

Competing to Cooperate: Motivating the Grammaticization of Complexity

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In language as in other games people play, competition and cooperation arise together. These two couplings, of competition with cooperation and of language with games of strategy, have the potential, I suggest, to tell us a lot about how languages get to be the way they are. The interaction of these two pairs of principles drives much of the narrative of this paper, in which I pose four related questions:

-- First, how do the communicative strategies which participants develop as they pursue the dialogic game of language lead to functional motivations with the potential to shape the elements, structures, and rules of grammar?

-- Second, why do some functional motivations come into conflict with others, yielding the phenomenon known as competing motivations?

-- Third, what role does grammaticization play in the resolution of competition between motivations?

-- And finally, in what sense does the resolution of competing motivations via processes of grammaticization play a role, perhaps the key role, in the emergence of complexity in language--ultimately shaping the functional power and structural efficacy of every human language?

It will prove crucial to pursue answers to these questions if we hope to approach an overall understanding of how language comes into being, and how it is shaped by the way it is used. In this effort it will be important to attend to the actual ecological environment in which language lives and continually evolves. The relevant ecological environment is language in use, or discourse, where grammar takes its shape in the service of its own speakers. To gain a vantage from which to pursue these questions, it will be useful to think about language as a complex adaptive system. This implies that language is characterized a vast number of interactions among a large population of elements, structures, processes, and strategies--not to mention speakers and their goals and identities--linked in a complex and dynamically evolving web of interacting components.

To have explanatory value, any theory of competing motivations must prove itself applicable to problems in the description and analysis of language. This may play out at the level of grammatical description, linguistic typology, discourse functional explanations for grammar, or some combination of these and other domains. In this paper, my approach will focus primarily on patterns in discourse and their relation to grammar, drawing as well on a typological perspective. The particular problem I address is the ditransitive, and specifically how this and other three-place predications arise through processes of grammaticization, emerging out of patterns of language use that necessarily include competing motivations. Ditransitives, boasting argument structures that accommodate three distinct syntactic arguments, are of special interest in that they are relatively complex in comparison to the simpler argument structures of transitive and intransitive verbs.

Evidence be presented mostly from English conversation, with some brief comparisons to Sakapultek Maya, with its distinct pattern of three-place predicates.