

DR HENDRIK DE SMET

KU LEUVEN (BELGIEN)

AMBIGUITY: CAUSE OR SYMPTOM?

Vortrag am 01.02.17 um 18 Uhr c.t.
in Raum S005 / Schellingstraße 3 (VG)

In many theories of language change, ambiguity is put forward as one of the main causes of change. It is thought to be the trigger for syntactic reanalysis (e.g. Harris & Campbell 1995; Hopper & Traugott 2003), and it is also assumed to cause semantic change. More recently, however, the role of ambiguity in syntactic change has been questioned, and several alternatives have been suggested (Fischer 2007; De Smet 2013). This paper reconsiders the role of ambiguity in semantic change. In the grammaticalization literature, in particular, semantic change is often linked to so-called “bridging contexts” (Heine 2002) or “switch contexts” (Diewald 2002), where an old and a new meaning seem to coexist. Typically, such contexts are regarded as a transitory stage from the old to the new meaning, and are even held to explain the semantic change. However, there are reasons to believe this view is not correct. From a theoretical point of view, it is not obvious why speakers would suddenly begin to produce ambiguous expressions even though the ambiguity has no communicative function. From an empirical point of view, the actual evidence does not always support the theory. In some cases, ambiguous instances are very few, so it seems unlikely that they would have any impact on how an expression develops over time. In other cases, instances of an expression with an unambiguously new meaning are attested before any bridging examples are. To show this, two cases from the literature are discussed (the grammaticalization of operator *do* and of future *be going to*) and two from my own research (the grammaticalization of the minimizers *far from* and Dutch *allesbehalve* (‘not at all’)). A theory of semantic change based on analogy is proposed that can better account for the facts.



References

- De Smet, H. 2013. Does innovation need reanalysis? In E. Coussé & F. Von Mengden (eds). *Usage-based approaches to language change*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Diewald, G. 2002. A model for relevant types of contexts in grammaticalization. In I. Wischer & G. Diewald (eds). *New reflections on grammaticalization*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Fischer, O. 2007. *Morphosyntactic change: Functional and formal perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, A.C. & L. Campbell. 1995. *Historical syntax in cross-linguistic perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heine, B. 2002. On the role of context in grammaticalization. In I. Wischer & G. Diewald (eds). *New reflections on grammaticalization*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Hopper, P. & E.C. Traugott. 2003. *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.