

Size noun expressions as non-canonical quantifiers: a diachronic constructional approach

Within a constructional grammaticalization approach, Langacker (Forthcoming a: 1) observes that quantifying expressions *a lot of* and *a bunch of* “pose[s] interesting questions of semantic and grammatical analysis, both synchronic and diachronic”. He argues that *a lot of* has not yet been fully reanalyzed as quantifier, but is emergent. The hypothesized end result of the reanalysis is *alotta*, analogous with quantifiers *many* and *much*. Grammaticalization towards this monomorphemic target-construction requires reinforcement of similarities with the quantifier-construction and loss in similarities with the source-construction. The fact that *lot* can be premodified, e.g. *a whole lot*, and has a plural variant *lots* is argued to show that *lot* still functions as a noun and *a* as (attenuated) grounding expression. The persistence of the meaning ‘group/collection of things (for sale)’ further blocks *a lot of* from proceeding to full monomorphemic quantifier status.

In this paper I consider whether the expressions *a lot(s)/load(s)/bunch of* in their quantifying uses cannot be considered as proper quantifiers from the radically functional grammatical perspective set out in Langacker (1991), in which the organization of the NP is said to be primarily determined by the functions of type specification, instantiation, quantification and grounding. I argue that Langacker’s salutary attention to the structural specifics of the grammaticalization process – often neglected in traditional grammaticalization studies – may benefit from a more elaborate assessment of the functional closeness to the target construction. I draw on observations yielded by extensive synchronic (COBUILD Corpus) and diachronic corpus (Helsinki Corpus, CLMETEV) data on (*a*) *lot/lots/load(s)/heap(s)/bunch of*. An important argument for viewing these expressions as genuine quantifiers (cf. Author 2003, 2007) is that they allow contextually triggered relative readings, in which quantity is designated by comparing how this profiled mass stacks up to a reference mass (Langacker 1991, Milsark 1976) (1), in addition to absolute uses (2), which directly measure the inherent magnitude of the predicated mass:

(1) *Certainly, heaps of kids are aware of it, carry it out and are brilliant but others seem to have lost the plot*

(2) *Czar Oak, a late maturing New Zealand-bred stayer with heaps of potential but also a major leg problem*

In addition, I argue that several phenomena of modification in quantifying expressions, as in *a whole lot*, do not necessarily detract from the decategorialization/grammaticalization claim. Such premodification patterns are restricted to expressions which further intensify the quantifier meaning and is also allowed by monomorphemic quantifiers like *a few/little* and *many*, e.g. *a great/good/long/large many*; *a wee little* and *a good/fair/tiny few*, of which the fully grammaticalized status seems to be undisputed. Finally, following Hopper (1991) and Hopper & Traugott (2003), I argue that layering of quantifier and lexical uses of quantifying expressions does not entail that as a quantifier these expressions have not engaged in reanalysis.

The general point of the paper is that adding an explicitly corpus-based functional perspective to Langacker’s (Forthcoming a,b) structurally-oriented account of grammaticalizing quantifying expressions helps reconstructing the constructional grammaticalization path from source to target and assessing the stages and extent of decategorialization more accurately.

References:

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Corpora:

COBUILD corpus, see <http://www.collins.co.uk>

CLMETEV, Corpus of Late Modern English Texts extended version (Hendrik De Smet); see <http://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/clmetev.htm>

Helsinki Corpus, see <http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/HC/INDEX.HTM>