ONE (NUMERAL)> INDEFINITE in classifier languages

Yasaman Sanei

University of Göttingen
RTG 2636 'Form-meaning mismatches'

Grammaticalization of the numeral ONE into an indefinite marker is commonly attested in many languages of the world. (Kuteva *et. al 2019*). This study aims to investigate the syntactic conditions that make this grammaticalization possible, in particular w.r.t. the numeral-classifier systems.

In the so-called *classifier languages* such as Mandarin and Spoken Persian, a numeral has to be accompanied by a numeral classifier and in most cases cannot appear alone. (Li 1999; Shirzad & Darzi 2023 a.m.o)

The following examples are from Spoken Persian:

(1) a. *do *(tā) ābnabāt*
     two TCL candy
     'two candies'

   b. *do ja'be ābnabāt*
     two box candy
     'two boxes of candies'

   c. *do tā ja'be ābnabāt*
     two TCL box candy
     'two boxes of candies'

As (1) shows, numerals in Spoken Persian have to be accompanied either by a measure classifier (*ja'be* 'box') or a functional classifier that only serves an individuation function (*tā*, glossed as TCL).

However, there is an exception to this pattern: the numeral *yek* 'one' can appear as a bare numeral; i.e. without any classifiers. Moreover, it can optionally be accompanied by a measure classifier, but it is not compatible with *tā*, as demonstrated below:

(2) a. *ye(k) (*tā) ābnabāt*
     one TCL candy
     'one candy'

   b. *ye(k) (*tā) ja'be ābnabāt*
     one TCL box candy
     'one box of candies'

In Persian, *yek* has been grammaticalized to an indefinite marker. (see Jasbi 2016 a.o.). Indefinite *yek* can be formally distinguished from the numeral in several ways; e.g. due to semantic bleaching and loss of the singularity component it is, unlike all numerals, compatible with the plural morpheme on the noun.

Looking at the structural differences between *yek* as a bare numeral and *yek* accompanied by a classifier, it might seem that it is the syntactic peculiarity of *yek* that allows it to be reanalyzed as an indefinite marker in Persian, i.e. the fact that it can appear without classifiers. However, it is not the case for all classifier languages, e.g. in Mandarin, grammaticalization happens even though the numeral ONE is obligatorily accompanied by a classifier. This contrast raises an interesting question: how can we unify the two seemingly different grammaticalization paths in the classifier languages where ONE can appear as a bare numeral, and in the ones where this is not a possibility?

Investigating syntactic properties of the numeral ONE in other classifier languages where the grammaticalization path of ONE (NUMERAL) > INDEFINITE has taken place may reveal more about classifier languages, and shed light on our understanding of conditions under which grammaticalization may happen.

References

- Jasbi, Masoud. 2016. Three types of indefinites in Persian: simple, complex and antidefinite. *Proceedings of SALT* (26). 244-263.

- Kuteva, Tania. *et. al.* 2019. *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Li, Yen-Hui Audrey. 1999. Plurality in a classifier language. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 8. 75-99.

- Shirzad, Amirmohammad & Darzi, Ali. 2023. Type shifting and the number system in Persian. *Journal of Researches in Linguistics* 15(1). 137-158.