

The (non-)grammaticalization of agreement in Iranian: diachrony meets typology

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Many languages exhibit significant phonological similarities between free pronouns, and the corresponding verbal agreement affixes (e.g. Bantu, or Turkic). For decades, linguists have sought to account for the similarities in terms of a grammaticalization process, by which the pronouns gradually coalesce with their verbal heads to yield affixal agreement markers (Givón 1976, Bresnan & Mchombo 1987, Siewierska 2004, Culbertson 2010, Kibrik 2011, van Gelderen 2011, among many others); indeed, Fuß (2005: 4) refers to “a universal historical pathway” in the rise of agreement markers from erstwhile free pronouns. Despite the unusual degree of consensus across linguists of very different persuasions, reliably attested case-studies that actually document the whole trajectory of the assumed developments remain a scarcity. A second issue that remains unresolved concerns the differences in the grammaticalization of subject agreement as opposed to object agreement. Recent attempts to synthesize the insights of grammaticalization theory with Minimalism, e.g. Fuß (2005) or van Gelderen (2011), do not predict different outcomes, and continue to work on the assumption that essentially the same mechanisms are involved. However, the evidence from typology suggests that genuine cases of obligatory object agreement are exceedingly rare (Siewierska 1999, Haig, under review), while subject agreement is commonplace.

In my talk I will discuss Iranian data that turn out to be highly relevant for the latter issue. Thanks to fortuitous developments in the system of verbal agreement (Haig 2008, Jügel 2015), Iranian offers a natural laboratory for investigating the differences in the grammaticalization of subject and object agreement. The results lend support to the view that there are fundamental differences in the respective grammaticalization processes. Specifically, while object pronouns are actually rapid early grammaticalizers, there are crucial differences in the final stages of the assumed grammaticalization cline: for objects, the endpoint (or attractor state), is Differential Object Indexing (Iemmolo & Klumpp 2013), while subject pronouns may indeed ultimately become part of verbal inflection. Finally, I will discuss reasons for the subject/object asymmetry, based on data from natural language corpora.