The pivotal role of linguistic context in constructional change

Elizabeth Closs Traugott
traugott@stanford.edu

Context has been a central notion in linguistics since Verner (1875) showed that sound change may depend on linguistic distribution and is not exceptionless as the neogrammarians then thought.

As linguists embraced pragmatics, discourse analysis, and sociocultural factors, an attempt was made to distinguish “context” (“external”, material setting) from “co-text” (“internal”, verbal, linguistic distribution (see Catford 1965). However, the distinction has proved hard to maintain, and many linguists now simply refer to “context” when referring to “linguistic/verbal context”.

I argue that linguistic context has a pivotal role in a usage-based constructionalist perspective on grammatical change (Diewald and Smirnova 2012, Traugott and Trousdale 2013). Extensive work on context in grammaticalization has been done in an attempt to theorize Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca’s (1994) statement: “Everything that happens to the meaning of a gram [‘grammatical item’] happens because of the contexts in which it is used”. In work on grammaticalization researchers usually focus
either on meaning or on form. In construction grammar (e.g. Croft 2001, Goldberg 2006), both are of equal importance since a construction is a form-meaning pairing. Therefore the role of context in change needs to be rethought. In particular, a distinction needs to be made between contexts that, together with language processing, may enable onset of constructionalization (Diewald 2002 calls these “critical” contexts) and contextual changes after constructionalization.

Examples are drawn from the development of i) a shred of in its quantifier use (e.g. not a shred of evidence ‘not any’, Brems 2011), ii) all but in its approximator use (e.g. she all but fell down ‘almost’, De Smet 2012), and iii) IT-clefts (e.g. It was John who fell, Patten 2012).

References

＜主催：青山学院大学総合研究所プロジェクト「英日語の『周辺部』とその機能に関する総合的対照研究」Joseph Dias、Elizabth C. Traugott、東栄裕子、澤田淳、小野寺典子
共催：日本語用論学会＞  （お問い合わせ先：小野寺典子 onodera@cl.aoyama.ac.jp）