Semantic maps and word formation:
Agents, Instruments and related semantic functions

Eugenio R. Luján
Depto. de Filología Griega y Lingüística Indoeuropea
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
(erlujan@filol.ucm.es)

The semantic map methodology has been applied mainly to the analysis of grammatical morphemes (affixes and adpositions); see, e.g., Haspelmath 1999 for 'Dative' or Haspelmath 2003: 226-229 for Instrumental and related semantic roles. Although this methodology is still in need of some refinement, it has already proved as a very useful tool for the study of the type of structured polysemy that is characteristic of grammatical morphemes. Semantic maps have also proved to be extremely useful for the analysis of grammaticalization paths between synchronically linked semantic functions.

The semantic map methodology can be further extended to the analysis of procedures of word formation, including both derivational and compositional procedures. I have been working lately on the use of semantic maps for the analysis of Agent and Instrument nouns and the grammaticalization processes associated with them. This poses some interesting theoretical and practical problems. For instance, it has been stressed (e.g., Haspelmath 1997: 10-13) how difficult it is to isolate semantic functions when dealing with grammatical morphemes cross-linguistically, if the possible proliferation of functions identified only on semantic criteria is to be avoided. That difficulty will increase when dealing with affixes and compounds, given that we cannot apply the standard syntactic procedures used to isolate semantic functions in functional-typological linguistics. We are thus driven to explore the bases on which different semantic functions can be isolated when dealing with procedures of word formation.

Semantic maps based on the analysis of procedures of word formation also allow for interesting comparisons with semantic maps elaborated on the basis of grammatical morphemes. Some general remarks can be made. First, languages tend to grammaticalize a much lesser number of procedures of word formation than grammatical morphemes for the expression of semantic functions – e.g., procedures of word formation of Agents and Instruments are frequently found but languages do not usually have procedures of word formation for Beneficiaries. Second, linguistic categorization (and its reflection in semantic maps) may be different when dealing with grammatical morphemes and procedures of word formation – semantic functions that are directly linked to each other in semantic maps based on grammatical morphemes may or may not be linked in semantic maps based on procedures of word formation, and the other way round. Third, even if certain grammatical functions are organized in the same way in semantic maps based on grammatical morphemes and procedures of word formation and, accordingly, meanings are extended following the linking lines between them (Croft – Shyldkrot – Kemmer 1987, Haspelmath 2003: 233-237), grammaticalization processes may follow opposite directions – e.g., Instrument markers frequently evolve into Agent markers while it is Agent nouns that usually evolve into Instrument nouns.

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