

On the crosslinguistic status of directional deixis (oral/poster)

It is standard practice in reference grammars and dictionaries to use the glosses ‘come’ and ‘go’ in such loose fashion as to suggest some sort of crosslinguistic semantic/pragmatic “equivalence” between the markers at issue. Such congruence is also usually taken for granted by linguists working within the grammaticalization “paradigm”. However, several studies addressing specific languages or groups of languages (e.g. Ricca 1993; Wilkins & Hill 1995; Botne 2005) have shown how problematic it is to discount the actual range of incongruence from one language to the next: for instance, German *kommen* does not exhibit as much deictic strength as Spanish *venir* and Russian *prijeti/prixodit’* even less so.

This paper argues that it is empirically justified, on balance, to bestow on directional deixis (DD) as a notional category much the same status as is classically granted to temporal deixis. This is because there is a clear tendency for markers implementing this putative category to display any number of a reasonably well-defined set of properties, most of which are attested across a broad spectrum of languages.

Putative DD systems are structured by a fundamental two-pronged asymmetry: (a) itive markers are deictically weaker than ventive markers, a semantic property with demonstrably transparent morphosyntactic correlates; (b) the intrinsically relevant variable is the deictic status of the goal of the motion event, not that of its source.

It is extremely common for DD markers to belong to closed paradigms, whether they be clitics (e.g. Somali) or affixes (e.g. German, Laal, Mohawk) or whether they consist in segmental or suprasegmental alternations (e.g. Kwaami, Pokot). When DD is lexically implemented, the verbs involved are almost invariably singled out by morphological idiosyncrasies (e.g. suppletion) or distinctive types of syntactic behaviour, proneness to serialization being only the best known of these.

Obligatoriness of coding is another recurring property. Thus, failure to specify the deictic status of the goal may be disfavoured in varying degrees for some types of motion episodes, whether these are self-standing (e.g. Lisu, Palauan) or “associated” with an open-ended set of events (e.g. Australian and Chadic languages). Obligatoriness may also be instantiated indirectly: DD is not infrequently handled by portmanteau morphemes co-specifying the status of the motion event with respect to selected topographical coordinates (e.g. Sobei, Anggor) or co-encoding such prototypically grammatical categories as sentence force, tense/aspect, modality, person, diathesis or evidentiality (e.g. Iraqw, Barasano, Karajá).

Redundancy is a fairly common feature of DD systems (e.g. Yavapai, Nahuatl). It sometimes allows for the sort of syntagmatic redundancy typically associated with such functional categories as person, number or tense (e.g. Turkana, Dahalo, Comanche).

The susceptibility of putative DD exponents to grammaticalization processes is endemic across languages. Because they involve a break from the referential domain, pathways that lead from the encoding of DD to that of valency manipulation (e.g. passive voice in Italian and Scottish Gaelic; applicative voice in Krongo) are of special significance, especially those followed by markers “already” belonging to closed paradigms (e.g. Burushaski, Sochiapan Chinantec, Mosétén).
