Grammaticalisation processes in Flemish Sign Language

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Definition grammaticalisation:
"the change whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions." (Hopper & Traugott 2003:232)

Method:

Internal reconstruction, i.e. a procedure for inferring part of the history of a language from material available for a synchronic description of the language on the basis of paradigmatic allomorphy.

Grammaticalisation processes occur along a number of structural clines:

1. Morpho-syntactic fusion

Givón (1971:413): "Today's morphology is yesterday's syntax".
Pfau & Steinbach (2007:87): "sign languages only have very few (if any) instances of type 2-grammaticalization (i.e. from free to bound grammatical morpheme)".
VGT: negative verb signs: a positive sign + negative adverb NOT => a positive verb stem followed by a negative affix which consists of a twisting movement. Examples are the verb signs BELIEVE-NOT, WANT-NOT, CAN-NOT and the deverbal adjective sign UNKNOWN.

2. Decategorialisation

Decategorialisation refers to the evolution of open class lexemes in a primary or major category to closed class lexemes in a secondary or minor category.

•in VGT and other sign languages (for ASL, Janzen and Shaffer 2002; for other OFSL related languages , Wilcox, 2004) :
➢evolution of the gesture for "strong" being lexicalised into the (ad)nominal sign STRONG/POWER and then grammaticalised into the modal verb CAN.
➢evolution of the adjectival/adverbial sign READY into an aspectual marker READY (similar to FINISH in ASL, Janzen 1995).
➢evolution of nominal sign REASON (into question sign WHY?) into the subordinating conjunction BECAUSE (similar to NGT, Pfau & Steinbach 2007:40).

•in VGT (but not (yet) described for other sign languages):
➢lexical verb GIVE -> light verb GIVE -> preposition/auxiliary GIVE functioning as recipient marker
➢nominal sign EXAMPLE -> conjunction

introducing a conditional clause
➢verb sign "be mistaken" -> conjunction introducing an adversative clause.

3. Phonological reduction

The grammaticalised element is frequently phonologically reduced compared to its non-grammaticalised counterpart.
e.g. preposition GIVE: short forward movement starting from the signer (without spatial agreement)

e.g. negative affixation: short twist

4. Reduction of syntactic freedom

Heine et al. (1991) claim that grammaticalisation entails a limitation of syntactic freedom since a lexical element can be moved around more freely while a grammaticalised element is more limited in its syntagmatic relation to other sentence elements.
e.g. VGT GIVE as preposition or auxiliary: always positioned right in front of the indirect object or recipient (= very striking since in VGT mostly only word order tendencies, no rules, Vermeerbergen 2004).

Principle of divergence (Hopper 1991:24)
= the different forms can exist next to each other at the same time and the variants can be put in a hierarchy from less to more grammaticalised:
e.g. the verb sign GIVE (itself a lexicalisation of a classifier construction):
1. Classifier construction or incorporated classifier:
   SOMEONE BOOK GIVE-cl.book TO BOY
2. Conventionalised sign GIVE:
   SOMEONE BOOK $_1$GIVE$_{3l}$ TO BOY
3. GIVE in a verb sandwich construction (Fisher & Janis 1990) in which the first GIVE is the conventionalised citation form without any spatial agreement and the second one has an incorporated classifier handshape and spatial agreement:
   WOMAN GIVE PRESENT TO BOY $_1$GIVE-cl.present$_{3r}$
4. Light verb (cf. Butt 2004) GIVE:
   GIRL GIVE BOY STROKE$_{self}$ STROKE$_3$
5. Auxiliary GIVE:
   INDEX$_m$ RABBIT $_1$GIVE$_{3l}$ MAN SHOOT$_{ml}$
6. Preposition GIVE:
   RABBIT GIVE MAN SHOOT$_{ml}$

Unidirectionality?

Most researchers would claim that grammaticalisation paths are unidirectional, i.e. developing from a full lexical element into a functional grammatical element. At least some counterexamples to this general rule can be found in VGT:
e.g. the possible development of the negative modal auxiliary WANT-NOT into a full lexical verb "cannot be bothered"
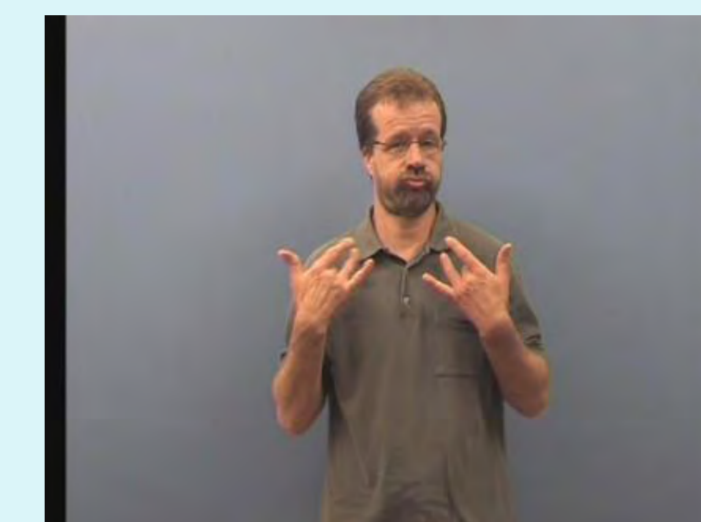
e.g. the possible development of the negative modal auxiliary CANNOT plus MORE into a full lexical verb meaning "cannot take it anymore".
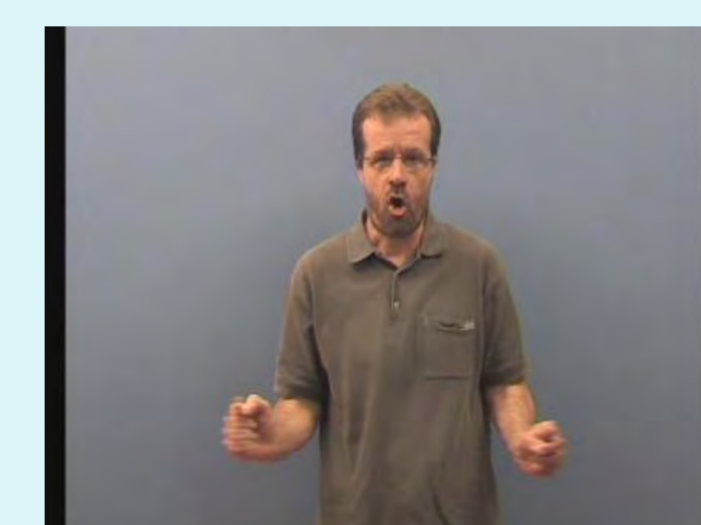
Grammaticalisation and sign languages?

Pfau & Steinbach (2007:87), based on a survey of studies that focused on grammaticalisation processes in sign languages, conclude "that sign languages employ exactly the same grammaticalization paths as do spoken languages. That is, the pathways proposed in the literature are **modality-independent**" (although there are certain differences at certain levels).

=> can be corroborated for VGT

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