

Semi-lexicity: syntax or lexicon?

STATEMENT AND MOTIVATION

In this talk we address the following central research question: “Are semi-lexical items a separate class of vocabulary items?” Semi-lexicity is rarely defined precisely (though see De Belder 2011; Klockmann 2017; Cavirani-Pots 2020). Our motivation is to propose two precise, but opposing definitions of semi-lexicity, depending on the views that semi-lexicity is (i) a property of specific vocabulary items or (ii) a property of specific syntactic structures. We all assume that semi-lexicity results from a transition from the lexical to the functional (grammaticalisation) or the other way around (degrammaticalisation). Therefore, semi-lexicity goes hand in hand with the question of what the early steps of (de)grammaticalisation are: are these steps a lexical process or a syntactic phenomenon? These questions echo and depend on more fundamental questions about the syntax-lexicon interface (Chomsky 1965, 1970 versus Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994; Borer 2005a,b, 2013 and others) and the nature of categories as syntactic or lexical categories and as precise or fuzzy concepts. In the talk we will present various case studies from the verbal, nominal and adjectival domain to illustrate the two opposing views.

PERSPECTIVE A

Semi-lexicity originates in the lexicon. Variants of this view identify a sub-category “semi-lexical” in the lexicon, on par with “lexical” or “functional” (see Butt & Geuder 2001), or alternatively, take semi-lexical items to differ in some crucial way from other items in the lexicon, e.g. as contentless heads (Emonds 2001) or functional heads (Haider 2001), which unexpectedly occur in the lexicon. Under the current perspective, vocabulary entries can project and determine syntactic structure, as lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives), functional items, or hybrid items (semi-lexical items). Vocabulary entries can contain roots, functional features, or a combination of the two, this last option resulting in semi-lexicity. Under this approach, semi-lexicity is a normal state of affairs: it simply involves a mixed lexical specification rather than just a root or just features; semi-lexical items do not differ principally in any other respect from other vocabulary items. (De)grammaticalisation relates to changes in the lexical entries of vocabulary items. Features or the root may be lost or gained, this triggering changes in how the vocabulary item behaves in the syntax. In short, the lexicon is the source of semi-lexicity, and syntactic structure building is constrained by the needs of vocabulary items.

PERSPECTIVE B

Semi-lexicity is a syntactic phenomenon. There are only two types of vocabulary items: roots and functional items. However, their use is flexible (De Belder & Van Craenenbroeck 2015). We propose that roots can occur in a syntactic position which is not the root position, leading to a more functional interpretation of this root (cf. Van Riemsdijk 1998; Cardinaletti & Giusti (2001)). Grammaticalisation into semi-lexicity occurs in syntax in two diachronic stages: (i) a root is used in the functional domain of another, lower root, (ii) a root incorporates into a functional feature, which as a whole appears in the functional domain of another, lower root (cf. Song 2019). Only in a final stage does a VI acquire a functional feature; it has then become functional (i.e. there is a separate root and a functional feature in the lexicon). In the early steps of grammaticalisation, this process piggy-backs on the root’s lexical semantics (Zeijlstra 2008; Biberauer 2019); only roots with lexical semantics which overlap with the eventual functional feature it will incorporate into in the second stage of semi-lexicity, are ‘legible’ for this grammaticalisation process (cf. Hopper & Traugott 1993). Summarizing, syntax has an intermediate semi-lexical structure, but Vocabulary only knows the bifurcation between lexical and functional items.

RELEVANCE FOR LINGUISTIC THEORY

The narrow relevance of this talk concerns the definition of semi-lexicality: What does ‘semi-lexicality’ mean from a technical point of view? How do semi-lexical items interface with the lexicon and the syntax? What does it mean to grammaticalise? What do we predict regarding degrammaticalisation, that is, how do we account for the fact that degrammaticalisation is much less common than grammaticalisation, and very rarely results in a change from fully functional to fully lexical (e.g. Norde 2010)? The broader relevance concerns the syntax-lexicon interface, the root hypothesis and the definition of categories. Semi-lexicality can be understood as a specific phenomenon that addresses the general question of whether lexical items project syntax or whether syntax determines the meaning of lexical items. For root theories it addresses the question of what the essence of a root is. What is the boundary between functional items versus lexical items and functional use versus lexical use of an item? As to categories, it questions how many categories there are. Are categories strict or fluid notions? Where are the boundaries between the categories? Do hybrid categories exist? Are there limits or principles that regulate categorial transitions? Is a category a lexical notion or a syntactic notion?

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