From Subordinate Clause to Attributive Clause in Sirva

Ever since Matsumoto's (1988, 1997) observation that noun-modifying clauses in Japanese do not relativize on their head nouns, there has been a growing awareness that many constructions that had previously been described as relative clauses were in fact GENERALIZED NOUN-MODIFYING CLAUSE CONSTRUCTIONS (GNMCCs)—clauses which modify a head noun attributively (see, for example, Comrie 1998). Our understanding of these constructions is still quite limited and there has been, to my knowledge, no investigation into the diachronic processes by which GNMCCs are created.

This paper presents a GNMCC from Sirva, a Trans-New Guinea language of the Sogeram group spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. Sirva GNMCCs follow the head noun as shown in (1), where the GNMCC *bira urubɨsa* 'they went' modifies the head noun *udukɨb* 'path'. The GNMCC also requires a postposed subordinating morpheme, in this case the pragmatic middle demonstrative *kudu*.

(1)   *Udukɨb [bira   u-rubɨ-s-a   ] k-udu   sigud-ɨi ...*
           path   3PL   go-PL-FAR.PST-3 MID-PRAG disappear-3SG.DS
           'The path they had gone on disappeared and …'

This construction is not found in any of the nine other Sogeram languages, so I argue that it is a Sirva innovation. The question then becomes, how did it emerge? I argue that two other constructions combined to create the Sirva GNMCC, and that both of these can be reconstructed to Proto-Sogeram: topic-fronting and clause chain nominalization. I first reconstruct these two constructions to Proto-Sogeram by reconstructing the associated morphology: Proto-Sogeram topics were marked by one of two cases on the demonstrative (*-n or *-Ø), and clause chains were nominalized by a postposed demonstrative.

I then argue that Sirva reanalyzed nominalized clause chains containing topic-fronted nominals as GNMCCs in which the topic-fronted nominal acted as head noun. In other words, the subordinate clause in (1) would have, at the Proto-Sogeram stage, been *udukɨb bira urubɨsa* 'the path, they walked (on it)'. Because of the semantic properties of the clause chain nominalization construction, the reanalysis I propose involved minimal semantic change. Moreover, the structural properties of clause chain nominalization and topic-fronting allowed for a gradual change in the constituency of the head noun. I then show that reanalysis is complete based on the determiner-taking properties of nouns modified by GNMCCs: while topic-fronted nouns can take a variety of determiners in modern Sirva, nouns modified by GNMCCs cannot.

This paper offers an important contribution to our understanding of GNMCCs, which are an understudied typological phenomenon. It also improves our understanding of the diachronic behavior of topicalization constructions as well as the peculiarly Papuan clause chain subordination construction from which the Sirva GNMCC emerged.

References

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