

THE RISE OF GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES.  
COGNITION AND LANGUAGE CHANGE IN AFRICA

by

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Bernd Heine, Professor of African Languages at the University of Cologne, was the Sixteenth Annual Hans Wolff Memorial Lecturer. His Ph.D. (1967) and Habilitation (1971) were earned at the University of Cologne for work on Togo remnant languages and on Pidgin languages in the Bantu area respectively. Between 1967 and 1978, he held research and teaching positions alternately at the University of Cologne and the University of Nairobi. In 1978, he became Director and Full Professor of the Institute of African Studies, University of Cologne. Professor Heine has conducted extensive field research both in West Africa and in East Africa, where he has worked on languages belonging to the Kwa, Bantu, and Cushitic language families. He has also had a long-standing interest in Pidgin and Creole languages and in indigenous African lingua francas. Professor Heine is the author of some fifteen books, including, Status and Use of African Lingua Francas (1970), A Typology of African Languages (1976), The Waata Dialect of Oromo (1981), Sprachpolitik in Afrika (1982, with Mechthild Reh), The Nubi Language of Kibera: An Arabic Creole (1982), and Grammaticalization and Reanalysis in African Languages (1984, with Mechthild Reh). He has been an active member of the editorial board of a number of international journals, including the Journal of African Languages and Linguistics and Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika, and was an editor, along with Thilo Schadeberg and Ekkehard Wolff, of the major reference work Die Sprachen Afrikas (1981). Since 1980 he has been co-director with Wilhelm J.G. Möhlig of an ongoing research and publication project, Language and Dialect Atlas of Kenya. Professor Heine has served on the Executive Council of the Inter-

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1. Metaphor

Dwight Bolinger (1965:567) has described a dictionary as a "frozen pantomime" which presses between its pages the pale flowers of a nosegay of faded metaphors". It would seem that this not only applies to dictionaries, much the same can be claimed for grammar as well. This at least is suggested by observations made within the research project on grammaticalization in African languages which has been carried out at the University of Cologne since 1981<sup>1</sup>. In this lecture some examples are provided to substantiate this claim.

It would seem that lexicographers working on African languages are still largely unaware of the potential that a study of metaphor offers to a better understanding of lexical semantics. In Somali, a Cushitic language of eastern Africa, the word il is used to refer to both an 'eye' and a 'spring of river'. Is this an example of "homophony"? A similar instance is found in Maasai, a Nilotic language, which uses one and the same word, en-korú, for 'eye' and 'spring', and exactly the same situation is encountered in Kikuyu, a Bantu language, where the noun ri-itho refers to both 'eye' and 'spring'. Hence, the same kind of "homophony" exists in all three East African languages, which belong to three different

language families.<sup>2</sup> And in order to distinguish between the two meanings, the same strategy is employed in all three languages: The meaning 'spring' receives an attributival modifier 'of water', that is, it is rendered as 'eye of water' if it is to be distinguished from the former meaning.

That we are not dealing with a case of homophony is suggested in particular by the fact that in all languages concerned a more pronounced cognitive relationship between body parts and certain natural phenomena can be observed. In Kikuyu, for instance, cases like the following have been found where one and the same lexeme is used to designate a body part on the one hand and a topographical concept on the other (cf. Benson 1964):

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<u>Lexeme</u>	<u>Body part</u>	<u>Topographical entity</u>
<u>mütwe</u>	'head'	'source of river, headwater of stream, head of a valley'
<u>kiŋogo</u>	'skull'	'place where a river bursts out from underground'
<u>ngingo</u>	'neck'	'land between two rivers which converge closely and then separate to join further on'
<u>ikai</u>	'cheek'	'broad sweep of bend of river in flood'
<u>mũmero</u>	'throat'	'main channel of river, riverbed'
<u>mũgongo</u>	'back'	'ridge'.

\*\*\*\*\*

Underlying such cases there appears to be a process whereby natural phenomena like topographical entities are conceptualized in terms of body parts. As is well

known, this is not the only domain which exploits the body part metaphor. In Lugbara (cf. Crazzolaro 1960), a Central Sudanic language, the parts of a house are rendered by terms denoting body parts, e.g.,

<u>dzɔ̄ ʼalɛ</u> house stomach	'interior of house'
<u>dzɔ̄ dri</u> house head	'roof'
<u>dzɔ̄ tilɛ</u> house mouth	'door'
<u>dzɔ̄ milɛ</u> house eye	'window'.

In all cases discussed so far, body parts serve as metaphorical vehicles for other physical concepts. But the body part metaphor is in much the same way employed to render non-physical entities, in particular human behaviour and feelings. Common, though by no means universal, metaphorical transfers in Africa include the following:

head	→	intellectual capability
eye	→	envy, desire, wish
heart	→	courage, hope, conscience
liver	→	cowardice
hand	→	theft
tongue	→	babbling, gossip.

It is obvious that metaphorical processes like these are of immediate concern to lexicography, and a dictionary which ignores them is likely to present a "frozen pantomime" of the lexicon, as Bolinger so appropriately termed it. In addition, however, metaphor may have grammatical implications. In the examples provided so far, metaphor involved

a transfer from one "thing-like" concept to another, even if the latter represented some non-physical, abstract entity. But metaphor need not be confined to what in Lyons' (1977:442ff.) terminology could be referred to as the same "order of entities", it may as well move a "first-order entity" to some other order. Such a transfer is likely to have grammatical effects.

Once again we may use the body part metaphor as an example. Another, probably universal, use of it can be seen in the expression of spatial orientation. In Africa, some more common transfers of this kind are:

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<u>Body part</u>	<u>Spatial concept</u>
'head'	'on (top of), above'
'eye'	'before, in front'
'back'	'behind'
'buttock'	'under, behind'
'belly'	'in (side)'
'heart'	'in the middle'
'foot'	'under, below'.

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While the vehicle of this metaphor appears to be the human body, there is a second, less common, metaphor found in some African societies which uses an animal body, instead - to the effect that, e.g., a body part like 'head' designates 'before, in front', rather than 'above', and 'back' is used metaphorically to designate 'above', rather than 'behind'.

What is remarkable about the BODY PART TO SPACE metaphor is that it leads from "thing-like" to "non-thing-like" locative concepts, which again may be further metaphorized to temporal, manner, and other concepts. Apart



from its cognitive aspects, this process also has a noteworthy linguistic effect in addition: it turns nouns or nominal structures into adverbial constituents or word categories. For example, a complex NP like 'the back of the mountain' may turn into an adverbial phrase 'behind the mountain'. The result is that a lexical category, noun, develops into a more grammatical category, preposition or adverb.

The BODY PART TO SPACE metaphor is not the only example of body part nouns assuming a more grammatical function. For instance, nouns like 'body', 'head', and 'belly' frequently have been grammaticalized in African languages to reflexive pronouns (see Heine/Reh 1984:280), and the noun 'hand' has become a marker of possession in a number of African languages in accordance with the metaphorical equation "what is in my hand belongs to me" (cf. Claudi forthcoming).

## 2. The process

More recent research (especially Heine/Reh 1984) has established a number of details on the evolution from lexical to grammatical structures. Some factors underlying grammaticalization have been isolated in Claudi/Heine (in press). This lecture is confined to outlining some technical aspects of the process leading to the rise of grammatical categories. Typically, this process involves three stages which can be described thus:

- Stage I: There is a linguistic structure referring to some physical object, event, or state.
- Stage II: This structure is exploited to designate a more abstract, typically non-physical, content. The result is a state of ambiguity since one and the same structure is employed to express different contents.
- Stage III: The semantic content of Stage I may be lost, with the effect that the new content introduced in Stage II is the only surviving one.

Two examples, both from Ewe, a Kwa language spoken in Ghana and Togo, now also referred to as Gbe, may illustrate the nature of the process involved. Ewe is a tone language, distinguishing two tonal registers. It has SWO as its basic order, though SOV order occurs in the progressive and ingressive aspects, and a possessor - possessed syntax. Further typological features are an analytic-isolating morphosyntax, serial verb constructions, and nominal compounding. The Ewe examples presented in this paper are taken from the unpublished M.A. thesis of Friederike Hünemeyer (1985). The first example concerns the development from a verb, ná 'give', to a dative benefactive case marker. In sentence (1a) ná exclusively functions as a verb, in (1b) it can be interpreted as either a verb (i) or a case marker (ii), while in (1c) it forms a grammatical morpheme, a dative case marker:

- (1) a      é-ná ga m.      'He gave me money.'  
         s/he-give money me
- b      é-wu gbõ ná m. i. 'He slaughtered a goat  
         he-kill goat      and gave it to me.'  
         give/to me      ii. 'He slaughtered a goat  
                            for me.'

- c            é-fle votrú ná afé lá. 'He bought a door  
he-buy door to home the for the house.'

The second example concerns the evolution of the lexeme be from verb to subordinating conjunction. The full verbal function of bé is present in (2a), while bé may be used as either a verb or, if followed by the synonymous verb gblɔ, as complementizer in (2b) and (2c), respectively. Finally, in (2d), bé acts exclusively as a complementizer introducing object clauses.

- (2) a        é-bé núka?        'What did he say?'  
         he-say what
- (2) b        é-bé ye-á-vá        'He said he would come.'  
         he-say he-SUBJ-come
- c            é-gblɔ bé ye-á-vá.    Same meaning as (2b).  
         he-say that he-SUBJ-come
- d            é-dí bé ye-á-lé-e.    'He wanted to catch him.'  
         he-want that he-SUBJ-catch him

This process from lexical to grammatical structure, which has been described under the label "functional split" in Heine/Reh (1984:59ff.), has various implications for synchronic language structure.

The first is that it introduces a dynamic perspective into grammar. What appears in the synchronic structure of a given language is not necessarily any particular state, but a continuum stretching from the least to the most grammaticalized stage. For instance, all three main stages distinguished in the evolution of the lexemes ná and bé, as well as many possible intermediate stages, are represented in modern Ewe, and a competent speaker of the language has to be familiar with the entire range

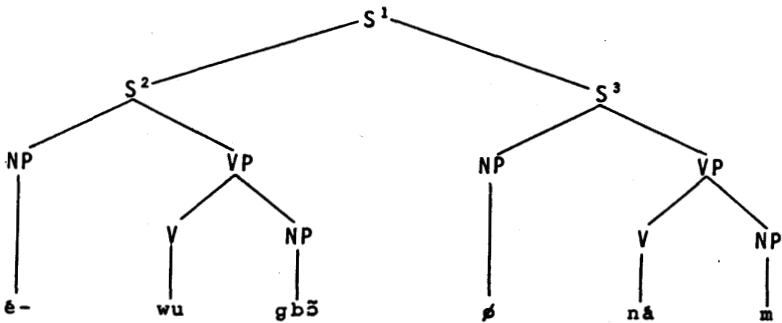
of stages in order to correctly understand and use these units. Thus, the continuum nature of the grammaticalization process is immediately reflected in synchronic grammar.

With each subsequent stage a slightly different, more grammaticalized, meaning is introduced. The result is that there exists a chain of meanings differing from one another in their degree of grammaticalization. While these meanings exist side by side in the structure of a given language and therefore have to be accounted for in the description of that language, their presence and conceptual interrelationship can only be "explained" with reference to their diachronic raison-d'être.<sup>3</sup>

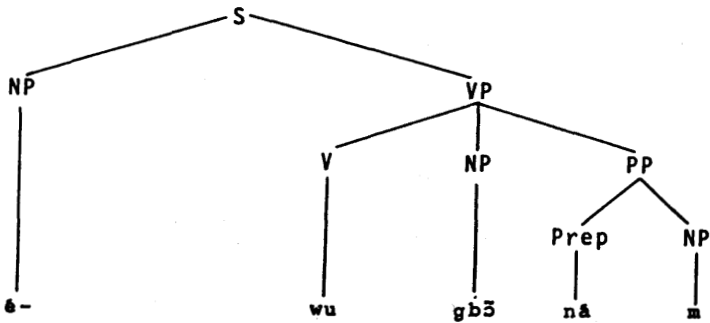
Second, due to the continuum nature of such a grammaticalization process, notions like "word category" or "constituent class" may be artificial entities which are inadequate for defining the exact grammatical status of the linguistic units concerned. For example, in sentence (1b), the unit ná may be translated either as a verb ('give') or as a preposition ('to'), or else as including the properties of both "word categories". It would seem that ná can be appropriately defined only with reference to the grammaticalization process as a whole. It occupies a specific position within this process, which means, for example, that it lacks certain verbal properties, such as the capability of being constructed in the progressive and ingressive aspects, and exhibits certain prepositional properties, such as marking goal or benefactive case roles.

Similarly, an approach which takes the existence of discrete syntactic constituents for granted is likely to fail in such cases. The constituent structure of (1b) may be represented in the same way as something like either (3) or (4), but neither can be regarded as an adequate description of the syntax of (1b), which appears to be located somewhere between (3) and (4).

(3)



(4)



Without a more comprehensive knowledge about the nature of such continua, linguistic analysis in terms of discrete categories like "morpheme class" or "sentence constituent"

can present no more than rough approximations which are inappropriate for achieving descriptive adequacy. It would seem that prototype research offers a more promising approach, although it too is ill-suited to coping with certain problems of grammaticalization continua.

Third, a grammatical model that incorporates such continua as part of the data to be accounted for is able to systematically describe the relationship between certain units which otherwise are likely to be treated as semantically unrelated homophones. The word bé for instance might be interpreted as a "homophone" designating a verb 'say' on the one hand and a complementizer 'that' on the other. The fact that these functions reflect differing grammaticalization stages of one and the same unit and, hence, can be regularly derived from one another is likely to remain outside the scope of linguistic descriptions that ignore grammaticalization continua.

Apart from its contribution to language description, the study of grammaticalization can also be pertinent to "understanding" language structure. For example a partial "explanation" may be provided for why in (2) there are two synonymous forms which differ considerably in their structure: The word bé occurs both as a verb (2b) and as a complementizer (2c); the meaning 'say' is expressed by entirely different verbs in the two alternative sentences; and (2c) introduces the object clause ye-á-vá 'he comes' by means of a complementizer, while

there is no complementizer in (2b). All these differences are largely predictable within the framework of grammaticalization theory: the lexeme bé 'say' occurring as a verb in (2b) has been grammaticalized to a complementizer 'that' in (2c). As a result of this functional split, bé came to introduce a new type of object clause, and, hence, a new verb denoting 'say' was required, which is increasingly replacing bé as a verb. Since functional split implies that the earlier structure still exists while a new structure has come into being, there is a period of overlap where two functionally equivalent structures co-exist. The presence of the synonymous sentences (2b) and (2c) is indicative of this transitional period.

The "explanatory" parameter underlying the entire process appears to be mainly psychological, relating to concept formation. One aspect of this process involves the "principle of the exploitation of old means for novel functions" (Werner/Kaplan 1963:403), whereby concrete, clearly delineated concepts are employed to refer to less concrete, less clearly delineated entities. In a case like (2) for instance, the verb bé 'say' may be said to constitute the old means employed for a novel function, that of introducing dependent predications, or subordinate object clauses. Thus, a more concrete entity, a process verb, serves to present a less concrete concept, a syntactic relation. The main claim made here is that underlying the genesis of many grammatical categories

there is a process of displacement which has the effect that more abstract phenomena are conceptualized in terms of concrete, perceptual-motor experiences. This includes in particular the following kind of transfers:

- a. From body part to spatial orientation,
- b. from space to domains like time, manner, and possession,
- c. from action to state/quality,
- d. from physical to grammatical relation.

Conceptual displacement of this kind hence entails, among other things, that lexical material is used to present grammatical information. In the Ewe examples discussed above, the last two kinds of transfer (c and d) appear to be involved, whereby verbs denoting physical actions such as ná 'give' and bé 'say' serve to express static, non-physical concepts, i.e. grammatical notions such as case marking and clause subordination, respectively.

### 3. Grammaticalization and grammar

In the discussion above several points were mentioned where a concept-to-grammar approach is of importance to a theory of grammar. Attention was drawn to the distinction between continuity and discontinuity in grammaticalization. The former requires a theoretical framework which is not limited to the analysis of a finite set of discrete taxa and their interrelationship, but takes linguistic variation as the center rather than the periphery of



grammar and views language as a dynamic process evolving through space and time. The latter relates, e.g., to the nature of overlapping stages of grammaticalization, raising such issues as "free variation", "functional equivalence", "ambiguity", and the like. In short, these points suggest that existing grammatical models, both descriptive-iconic and theoretical-explanatory, may profit from incorporating findings on grammaticalization. In the present section, another Ewe example is examined to illustrate the immediate relevance of such findings in more detail.

### 3.1 The verb-to-adverb channel

Ewe has a small set of words which tend to fulfill an adverbial function, expressing the direction of an action:

<u>dzó</u> , <u>yi</u>	'away'
<u>di</u>	'down'
<u>vá</u> , <u>vê</u>	'hither'.

Hunne Meyer<sup>4</sup> refers to them as directionals. The following discussion is confined to one of them, di 'down', which is characteristic of this set. This word occurs as a place adverb after verbs requiring a locative complement as in (5), or as a temporal adverb after verbs of saying or mental process verbs as in (6):

- (5) me-tss e da di. 'I have put it down.'  
I-take it lay down
- (6) afákalá-wó gblɔ-a nya di. 'The soothsayers  
soothsayer-PL say-HAB word predict things.'  
ahead

This word di may also occur as a place adverb after other verbs in the same sentence, but only if immediately preceded by an inanimate object NP, as in (7). If the object is animate then di behaves like a verb, i.e. it takes a subject prefix which shows agreement with the preceding object, as in (8):

(7) wó-he e di. 'They pulled it (\*him/her)  
they-pull it down down.'

(8) wó-he e wò-di. 'They pulled him/her down.'  
they-pull it it-go:down

Finally, di also forms a verb having both an intransitive (9) and a transitive reading (10):

(9) me-di le sɔ dzɪ. 'I got off the horse.'  
I-descend be horse on

(10) mé-nyé nye-é di ga lá di o. 'It wasn't I who  
NEG-I I-FOC put:down money buried the money.'  
the down NEG

Note that in sentence (10) di occurs both as a verb and an adverb. It is hard to imagine how these different uses of di, and those of the other directionals, can be described in a meaningful way unless one reconstructs the process which gave rise to them. Underlying this process there appears to be displacement to the effect that adverbial notions are conceptualized in terms of action verbs involving transfers like the ones in (11):

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(11) <u>Lexeme</u>	<u>Source concept</u> (action verb)	<u>Resulting concept</u> (adverb)
<u>yi</u>	'go (to)'	'away'
<u>vá</u>	'come'	'here, hither'
<u>dzó</u>	'leave, go away'	'away'
<u>di</u>	'go down, descend'	'down'.

As has been demonstrated elsewhere (Claudi/Heine in press), such transfers can be described by means of a limited number of categorical metaphors. Thus, the transfer from action verb to adverb may be said to have been triggered by the metaphor A QUALITY IS A PROCESS, whereby adverbial qualifiers are expressed in terms of process verbs. In addition, the categorical metaphor AN OBJECT IS A PERSON appears to have been involved. Whereas the verbal concept is typically associated with a human agent, the adverbial concept no longer is, as can be seen in sentences like (8) where the erstwhile verb đi may be associated with either an animate or an inanimate concept, or (7), where it no longer tolerates a human agent.

Another, more obvious, example is provided by sentence (1) presented earlier. The lexical unit ná 'give' typically requires a human complement, as is evident in sentences like (1a) and (1b). In (1c) however it has been grammaticalized to the extent that it no longer requires human complements, but may introduce inanimate concepts as well, in accordance with the AN OBJECT IS A PERSON metaphor.

The evolution from action verb to adverb is largely predictable within the framework of grammaticalization theory and accounts for some of the peculiarities in the use of đi, like the following:

(a) Conceptual transfer precedes morphosyntactic shift. This means for example that in sentence (8) the shift from verb to adverb has been concluded conceptually but not yet morphologically: the lexeme đi no longer has verbal meaning although it still maintains the inflections of a verb.

(b) At first, grammaticalization does not affect the syntactic characteristics of the unit concerned. Thus, di occupies the position of a verb in a serial verb construction in sentence (7). Subsequently however the relevant unit acquires the syntax of the new word class it now belongs to. Accordingly, in sentence (5) di appears in the position reserved for locative complements, i.e., that of adverbials.

(c) In accordance with the metaphorical structure of Ewe,<sup>5</sup> di may serve to express more abstract concepts. In sentence (6), for instance, it has a temporal significance suggesting that a metaphor TIME IS SPACE has been applied. More specific uses of di can be observed in sentences like (12), where the phrase dó (ga) di 'put down (money)' acquired the metaphorical meaning 'save (money)'.

- (12) háfi wo-á-tu xə-a lá é-dó ga sugbɔ di.  
before he-SUBJ-build house-DEF COMPL he-put  
money much down

'Before he built the house, he had saved a lot of money.'

### 3.2. Synchronic grammar

These few examples may suffice to show that directionals of modern Ewe, such as di, exhibit the whole range of uses from a full verb at the one end to an adverb at the other. This synchronic spectrum immediately reflects a diachronic process, the grammaticalization of verbs to adverbs. Predictably, it also reflects certain grammatical properties of this process. For example, since morphosyntactic evolution lags behind conceptual transfer, there

are cases where these directionals are semantically adverbs although they still require a verbal morphosyntax.

It would seem that information of this kind has to be considered in a synchronic grammar which aims at both describing and "explaining" language structure. Apart from the verb-to-adverb continuum, much the same range of grammaticalizations can be observed in other parts of Ewe grammar. The examples of the verb-to-case marker and the verb-to-complementizer continua have been alluded to in section 2; various others could be added.<sup>6</sup> The question that remains to be considered is: how should such information be included within synchronic grammar?

Traditional grammatical models tend to describe the relationship between, e.g., a verb and a more grammaticalized form of it such as an adverb, a case marker, or a complementizer either as one involving "homophones", or else involving a separate, "hybrid", word class combining properties of two existing classes (cf. Ansre 1966). None of these solutions accounts for the nature of grammaticalization continua and the significance they have for synchronic grammar. At the present stage of research it is not yet possible to exactly define this significance. It would seem that a grammar which aims at understanding the structure of a given language should provide information, inter alia, on (a) the conceptual base of grammaticalization, (b) the grammaticalization channels involved, and (c) the range of grammaticalizations each taxonomic unit exhibits.

With reference to a word like di, information of the following nature should be included: There is a common strategy in Ewe to express adverbial concepts by means of process verbs. Accordingly, a verb like di 'go down, descend' is employed to render the notion of 'down'. This triggers off grammaticalization, with the result that in modern Ewe there is a range of different uses of di, extending at the one end from a verb with all its inflections for tense, aspect, modality, person, and negation, which are characteristic of Ewe verbs, to an invariable adverb which may not take any inflections at the other end. In order to mark the dynamic nature of such units in a grammatical description of Ewe, they may be referred to in an abbreviated form roughly thus:

- di (verb → adverb)
- ná (verb → preposition)
- bé (verb → complementizer).

#### 4. Conclusion

To return to the Bolinger phrase quoted in the introduction, there is real justification for viewing grammar as representing "the pale flowers of a nosegay of faded metaphors". To what extent the type of conceptual displacement leading to grammaticalization involves metaphor in the strict sense remains to be investigated. Furthermore, it is still unclear how the relationship between metaphor and processes like desemanticization (see Heine/Reh 1984: 36-39) or "semantic bleaching" is to be defined. The

evolution observed in Ewe from a verb 'give' to a dative case marker, for instance, on the one hand involves a metaphorical process whereby a dynamic verb serves as a vehicle for encoding a grammatical function, case marking, in accordance with the categorical metaphor A QUALITY IS A PROCESS, which uses events or processes as vehicles to express states or qualities (see Claudi/Heine in press). On the other hand, this can equally be interpreted as an instance of semantic bleaching since the semanto-syntactic content of the relevant lexeme is narrowed down to one constituent part of that content, i.e., that of expressing a case relation. This interpretation would suggest that we are not dealing with a metaphor but rather with a process which can be regarded at best as one involving metonymic usage.

The main purpose of this lecture has been to demonstrate that processes such as the evolution from lexical to grammatical structure are not merely a matter of diachrony of language history but are also of concern for the synchronic linguist and grammarian. A better understanding of such processes can be pertinent, for example, to describing and accounting for certain dynamic aspects of language structure and to reconstructing parts of the cognitive base of grammar.

It is hard to determine exactly what position phenomena like the ones considered above should occupy in grammar. On the one hand one could think of a "core-and-appendage" grammar which,

in addition to looking at language as a static system, includes a chapter on grammaticalization and its implications for understanding language structure. On the other hand, one could conceive of a new type of grammar which views language as "a dynamic process evolving through space and time" (Bickerton 1973:643), one which is equally concerned with linguistic categories and with what happens between such categories. How these, as well as various other, alternatives are to be evaluated is entirely open to future research

#### NOTES

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2. Paul Newman (personal communication) informs me that a similar situation is found in West African languages. The Hausa noun idoo, for example, has both meanings as well, as is also the case with the noun yyi of Grebo, a Kru language of eastern Liberia.
3. Concerning the problem of achieving explanations in linguistics, see Lass (1980).
4. The present account is based on Hünemeyer (1985:92-124).
5. This structure can be roughly reduced to the following chain of categorical metaphors:  
  
QUALITY - PROCESS - SPACE - OBJECT - PERSON,  
  
where OBJECT, PERSON, etc., stand for abstract categories which serve as metaphorical vehicles to any of the categories to their left (see Claudi/Heine in press). These categorical metaphors differ from the conceptual metaphors proposed by Lakoff/Johnson (1980) in representing more abstract, and more inclusive, relations.



Thus, underlying a given categorical metaphor there are a number of different conceptual metaphors. The QUALITY IS SPACE metaphor for instance may be said to include conceptual metaphors like the following (see Lakoff/Johnson 1980:15-17), which employ spatial orientation as a vehicle to express non-physical states or qualities: HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN; GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN; VIRTUE IS UP, DEPRAVITY IS DOWN; etc.

6. For more examples, see Heine/Reh (1984).

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#### HANS WOLFF MEMORIAL LECTURESHIP

Hans Wolff was born on April 6, 1920 in Mainz, Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1937, attended Queens College, New York from 1939-1941 and then transferred to Indiana University. From 1942-1946 he served with the Military Intelligence Corps. After the war he returned to Indiana and in 1946 the B.A. magna cum laude in Linguistics, he was awarded the M.A. in Linguistics in 1947 and in 1949 a double doctorate in Anthropology and Linguistics. In 1949 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico where he taught for eleven years. His early work was in Amerindian languages, especially in Siouan studies, and in the teaching of English as a second language. While still at the University of Puerto Rico, he was invited in 1953 to visit Nigeria, and from that time his interest in Africa and African languages grew. He published widely on the languages and language problems of Nigeria, and became one of the leading authorities on Yoruba. He helped to found and to edit the Journal of African Languages, assisted in the early development of the West African Language Conference, and for several years served as Chairman of the African Linguistics Committee of the African Studies Association. At the time of his death in September 1967, he was Professor of Linguistics at Northwestern University.

The Hans Wolff Memorial Lectures were established at Indiana University to honor his considerable contribution to African Studies.

- 1968-69 David Dalby (United Kingdom), University of London. Linguistics. "Black Through White: Patterns of Communication." (24 March 1969).
- 1969-70 Emile Snyder (United States), University of Wisconsin. African Literature. "Tradition and Modernism in African Literature." (4 March 1970).
- 1971-72 Wilfred H. Whiteley (United Kingdom), University of London. Linguistics and Anthropology. "To Plan is to Choose: The Rationale and Consequences of Language Choice in Eastern Africa." (7 April 1972).
- 1972-73 Anthony H.M. Kirk-Greene (United Kingdom), St. Anthony's College, Oxford University. Political Science and African Studies. "Mutumin Kirkii: The Concept of the Good Man in Hausa." (11 April 1973)
- 1973-74 A.E. Meeussen (Belgium), University of Leiden and Royal Museum of Brussels. Linguistics. "Africanisms." (18 April 1974).
- 1974-75 Sembene, Ousmane (Senegal). Novelist and film-maker. "Man is Culture." (5 March 1975).

- 1975-76 A. Teixeira Da Mota (Portugal), Centro de Estudos de Cartografia Antiga, Lisbon. History, Geography. "Some Aspects of Portuguese Colonization and Maritime Trade in West Africa in the 15th and 16th Centuries." (5 March 1976).
- 1976-77 Nathan M. Shamuyarira (Zimbabwe), University of Dar es Salaam. Political Science and Journalism. "The Political and Economic Crisis in Southern Africa." (14 April 1977).
- 1977-78 Batourou Sekou Kouyate (Mali), National Ensemble of Republic of Mali. Kora soloist. A concert of Mande poetry and song. (19 April 1978).
- 1978-79 L. Adele Jinadu (Nigeria), University of Lagos. Political Science. "Structure and Choice in African Politics." (5 April 1979).
- 1979-80 Leo Kuper (South Africa), University of California-Los Angeles. Sociology. "South Africa: Human Rights and Genocide." (18 April 1980).
- Hilda Kuper (South Africa), University of California-Los Angeles. Anthropology. "Biography as Interpretation." (21 April 1980).
- 1980-81 Ruth Finnegan (United Kingdom), Open University, Milton Keynes. Folklore and Anthropology. "Short Time to Stay: Comments on Time, Literature and Oral Performance." (1 April 1981).
- 1981-82 Francis M. Deng (Sudan), Ambassador from Sudan to Canada. Law, Jurisprudence, and Anthropology. "Security Problems: an African Predicament." (23 October 1981).
- 1982-83 B.W. Andrzejewski (Somalia), Emeritus Professor of Cushitic Languages and Literatures, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. "Islamic Literature of Somalia" (11 November, 1983).
- 1983-84 Thurstan Shaw (West Africa), Ph.D., CBE. "Filling Gaps in African Maps - Fifty Years of Archaeology in Africa" (29 February 1984).