Consequently, the method to be used is that of internal reconstruction which is a procedure for inferring part of the history of a language from material available for a synchronic description of the language on the basis of paradigmatic allomorphy.

1   Grammaticalisation clines

For spoken languages, grammaticalisation processes have been described along a number of structural changes or clines. The following examples will show that these clines can be found in VGT as well.

1.1 Morpho-syntactic fusion

According to Bybee (1985) morphosyntactic fusion treats the relationship between syntax (or sentence structure) and morphology (or internal word structure) or to put it in Givón's (1971: 413) terms "Today's morphology is yesterday's syntax". Pfau & Steinbach (2006: 87) state that "sign languages only have very few (if any) instances of type 2-grammaticalization (i.e. from free to bound grammatical morpheme)". I would like to argue that at least one example can be found in VGT (and probably also in other sign languages) with respect to negative affixation. Clearly, certain negative verb signs in VGT have developed from a combination of a positive sign and the negative adverb NOT (see Figure 1) resulting in a positive verb stem followed by a negative affix which consists of a twisting movement of the wrist.
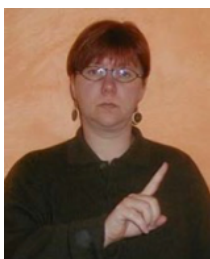

Figure 1: Negative adverb NOT (with a left to right horizontal sweeping movement) (picture taken from Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2006: 245)

Examples are for instance the verb signs BELIEVE-NOT, WANT-NOT (see Figure 9), CAN-NOT (see Figure 10) and the deverbal adjective sign UNKNOWN which is the same as the noun STRANGER (see Figure 2).
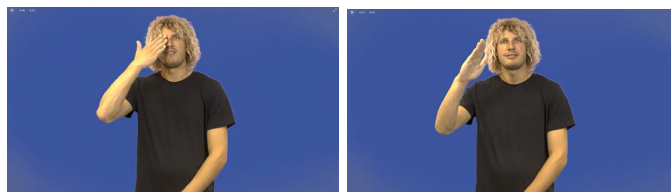

Figure 2: UNKNOWN or STRANGER (`http://gebaren.ugent.be/alfabet.php?id=23011`)

1.2   Decategorialisation

Decategorialisation refers to the evolution of open class lexemes in a primary or major category to closed class lexemes in a secondary or minor category. As has been described for other sign languages VGT also has instances of the evolution of the gesture for "strong" being lexicalised into the (ad)nominal sign STRONG/ POWER (with an upward movement) and then grammaticalised into the modal verb CAN (with a downward movement).
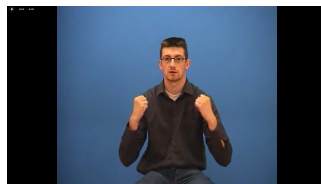

Figure 3: STRONG/POWER (`http://gebaren.ugent.be/alfabet.php?id=18674`)

Figure 4: CAN (`http://gebaren.ugent.be/alfabet.php?id=22028`)

Since a similar path has been described for ASL (Janzen & Shaffer 2002) and other OFSL related sign languages (Wilcox 2004) the assumption can be that at least the lexicalisation but maybe also the grammaticalisation already took place in OFSL. Another example of decategorialisation in VGT is the evolution of the adjectival/adverbial sign READY into an aspectual marker READY, quite similar to what has been described for FINISH in ASL (Janzen 1995).

Furthermore it would appear that the subordinating conjunction BECAUSE has developed from the nominal sign REASON, which may be similar to its NGT counterpart (Pfau & Steinbach 2006: 40).

However, in VGT the following paths can be discerned which have not (yet) been described for other sign languages:

- lexical verb GIVE → light verb GIVE → auxiliary/preposition GIVE functioning as recipient marker (see below)
- nominal sign EXAMPLE → conjunction introducing a conditional clause

Figure 5: READY (`http://gebaren.ugent.be/alfabet.php?id=22239`)

- verb sign "*get the door slammed in one's face*" → conjunction introducing an adversative clause (Huys 2008: 94–97)
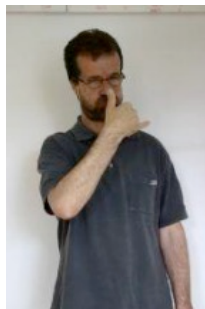

Figure 6: *get the door slammed in one's face* (picture taken from Huys 2008: 94)

1.3   Phonological reduction

The grammaticalised element is frequently phonologically reduced compared to its non-grammaticalised counterpart. For VGT we can find phonological reduction in for instance the negative affixation mentioned above. Another example is the sign GIVE which in its full lexical verb form is signed with a horizontal movement from the agent to the recipient. It is usually (but not compulsory) formed with spatial agreement, i.e. the movement of the sign starts at the locus of the agent and ends at the locus of the recipient.

In its reduced form, when used as a preposition functioning as recipient marker (see below), it is formed with a short horizontal forward wrist-flipping movement starting from the signer without any spatial agreement.
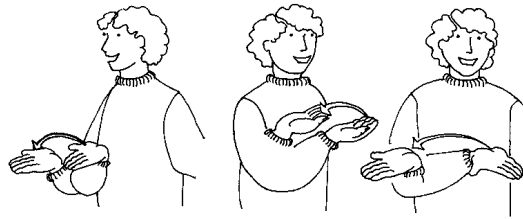
Figure 7: GIVE (in its citation form) - $_2$GIVE$_3$ (= *you give me*) - $_{3l}$GIVE$_{3r}$ (= s/he gives him/her) (drawings taken from Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 1998: 88)

Figure 8: GIVE as recipient marker (pictures taken from Devriendt 2009)

1.4   Reduction of syntactic freedom

Heine et al. (1991) and Lehmann (1985) claim that grammaticalisation entails a limitation of syntactic freedom since a lexical element can be moved around more freely while a grammaticalised element is more limited in its syntagmatic relation to other sentence elements. In VGT GIVE as an auxiliary or preposition is again a good example of this structural change since both are always positioned right in front of the indirect object or recipient. This is quite striking since for VGT it is frequently very difficult to detect clear word order rules, since there are mostly only word order tendencies (Vermeerbergen 2004).

2   Principle of divergence

Following the principle of divergence (Hopper 1991: 24) it is possible that the different forms that can be found on a grammaticalisation cline exist next to each other at the same time while the variants can be put in a hierarchy from less to more grammaticalised. One such example is the variety with respect to the verb sign GIVE (itself a lexicalisation of a classifier construction). The examples can

all be found in Devriendt (2009) where they are discussed more elaborately.

1. Classifier construction or incorporated classifier: SOMEONE BOOK GIVE-classifier for book TO BOY. In this construction a classifier handshape or book is incorporated in the verb sign GIVE.
2. Conventionalised sign GIVE: SOMEONE BOOK $_1$GIVE$_{3l}$ TO BOY. Here the citation form of the verb sign GIVE is a conventionalized form although it is possible (but not compulsory) that spatial agreement is applied.
3. GIVE in a verb sandwich construction (Fischer & Janis 1990): WOMAN GIVE PRESENT TO BOY $_1$GIVE-classifier for present$_{3r}$. In this example the first GIVE is the conventionalised citation form without any spatial agreement and the second one has an incorporated classifier handshape for pre- sent and there is spatial agreement.
4. Light verb (cf. Butt 2004) GIVE: GIRL GIVE BOY STROKE$_{self}$ STROKE$_3$. Here again the citation form of GIVE is used, without any spatial agreement and with a certain level of semantic bleaching since a stroke cannot be handed over from one person to another.
5. Auxiliary GIVE: INDEX$_m$ RABBIT $_1$GIVE$_{3l}$ MAN SHOOT$_{ml}$. In this example (in which the rabbit is shooting the man) again the citation form of GIVE (with spatial agreement with the locus of the recipient) is used followed by the recipient. The label auxiliary is used here since its use seems to be very similar to the NGT auxiliary ACT-ON (Bos 1994).
6. Preposition GIVE: RABBIT GIVE MAN SHOOT$_{ml}$. The label preposition is given here since contrary to the auxiliary GIVE there is no spatial agreement and there is a strong phonological reduction (as described above).

3 Unidirectionality?

Most researchers would claim that grammaticalisation paths are unidirectional, i.e. that there is development from a full lexical element into a functional grammatical element. It appears that at least some counterexamples to this general rule can be found in VGT. For a more detailed description of these signs we refer to Huys (2008).

There is a possible development of the negative modal auxiliary WANT-NOT into a full lexical verb "*cannot be bothered*". Both signs are formed in exactly the same way, but the non-manual part of the sign differs because the latter has a compulsory mouth gesture (i.e. not referring to any Dutch word) while the former can be accompanied by the mouthing "wil-niet" (want-not).
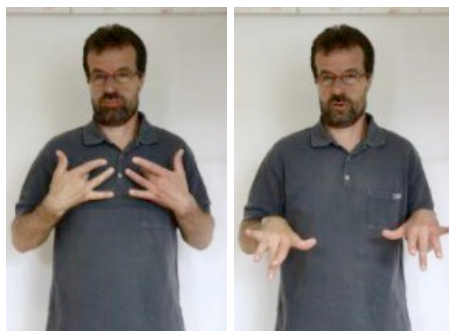
Figure 9: WANT-NOT or "cannot be bothered" (pictures taken from Huys 2008: 66)

Another example could be the possible development of the negative modal auxiliary CANNOT plus MORE into a full lexical verb meaning "*cannot take it anymore*". Again the latter has to be formed with a compulsory mouth gesture while the former can be accompanied by the mouthings "kan niet meer" (can not more).

Figure 10: CANNOT MORE or "cannot take it anymore" (pictures taken from Huys 2008: 59)

Some researchers would regard these counterexamples as a challenge to the principle of unidirectionality, while others would take a more careful stand.

In conclusion, Pfau & Steinbach (2006: 87)) state "that sign languages employ exactly the same grammaticalization paths as do spoken languages. That is, the pathways proposed in the literature are modality-independent". From the small-scale study on VGT which has been reported on here, it seems to be able to corroborate this for VGT as well.

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