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On the upgrading of grammatical concepts

Christian Lehmann

1 Theoretical foundations

1.1 Retrospect

Semantic change is omnipresent in language: While the significans may remain constant, the significatum changes. The language of science is not exempt from this phenomenon. Although the whole purpose of technical terms is to allow the scientist to work with well-defined concepts whose meaning remains constant in different contexts, in actual practice terms change their meaning and become polysemous just like any other word.

The core of our concepts of grammatical categories and functions goes back to Ancient Greek and Latin grammar. To be precise, the sophists of the 5th cent. BC laid the foundations for a grammar of Ancient Greek, to be further elaborated from the third century BC by the stoics and the philologists of the school of Alexandria. The first comprehensive grammars were probably produced in the first cent. BC. The Greek grammarians provided the terms for such concepts as *ónoma* 'noun', *rhêma* 'verb, predicate', *árthron* 'article', *metokhé* 'participle', *ptôsis* 'case', *khrónos* 'tense', *diáthesis* 'voice' and many more. Needless to say, those terms denoted phenomena of the Greek language. Those philologists did not even dream of doing the grammar of any other language.

In the second cent. BC, Greek grammatical concepts were imported into Latin, more precisely, the concepts were applied to the Latin language and the terms were translated into Latin. In the subsequent centuries, the Latin equivalents to the above-quoted terms, *nomen, verbum/praedicatum, articulus, participium, casus, tempus, genus verbi*, were coined. The Roman grammarians were essentially aware of the fact that those Greek concepts fitted their own language to different degrees. However, since on the one hand most of the concepts had been defined on a combined functional-structural basis, and on the other hand the two languages are rather similar, they had no principal problem in applying the concepts cross-linguistically. By the time of Aelius Donatus (4th cent. AD), the canon of Latin grammatical terminology was firmly established and remained essentially unchanged for one and a half millennia.

When, at the beginning of the Modern Age, the first vernacular grammars were written, they all employed the concepts of Donatus's grammar. The terms were seldom translated, mostly borrowed. Chase 1926:24f offers a list of 65 Donatian terms borrowed into English. At the beginning of English grammaticography, grammarians applied the Latin concepts to English much like the Roman grammarians had applied the Greek concepts to Latin. It took them a while to recognize that some of those concepts were more language-specific than others and therefore not necessarily transferable to English.

1.2 Cross-linguistic grammatical concepts

A grammar is part of the system that associates sound with meaning. Since this association is effectuated in each historical language, the grammars of all languages differ. If one takes a concept like 'dative' or 'infinitive' as a structural concept, it cannot cover the same phenomena in Latin as in English. If one thinks it is the task of terminology to prevent one from the inference that what is called 'infinitive' in English is somehow structurally like the Latin infinitive, then one ought never to have called the English form (with or without *to*) an infinitive; and similarly for all the other grammatical categories and functions. That was actually the conclusion drawn by American structuralism. This position leads to a wealth of language-specific terminology which, in the face of 7,000 languages, becomes unwieldy and renders comparative linguistics next to impossible.

The linguists who do not see a serious problem in recycling terms are obviously the majority; otherwise it would be inexplicable – to mention but that example – that grammar after grammar in the series Lingua Descriptive Studies alias Croom Helm Descriptive Grammars alias (Routledge) Descriptive Grammars does not find a problem with answering questions 2.1.3.2.1 of the pertinent questionnaire, which inquire for the distinction of tenses like present, past, future and the like in the target language. All of these linguists consider such concepts of grammatical categories and functions as typological concepts. That means that they are categories of linguistic signs, i.e. categories based on function and structure of the elements they comprise. They are, on the one hand, more abstract than concepts identifying language-specific categories, and on the other hand, less abstract than concepts pertaining to the level of human language. For instance, 'tense' and 'case' are typological concepts in that sense: Some languages such as Latin and German have tense and case, while others such as Yucatec Maya or Mandarin do not. How generally applicable such a concept is trivially depends on how general we make it: if 'tense' happened to comprise 'aspect' (as it did up to 1885), then Yucatec Maya and Mandarin would have tense, too.

1.3 The core of a grammatical concept

In applying a grammatical concept that had been used in the description of one language to a phenomenon of another language, we abstract from certain features characteristic of the phenomena of the donor language that fall under the concept. This concerns, first and foremost, the significantia of the morphs coding that category. Naturally, the fact that the English possessive attribute is introduced by *of* while the French possessive attribute is introduced by *de* does not prevent us from recognizing that both are possessive attributes, no more than the fact that the French call *aller* what the English call *go* prevents us from recognizing that both mean 'go'. But there is more that we have to disregard if we want grammatical categories to be typological categories. The French possessive attribute may be introduced by *à* instead of *de*, while the English possessive attribute is not normally introduced by *to*, otherwise equivalent to *à*. The French possessive attribute is exclusively postnominal, while its English congener has a prenominal variant, without the preposition and with an enclitic *'s* instead. Such structural differences are neglected in the formation of the typological concept 'possessive attribute'. There are functional differences, too. In French, the same construction is used to code provenience, as in *artiste de Londres*, whereas in English it is *artist from London*, not *artist of London*. In other words, from a semasiological point of view, the attribute of provenience is a kind of possessive attribute in French, but not in English.

Nobody has ever denied the existence of such differences. Nevertheless, there has been a remarkable consensus in transferring concepts with their terms from one language to another. There was apparently an intuition of what was essential about the concepts formed by Donatus for Latin, which had to be preserved in their transformation into typological concepts, and what were accidental features of the Latin phenomena which nobody would seriously expect to recur in many other languages.

For something to be a morphological category requires that it be expressed by some morphological process on word forms. For an inflectional category, a certain advanced degree of grammaticalization identifies the prototype, constituted by a paradigm of agglutinative or fusional morphemes. In addition to such general structural properties, the concepts of individual morphological categories also involve more specific properties. For instance, a morphological category is called 'case' only if it is expressed on nouns *sensu lato*; if something fulfilling a similar function is expressed on verbs, it is not subsumed under the category of case.[1] The extent to which such definitory features still derive from ("accidental") properties of the respective Latin categories, so that our concepts would be, to that extent, eurocentric or even latinocentric, is an issue that would require a much ampler epistemic foundation and a comparative methodological study of linguistic concepts. For our purposes, it suffices to see that grammatical categories are situated at the typological level. If they are stripped of all linguistic features, they cease to be grammatical categories and become cognitive or communicative categories instead. The latter cannot define linguistic types and are thus useless in the endeavor to describe individual languages and to work out essential differences among languages.

Such structural properties of grammatical categories that are not part of the respective concepts are susceptible of empirical research; i.e. it can be an empirical task to find out whether certain structural properties are true of all the instantiations of a given grammatical category in the languages of the world. The relative order of morphological categories on verb stems as described in Bybee 1985 is an example in point. Certainly more research of this kind is necessary. On the other hand, if certain structural properties such as the nominal character of case make part of a concept, then obviously such properties cannot be found out or confirmed inductively.

Non-morphological criteria are definitory for specific morphological categories at two levels: First, such categories as tense, aspect, person, number etc. and their values have a notional basis in cognitive and communicative categories such as time, boundedness, speech act participants, cardinality etc. Second, they have characteristic functions in the syntax of the language. Consider, for instance, gender and declension class. These two categories may partly be distinct by their notional basis in the sense that something is not called gender unless it is somehow associated with sex, while declension class need not be. However, in principle a gender system and a declension class system could both have some weak association with sex but for the rest be semantically nearly empty and thus, indistinguishable on a semantic basis. Then the structural criterion of syntactic relevance (of gender as opposed to declension class)

[1] The extent to which such definitory decisions are corrigible by empirical findings is an important issue in linguistic methodology. For instance, the concept of mood is rather similar to the concept of case in that one may wish to define mood as a verbal category and to deny the term 'mood' to anything functionally similar that may appear on nouns. Grammars of some Australian languages such as Kayardild (Evans 1995) describe modal functions of what is otherwise case and call it 'modal case'.

will tell them apart. The same goes for the values of morphological categories. Let the task be to decide whether one of a paradigm of cases is a dative. The decision will appeal to the notions of the indirect object and of the recipient. Thus, more in general, the functioning of a value of a morphological category in the syntax will be a criterion in its identification. Generations of linguists have proceeded along such lines when they discovered familiar European categories in newly described languages.

Needless to repeat, all those instantiations of morphological categories differ structurally. Not only may they be coded by different morphological processes. They may also be expressed analytically rather than synthetically. Thus, the category of passive was first defined for the Latin language. There it is mostly a synthetic inflectional category, and a couple of analytic formations are subsumed under that category by way of analogy to synthetically expressed values of the categories involved, like this:

voice / **tense**	**active**	**passive**
present	amat	amatur
perfect	amavit	amatus est

Thus, *amatus est* is a passive form because it is a member of the respective inflection paradigm. At a higher level of abstraction, this kind of analogy is applied cross-linguistically. The English language has a passive. It is even considered a verbal category, although none of its finite forms is synthetic. The basis of this recognition is, first, the function of the passive in the syntax and, second, the generalization of the concept of inflection categories from synthetic to analytic expression.

Sometimes a value of a morphological category is not coded at all. Not only are there zero-allomorphs, which need not concern us here. There are also members of inflection paradigms that never have an expression of their own. Consider German declension: The nominative is a member of the case paradigm, although there is no nominative morpheme. The same goes for singular number. In such cases, markedness theory both allows for the integration of these values as members of the category in question and helps avoid positing zero morphemes.

Then if German has a nominative, does English have a dative, appearing on *Mary* in a sentence such as *John gave Mary a book*? The answer is ‘no’. The criteria of functioning on the indirect object and/or the recipient are necessary, but not sufficient conditions. The generic structural conditions for morphological categories already mentioned are spelled out thus: a value of a morphological category must be expressed (to be precise: it must have non-zero allomorphs), unless it is the one unmarked member of its paradigm. Some specific grammatical notion that does not fulfill this condition is not a member of a morphological paradigm; and a morphological category that consists exclusively of such zero members is not a morphological category. While English does have a weak case system relying on the declension of pronouns and on analytic constructions involving grammatical prepositions and the Saxon genitive, the conclusion for languages such as Mandarin, Yucatec Maya, Navajo, Hocank (Sioux), Guarani and many more is: those languages do not have case.

Interim balance: Concepts of grammatical categories must be cross-linguistically applicable. This has a number of consequences: First, their basis must be in their cognitive or communicative function, on the one hand, and in their syntactic function, on the other hand.

Second, concepts of morphological categories familiar in the European tradition may be generalized to other languages under such conditions. Third, many languages like English are rather poor in inflectional morphology. Those functions fulfilled by inflectional morphology in the classical languages are rather fulfilled at the syntactic level in these languages. The net result of all this is the syntacticization of morphological terminology and, more in general, the upgrading of grammatical concepts. The issue then, is: To what extent, and under which conditions, is syntacticization of morphological categories useful, and where does it generate confusion? The following sections will present a number of cases. No attempt will be made to pin down the chronologically first use of a term in a certain sense. For present purposes, it suffices to see that certain uses of a term are older while others are younger.

2 Some cases of upgrading of grammatical concepts

2.1 Case

The traditional concept of case is restricted to such nominal inflection (including possibly analytic expression) whose function it is to code semantic and syntactic relations of nominal dependents. Relying on this function, the term has been applied to the syntactic and semantic functions themselves. Probably the first to do this explicitly is Fillmore (1968:21), who defines case as "the underlying syntactic-semantic relationship" and case form as "the expression of a case relationship in a particular language." This is taken up in the generative framework, at the latest in Chomsky 1981, where the term *case* is used for the concept of 'syntactic function' as modified by certain theory-internal criteria. It is, then, a syntactic, not a morphological concept. An extreme generalization of the concept of 'case' is found in Givón 1984[D], which speaks of "semantic case" and "pragmatic case".[2]

As a consequence, morphological phenomena associated with this concept of 'case' have been named "case marking". Subsequently, this term has been applied not only to (nominal) case, but, on the basis of the recognition that pronominal cross-reference or agreement of the verb with its dependents in person and number signals which dependent fulfills which syntactic function, such pronominal indices on the verb have been called "case marking", too, e.g. in Perlmutter 1980 and Mithun 1991.

Since the concept of a syntactic function does not by itself imply any particular coding features, the same goes for the new concept of 'case'. If the nominal dependents in question are actually inflected for case, then they are said to show "overt case". The same terminological apory shines through in the following contemporary definition (Abraham 2006:6): "*Case* is a relation between a DP (or an argument) and its syntactic surrounding … cases may but need not be reflected by *morphological* case (m-case)." Just like *overt case*, the neologism *m-case* proves that the transfer of the concept of case to a syntactic (or semantic) function is not justified by the fact that a concept and a term restricted to the morphological category of case would not be needed.

What holds for the category of case in general also applies to its values. Nominal (typically, possessive) attributes have long been called genitive attributes ("genitive modifiers" in Givón

[2] A pragmatic notion of case apparently also underlies the following definition (Levinson 1983:71): "Vocatives are noun phrases that refer to the addressee, but are not syntactically or semantically incorporated as the arguments of a predicate."

1984[S]:180f) regardless of whether they feature a genitive or not. Another straightforward association of cases with syntactic functions and a corresponding extension of terminology of long standing has happened in the typology of the alignment of syntactic relations. In Comrie 1981, ch. 5.3 (as doubtless in earlier publications), the terms *ergative*, *absolutive*, *nominative*, *accusative* are applied not only to certain cases, but also to syntactic constructions and even linguistic types characterized by them. In Givón 1997:15, a Japanese relative clause whose empty place bears the function of direct object is called an "Accusative REL-clause". Similarly, the term *dative* has been applied to nominal dependents in the macrorole of the indirectus (Lehmann et al. 2004), both to indirect objects and to benefactive, directional and similar adjuncts (Givón 1984[S]:88).

Traditionally, a case paradigm is divided into two subsets: the nominative or absolutive is the *casus rectus*, all the other cases are *casus obliqui*. The subdivision is useful for the morphological description of those many languages like Eskimo and Tamil which use one nominal stem in the *casus rectus* and another stem – typically an extended one – for the oblique cases (cf. Lehmann & Moravcsik 2000, section 4.3). Here the shift from morphology to syntax has triggered more semantic changes. 'Oblique' does not comprise the direct object (as it should if the term had only shifted from cases to syntactic functions marked by them) neither, depending on the author, the indirect object, but got reserved to nominal dependents in other syntactic functions, typically various kinds of adjuncts (cf. Lehmann 1988:183). At the time of this writing, *oblique role* appears to mean 'semantic or syntactic function low on a hierarchy of such functions'.

Furthermore, case terms are used for verb valency derivations and derivational operators that add an actant in a certain syntactic function that in SAE languages may be marked by the case whose term is being used. For instance, applicative suffixes on verbs are variously glossed *dative* or *benefactive* (cf. Lehmann 1988:183). Haspelmath and Müller-Bardey (2004:1136) speak of "dative-adding applicatives". The promotion of an indirect object (introduced by *to* in English) to direct object, as in *she showed a book to her teacher* transformed into *she showed her teacher a book*, is called "dative shifting" in Givón 1984[D].

In German linguistics, the diathetic relationship of *der Präsident bekam vom Minister das Büro gezeigt* ('the president was shown the office by the minister') to the active construction *der Minister zeigte dem Präsidenten das Büro* ('the minister showed the president the office') has been called "Dativ-Passiv" (e.g. in Eisenberg 1994:144). The term designates a diathesis (thus, a syntactic operation) that brings an indirectus (thus, a dependent in a certain macrorole) into subject function.

Another mediate transfer of case terms to semanto-syntactic phenomena associated with verbs underlies the terminology of Perlmutter 1978. There, an agentive and a non-agentive intransitive verb are called "unergative" and "unaccusative verb", respectively, because the actants of such verbs are likened to the agent and the patient, respectively, of transitive verbs and, as such, would bear the ergative and accusative case, respectively, if they bore cases at all.

The syntacticization of case concepts also has a mirror image: Sometimes when cases are to be named, authors do not apply the traditional case terms and instead call them by the name of the syntactic function that they signal. Thus, the nominative and accusative cases appearing on the subject and the direct object of a Japanese example sentence are glossed as "SUBJ" and "OBJ", respectively, in Van Valin & LaPolla 1997:120. Similarly, the Hebrew accusative is

glossed as "DO" (presumably, 'direct object'), and the Ute accusative, as "OBJ", in Givón 1997:15, 21.

2.2 Finiteness

Traditionally, a finite verb is one that inflects for all the verbal morphological categories, whereas a non-finite verb lacks at least person inflection and possibly other conjugation categories (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1994). Thus, while finiteness is a matter of degree, it has been a purely morphological concept for a long time. Its syntacticization is essentially based on the fact that non-finite forms typically do not take a subject (at least not in the same form as finite forms do) and, in connection with this, do not head the predicate of an independent clause. The first step in the syntacticization of the concept is, consequently, the notion of a finite (non-finite) clause as one whose verbal head is finite (non-finite). There is some kind of reverse application of this reasoning in the terminology of Hewitt's (1979) Abkhaz grammar. The language distinguishes between independent and subordinate verb forms by verb suffixes. Both kinds of forms conjugate for person and a set of further verbal categories. They might be called "indicative" and "subjunctive", respectively. In Hewitt 1979, section 2.1.3.5.2, the former are called "finite", the latter "non-finite".

The functional basis of finiteness has been the object of recent research. Klein (1998) finds it in assertion, Maas (2004:361) in sentence modality. Maas distinguishes between "morphological finiteness" and "semantic finiteness". Thus, he does lift the concept to the semantic level, but at the same time avoids polysemy by supplying the epitheton *semantic*.

2.3 Voice

The Latin term *genus verbi* was originally the equivalent of the Greek term *diáthesis* as introduced by Dionysios Thrax. In his chapter 'De verbo', Donatus defines the category of *genus verbi* extensionally by enumerating its values (active and passive among them) and defines the values *per ostensionem*, i.e. by examples of appropriate conjugated forms. It is clear that *genus verbi* is a morphological category of the verb. In medieval Latin grammar, the term *vox* was preferred for the same concept, which yielded the English term *voice*. This term, by the way, is not particularly felicitous, both because its literal meaning contributes nothing to understanding the concept and because there are several homonyms of it even inside linguistics (its alternative *genus verbi* does not fare much better on either count). That, however, has not kept the term from upgrading. Currently (e.g. in Shibatani (ed.) 1988), active and passive are considered syntactic constructions that may or may not involve a dedicated conjugation category in a given language. An example of a passive construction that does not involve passive voice is Yucatecan Spanish *lo arrestaron por la policía* (lit. they arrested him by the police) 'he was arrested by the police'.

Like in several similar cases, the extension of the term *voice* to cover the related syntactic paradigm could easily be avoided by using the other traditional term, *diathesis*, to designate the latter (cf. e.g. Partee 2005). The term *diathesis* avoids both of the pitfalls of *voice*: it does mean what it appears to mean ('disposition, arrangement'), and it could be unequivocal in linguistics, were it not for the fact that, at least in English linguistics, it is currently mostly used, if at all, interchangeably with *voice*.[3]

[3] In Mel'čuk 1993, *voice* is defined as a conjugation category, but *diathesis* is defined essentially as a predicate's valency frame.

2.4 Incorporation

The concept of incorporation was apparently introduced into linguistics, under the term *Einverleibung*, in Humboldt 1836, section 29a. There reference is made to the Nahuatl construction *ni-naka-kwa* (SBJ.1.SG-meat-eat) 'I eat meat', where a noun that could be a syntactic dependent of the verb instead occupies an internal morphological slot on the verb. Thus, incorporation is a morphological concept, although the paradigmatic relationship of an incorporative construction to a syntactic construction is clearly seen in Humboldt 1836.

The condition of the internal position of the incorporated stem was subsequently dropped. Consequently, it became more difficult to distinguish between incorporation (as a type of verbal compounding) and syntactic juxtaposition. Finally, syntactic juxtaposition was explicitly subsumed under incorporation (e.g. for Samoan in Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992:89). *Incorporation* now apparently designates any configuration of a verb and a nominal dependent that is more tightly bonded than some other construction that belongs to the same syntactic paradigm.

2.5 Transitivity

Since medieval Latin grammar, a transitive verb has been one that takes a direct object. Our last topic here is, thus, not a morphological concept, but a syntactic property of a verbal lexeme. In other words, if 'verb' is a syntactic category, then 'transitive verb' is a subcategory of it. The upgrading of this concept proceeded much like the syntacticization of morphological concepts. Just as in the case of the finite verb, the first derived concept formed was that of the transitive clause, which originally was one that contained a transitive verb and a direct object. Then in Hopper & Thompson 1980, a proposal for the functional basis of transitivity is made. Transitivity is analyzed as a multifactor concept. Ten factors contribute to the transitivity of a clause, nine of which are semantic in nature, including properties like volitivity, agentivity, modality etc. Here, transitivity is no longer a syntactic property of a verb or a clause, but a semantic property of a clause. As a consequence, a clause may be highly transitive on this account without containing a transitive verb. For instance, German *Linda trat dem Einbrecher auf den Fuß* 'Linda stepped on the burglar's foot' fulfills all of the ten conditions, is thus "highly transitive", but does not contain a transitive construction in the traditional sense. In Tsunoda 1985, it is argued that the functional basis – which may well be spelled out as in Hopper & Thompson 1980 – of transitivity could be called the effectiveness of the situation, and then the term *transitivity* could be reserved for what it used to mean. That voice was not heard by many.

3 Conclusion

To upgrade a morphological concept first means to expand it onto the level of syntax and to apply its term to the expanded concept. The expansion of the concept may proceed along different pathways. One is constituency: The morphological category in question is marked on a word form that is typically the head of a certain syntactic construction. Then one ascribes that category not only to the word form, but also to the syntactic construction. This has happened to the concepts of case (from noun *sensu lato* to noun phrase), finiteness, voice and transitivity (from verb form to clause). Another kind of expansion involves the syntactic function of the morphological phenomenon in question. Case may code syntactic or semantic

function; so syntactic/semantic function is called case. Non-finiteness may code subordination; so subordination is called non-finiteness. Transitivity may code effectiveness; so effectiveness is called transitivity. Depending on the level reached, the upgrading of grammatical concepts may take the form of syntacticization, semanticization or pragmaticization. In the preceding sections, a number of examples from nominal and verbal morphology have been adduced; they could easily be multiplied.[4] It may be comforting to realize that although upgrading of grammatical concepts is typical of 20th and 21th century linguistics, it is not limited to any particular strand or camp.

Up to the beginning of the 20th century, most of syntax was based on morphology. While it is the current state of the art to see morphological phenomena as fulfilling a certain function in a construction that is conceived independently from such phenomena, formerly syntax used to be viewed as the use of morphological forms. Many definitions of genuinely syntactic concepts were based on certain morphological components. For instance, the direct object was defined as a sentence component in the accusative, and the relative clause was defined as a subordinate clause introduced by a relative pronoun. That was syntacticization of morphological concepts in a different sense: The notion of a syntactic category was built upon the notion of a morphological category involved in it. Such conceptions were overcome only in the course of the 20th century. And it did take traditionally-minded linguists some effort to accept that there could be direct objects in the absence of an accusative and relative clauses no matter whether they contain a relative pronoun. These conceptual changes were necessary, because syntax is not simply an expansion of morphology.

It is a task of linguistics to seek the functional basis of structural categories. As said in section 1.3, this functional basis is partly extralinguistic – cognitive and communicative – and partly intralinguistic, especially syntactic. Many morphological categories such as case, finiteness, voice etc. can be understood as structural reflexes of such functions. However, the two levels must be kept distinct. Since there is no biunique mapping of functions onto structures, it is misleading to transfer the terms of morphological concepts onto syntactic, semantic or even pragmatic concepts. There may be syntactic functions without case, there may be subordination without non-finiteness, there may be diathesis without voice. The peculiar service done by a certain morphological category in the fulfillment of some linguistic function gets blurred if we confuse it with the function itself. In some situations, e.g. when *case* comes to mean 'syntactic function' and *morphological case* or *overt case* is newly introduced to designate what used to be called case, the shift in terminology is obviously not motivated by the need to form new concepts. The only net gain after the terminological change is confusion.

The task of linguistics just mentioned appears to be misunderstood by some linguists who, preoccupied with the "higher" levels of linguistic structure, viz. syntax, semantics and pragmatics, tend to view morphology as a staffage of contingent accessories liable to block the view on the essentials. There is a wide-spread desire to get away from "superficial" coding features and to identify the "deep" design features of language. However, there is no such thing as a superficial property of a language. The working of language can be understood only if we take all its expressions at face value and do not reduce them to something else.[5]

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[4] Candidates include *aktionsart*, *clitic, causative, gender.*

[5] The 'x is really y' syndrome is already diagnosed in Chafe 1973:86-88.

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