
Reviewed by GEOFFREY HAG, University of Bamberg

Although relatively short, this book tackles central issues in historical syntax and grammaticalization theory, with implications far beyond the Indo-Aryan case study that forms the empirical core of the study. It can be read on two levels: on the one hand, as a historical micro-analysis of two postpositions and their source lexemes across three millennia of Indo-Aryan (I-A), and on the other, as a set of theoretical claims regarding the mechanisms by which the claimed ‘strong non-configurationality’ of Vedic ultimately spawned the ‘low-level configurationality’ of the modern I-A languages.

Uta Reinöhl draws on a text corpus spanning several chronological stages of I-A: Vedic Sanskrit, early Middle I-A Old Awadhi, late Middle I-A Apabramsha, early New I-A Awadhi, and contemporary Hindi (9–17). The two postpositions have the forms mē ‘in’ and par ‘on’ in Hindi, but R refers to their various I-A cognates as madhye and upari respectively, a convention I also adopt in this review. The corpus includes a total of 1,060 tokens, 844 of madhye and 216 of upari, which are detailed in the Appendix. This review concentrates on the book’s broader implications for diachronic syntax, while an assessment of the philological details is referred to the specialists of historical I-A.

The book’s main hypothesis is that phrasal structure co-evolves with the grammaticalization of lexical elements into purely functional items. The functional items here are the postpositions of contemporary I-A, which constitute a new form class that was entirely absent in ancient I-A. R proposes that with the emergence of postpositions, a previously unattested phrase type (the adpositional phrase) was introduced into I-A syntax, and this in turn contributed to the fixation of phrasal structure in NPs (or DPs). In this sense, then, the development of adpositional phrases spearheaded the development of phrasal structure in I-A. R’s proposals are profoundly influenced by Himmelmann’s (1997) thinking on grammaticalization: grammaticalization is not merely the evolution of individual lexical items down a cline of increasing grammaticalization, but it also creates novel constructional syntax. On this view, grammaticalization works in parallel, in that individual items shift in terms of, for example, obligatoriness or paradigmaticity, and at the same time syntactic structures specifically geared to these functional elements crystallize. In this sense, syntax is ‘emergent’.

With regard to the grammaticalization of adpositions, R rejects the widespread view that the adpositions of I-A languages developed from the Indo-European ‘adverbial particles’. These particles constituted a set of syntactically very heterogeneous items in ancient Indo-European, regu-
larly cited as a main source of adpositions in contemporary Indo-European. According to R, I-A underwent a distinct development, setting it apart from ‘other Indo-European branches’ (87). In Ch. 4, the ‘traditional scenario’ (Section 4.1), widely assumed to hold for Indo-European, is outlined. On this view, the birth of adpositional phrases involved the grammaticalization of what R refers to as ‘symmetrical groups’, groups of nonhierarchically associated syntactic items that included the adverbial particles and case-marked nouns. Through frequent collocation, such groups apparently ultimately crystallized to grammatical phrases (87). In Ch. 4, R assembles three lines of evidence that militate against the ‘traditional scenario’ for I-A. First is the lack of evidence for an etymological connection between the adpositional particles and the later postpositions (the latter being of extremely varied provenience (83)). Second, in a meta-analysis of the corpus studies of Rigvedic syntax undertaken by Hettrich and associates (e.g. Hettrich et al. 2010), she shows that among the attested noun-plus-particle sequences, the ordering particle-noun is actually more frequent than the inverse order, a finding that runs counter to the expectations that the particles became postpositions. Finally, R refers to a distinct pattern of cliticization in I-A, which may have inhibited the reanalysis of the particles as adpositions. On R’s view, there was thus no gradual reanalysis of ancient adverbial particles into adpositions. Instead, she localizes the crucial changes at a chronologically later stage, in Middle I-A, referring to a ‘post-Vedic genitive shift’, that is, an increase in genitive-noun combinations, in which items with spatial semantics such as MADHYE ‘between, middle part’ also took part. The point of departure was thus not a ‘symmetrical group’, but an ‘asymmetrical group’, involving a noun and a dependent genitive. R proposes that coincidental phonological similarities with locally case-marked nouns may have eased the reanalysis of such items, from their hitherto unclear word-class classification into nouns (Ch. 5) and, later, postpositions. R’s corpus data also highlight the leading role of third-person pronominal elements in fixing the Gen-N order that ultimately led to the postpositions.

Some of the most innovative aspects of R’s claims concern the semantic shifts that accompanied (in fact, on her view, precipitated) the later developments from a nominal head, accompanied by a dependent genitive (N-Gen-middle = ‘N’s middle’) to a postposition plus NP complement = ‘NP-in’). R traces a shift in the frequency of MADHYE ‘center’ with and without an accompanying genitive. She notes that the presence of a dependent genitive is not required when the dependent involves a center that is inferable (163); compare the English expression she’s in (i.e. ‘at home’), where the complement of in may be omitted. When used in metaphorical senses, inferability declines and MADHYE thus requires an overt dependent. With increasing semantic bleaching (e.g. ‘central location’ > ‘containment’), the expression of noninferable dependents increases, ultimately yielding a fixed N-MADHYE combination and a shift to an abstract relational meaning ‘in’. Thus the shift from N-Gen N to N-Gen Postposition correlates with a semantic shift of MADHYE (and in fact R sees here the ultimate cause of the shift to adpositional syntax).

In Ch. 8, R addresses later stages of the developments, which have received relatively little attention in grammaticalization theory, namely the emergence of a new paradigm of postpositionally flagged case relations in modern I-A languages. R considers two approaches in the literature, those of Bybee and Dahl (1989) and Van de Velde (2010). According to the former, paradigms emerge as epiphenomenal by-products of distinct historical developments. By contrast, Van de Velde (2010), based on a historical investigation of the evolution of a determiner position as a grammaticalized slot in the Dutch NP, sees paradigmaticity as driven by the creation of syntactic slots, which a set of mutually exclusive elements is recruited to fill. R finds neither account fully satisfactory; the ‘paradigmatization of the Hindi postpositions defies a clear-cut model based only on epiphenomenality or only on slot-formation’ (197). R notes furthermore that although exponents of local case relations, such as MADHYE, were the earliest to grammaticalize, elements such as the ergative marker ne, which entered the system at a later period, exhibit a higher degree of paradigmaticity in contemporary Hindi. The mismatch between the time elapsed for grammaticalization and the degree of paradigmaticity is reminiscent of that noted for the grammaticalization of subject and object agreement from clitic pronouns (Haig 2018), where object pronouns may cliticize earliest, yet nevertheless lag behind in achieving inflectional status. These findings suggest that the later stages of grammaticalization, what Norde (2009) refers to as ‘inflectional-
ization’, are highly sensitive to the functional role of the grammaticalizing element in its target construction, and this will determine the outcome of grammaticalization more reliably than the time at which early grammaticalization sets in.

In the final part of this review I would like to address two broader aspects of R’s claims, where I suspect future controversies lurk: the concept of nonconfigurationality, and the question of how unique the I-A developments are within Indo-European. On the issue of nonconfigurationality, the book’s central concern is how present-day configurationality arose from the ‘far-reaching non-configurationality in early Old Indo-Aryan, which lacks any phrasal structures’ (201). Thus a lynchpin of her argument is the claim that Old I-A was indeed nonconfigurational. In Ch. 2, R lays out her approach to nonconfigurationality, sketching various currents in the literature, but ultimately adopting Hale’s (1983) tripartite definition of nonconfigurationality, involving (i) free constituent order, (ii) null anaphora, and (iii) discontinuous nominal expressions (27). R claims that Vedic possesses all three properties (see below), hence is ‘strongly non-configurational’, but correctly notes (43) that contemporary Hindi also exhibits the first two. The difference between Hindi and its ancestor Vedic thus reduces to (iii): the presence of discontinuous nominal expressions. In documenting the presence of this property in Vedic, R is careful to distinguish genuine discontinuities from those that arise from, for example, clitic placement driven by independent principles, or through afterthought constructions. But the evidence presented for ‘true discontinuity’ (39) in Vedic consists of just two, arguably three, examples (38–39), which I find somewhat anticlimactic, given the pivotal role of this criterion for the nonconfigurationality claim.

R then introduces other putative correlates of nonconfigurationality, including a lack of nominal function words (articles etc.), a weak noun/adjective distinction, and the possibility of referential null objects (42), all of which are claimed to hold in Vedic. However, these are not convincing arguments. A weak noun/adjective distinction is not obviously correlated with other features generally associated with nonconfigurationality; Samoan, for example, has a weak noun/adjective distinction and also permits widespread zero-anaphora, yet it has richly articulated phrasal structure, characterized by obligatory functional elements in the NP and VP, thus hardly counts as nonconfigurational. Turkish likewise has a weak noun/adjective distinction (Braun & Haig 2000), also lacks obligatory determiners, and permits subject and object deletion, all properties that R would interpret as indicative of nonconfigurationality. But within the NP, there is a strict linear order of constituents, including slots for modifiers (only genitives display word-order freedom, reflecting a widespread trend crosslinguistically). In other words, crosslinguistically, neither object-drop nor a weak noun/adjective distinction consistently align with a lack of phrasal structure.

R also addresses another criterion, that of a lack of subject-object asymmetries (hence lack of a VP-constituent). R claims that in Vedic, such asymmetries are only present in a ‘small pocket of the grammatical system’ (37, 42). But this assessment is difficult to reconcile with the facts of verbal agreement morphology, which is consistently controlled by the subject, yet is impervious to objects (amply illustrated in the Vedic examples cited). To assign this central asymmetry of Vedic morphosyntax to a ‘small pocket’ seems questionable. Given these unresolved issues, I am skeptical of R’s conclusion that Vedic shows nonconfigurationality ‘to a far-reaching degree, even greater than Warlpiri in some respects’ (51). Without a more coherent theoretical account of nonconfigurationality (see e.g. Pensalfini 2004), I see no meaningful basis for comparison.

In all fairness one can hardly blame R for the contradictions surrounding the notion of nonconfigurationality. Murasugi (2014:298) notes that most linguists use the term ‘nonconfigurationality’ in a primarily intuitive manner, and with regard to ancient Indo-European, the debate had already been framed in terms of ‘configurationality’ by Hewson and Bubenik (2006) and remains so in much of the relevant literature. A less spectacular, but perhaps more insightful, angle would avoid the holistic concept of configurationality and focus on the specifics. What Vedic evidently lacks is not necessarily phrases per se, but (a) phrase structure rules determining linear order of phrasal constituents, and (b) a specifier position. Indeed, if headhood is considered a characteristic of phrases, then one can argue that Vedic had noun phrases: groups linked through rules of gender, number, and case agreement, involving identifiable heads and dependents, but lacking linear ordering rules—in line with a ‘constructional case’ approach within lexical-functional
grammar (Nordlinger 1998). But R has a different take on phrasehood and fastidiously avoids using the P-word with reference to Vedic, instead referring to ‘asymmetrical’ nominal groups or ‘heads in relational noun expressions’ (116). But if headed nominal groups existed in Vedic, the step to phrasal organization (‘configurationality’) would seem less radical (and also more plausible) than is portrayed in recent literature. I think the appeal to nonconfigurationality actually obscures many of the highly original and theoretically more subtle nuances of R’s analysis, and their contribution to grammaticalization theory.

The second issue requiring reconsideration is to what extent the I-A developments are unique within Indo-European. Throughout the book, the pathway to adpositional phrases in I-A is repeatedly contrasted with the developments in ‘other Indo-European branches’ (202), but the only branches discussed in any detail are Greek and Italic. This is surprising given that Armenian, Iranian, and Tocharian all exhibit postpositions and are thus more obvious benchmarks for pan-Indo-European comparison. Iranian is particularly relevant, as the branch divides into languages with predominantly prepositions (e.g. Persian, Central Kurdish), predominantly postpositions (e.g. Mazanderani), and various combinations of both (e.g. Pashto, Northern Kurdish). The distribution is largely areally determined (Stilo 2005), a fact that is relevant for the question that R raises in Ch. 6 regarding the role of language contact in determining adpositional type. Just as R notes for Hindi, the inventories of postpositions, in those Iranian languages that have them, are of divergent etymological origins, but often include relational items such as body-part terms (e.g. in Gilaki and Ossetic). Thus the claimed difference between ‘the sources of adpositional phrases in Indo-Aryan and other branches of Indo-European’ (202) and, more generally, the pathway(s) to configurationality in Indo-European requires more reference to the evidence from I-A’s closest relative, the Iranian branch, than the passing mention on pp. 82–83.

In sum, R has presented a stimulating study that challenges some very widespread views on Indo-European historical syntax and brings new light to bear on subtler, oft-neglected aspects of grammaticalization. Despite the somewhat uneven database (corpus data for two postpositions, of which 80% are accounted for by madhye), R does not flinch from formulating bold hypotheses, which are likely to generate a considerable amount of future research. The book is well organized, clearly and engagingly written, and offers a fine blend of theoretical relevance and close textual analysis. Although I do not share all of R’s conclusions, her arguments are thought provoking and well presented, and definitely demand close consideration by scholars of Indo-Aryan and anyone interested in grammaticalization and Indo-European diachronic syntax.

REFERENCES


HETTRICH, HEINRICH; ANTELJE CASARETTO; and CAROLIN SCHNEIDER. 2010. Syntax und Wortarten der Lokalpartikel des Rgveda. IV: Allgemeines (H. Hettrich); II: ipa (A. Casaretto); III: ava (C. Schneider). Münchner Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft 64.17–130.


A central objective of diachronic linguistics consists in identifying basic regularities of language change, in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of language and human cognition. One particularly systematic type of change that lends itself to this kind of investigation is linguistic cycles, that is, instances of recurrent directional, stepwise change and renewal of linguistic markers, found repeatedly within one language but also across languages.

The concept of linguistic cycles (or spirals), already explicit in von der Gabelentz 1901 and Meillet 1912, has proven very fruitful in recent years, with the renewed interest in the history of negation and JESPERSEN’S CYCLE (Willis et al. 2013, among others), and also in a number of other linguistic areas. Evidence of this is the volume Cyclical change continued, which contains a dozen papers based on the 2014 workshop Linguistic Cycles II at Arizona State University. Elly van Gelderen has refined our understanding of cycles, not least by relating it to her theory of feature economy (van Gelderen 2004). Cyclical change continued forms a perfect companion to van Gelderen 2009 and 2011. While the latter gives a systematic overview of known cycles in various areas of morphosyntax, expanding the analysis within the framework of minimalist generative syntax, the former collects a number of in-depth empirical studies, as does this volume. Some of the topics overlap with the 2009 volume, but the empirical coverage is extended to further languages and new cycles are discussed as compared to the previous collection (e.g. distributive, reflexive, and future cycles).

The first part, entitled ‘Characteristics of cycles’, is opened by ELLY VAN GELDEREN’s ‘Cyclical change continued: Introduction’, characterizing the scientific background of the concept of linguistic cycles. The special emphasis is on the distinction between microcycles (in subparts of grammar) and macrocycles, that is, cycles in language type from synthetic to analytic and back (Hodge 1970)—a problematic concept not least because of the fuzziness of the terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’. Putting the contributions into a wider context, van Gelderen identifies overarching questions about cycles, including typical steps, sources, and influencing factors.

In ‘What cycles when and why?’, MARIANNE MITHUN scrutinizes the Iroquoian languages of North America for instances of cyclical change, identifying reflexive, determinant/DP, distributive, pronominal, and negative cycles driven by weakening and subsequent renewal of pragmatic force, and a locative cycle primarily driven by language contact.

The second part of the volume, ‘Macro-cycles’, is devoted to the above-mentioned synthetic-analytic cycles. In ‘Is radical analyticity normal? Implications of Niger-Congo and Southeast Asia for typology and diachronic theory’, JOHN McWHORTER argues that the near-total lack of