

THE UNFINISHED CLINE OF GRAMMATICALISATION?
REFLECTIONS ON THE USES OF OE *UNDER* AND ITS DERIVATIVES

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*This is a modest contribution to celebrate forty years of Studia Anglica Posnaniensia, and to pay a tribute for his inspiration to Professor Jacek Fisiak O.B.E., the initiator and first Editor-in-Chief still in office.
AD MULTOS ANNOS!*

ABSTRACT

A lexical category *under* functioned in Old English as a preposition, an adverb or a member of a compound. This raises the questions: of whether and, if so, to what extent did these different uses undergo a process of grammaticalisation? On the basis of the observations of language material I assume that the cline of changes has never reached a final stage and either the process has been interrupted or is still in the making, which requires a fundamental rethink of the problem.

In my article about the semantics of *under* compounds I came to a conclusion that “once a lexical unit extends its basic sense, or is substantially modified by, for example, a prefixal element it may enter a completely different semantic domain” (Nagucka 2000: 210). This short essay continues my attempts to show the important and still poorly understood complexities of the semantic changes of the OE word morpheme *under* and its derivatives. In Old English it was customarily classified either as a preposition or an adverb depending on its structural behaviour and was used to indicate location or motional direction. The preposition according to Latin grammarians (Pristianus and Donatus) is always used with another word. In *Ælfric’s grammar* we read:

- 1) Praepositio is foresetnyss. se byð geðeod naman and worde and stent æfre on forewearðan (*Ælfric’s grammar* 10: 15).

‘Preposition is a fore-setting. It is associated with a noun and a verb and always stands in the fore’.¹

It governs the L ablative (OE dative), e.g.

- 2) sub arbore sto
 under treowe ic stande (Ælfric’s grammar 274: 3).
 ‘I stand under the tree.’

or the L accusative (OE accusative), e.g.

- 3) Drihten ne eom ic wyrðe þ þu
 ingange under mine þecene (Matthew 8:8, Anglo-Saxon version).

drihter (*sic*) nam ic wyrðe þ ðu inngae
 domine non sum dignus ut intres
 under rof min
 sub tectum meum (Lindisfarne version).

drihten nam ic wyrðe þ ðu ga under pacu minne (Rushworth version)
 ‘Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof’
 (Authorised version).

This view has been common for centuries and reached its acme in the methodological art of structuralism in the mid 1950s, when the preposition was treated as a function word almost deprived of semantic content. With the development of generative linguistics the role of the preposition was discovered and promoted to a subcategory of the verb (Geis), or later to the rank of a former content category, which together with the verb, noun and adjective constitute an essential grammatical structure whose syntactic features determine the underlying phonological and logical forms ready for phonological and semantic interpretations (e.g. Chomsky 1982, 1995). Of the other novel trends in linguistic thought it is the cognitive approach together with psycholinguistic achievements that devote most attention to the preposition as a bearer of spatial relations. But all these theoretical concepts do not resolve the problems which involve such questions as why and how changes have taken place; however, they do contribute to the expectations of the researcher who would like not only to touch historical language data, but to find explanations as well. A promising resolution to the problem seems to come in the theory of grammaticalisation enriched with

¹ ModE translation is my wording unless stated otherwise.

some ideas of psycholinguistic science. This has offered methods for a provisional search for root causes of the problem; and now, I shall concentrate on this point.²

To go back to the OE data, it has been agreed that *under* indicates spatial relations when two entities are involved (see examples (2) and (3)), i.e. as a preposition; it can also be used adverbially when applied to a verb. *Ælfric's grammar* defines the adverb as:

- 4) Adverbium is wordes gefera, forðan ðe he næfð nane fulfremednysse, buton he mid ðam worde beo (Ælfric's grammar 9: 8).
 'The adverb is the verb's companion because it does not have any completion unless it be with a verb.'

For example:

- 5) a. stig under læg
 eldum uncuð (Beowulf 2213).
 'the path lay beneath
 unknown to men'
 b. wæter under stod
 dreorig ond gedrefed (Beowulf 1416).
 'water stood beneath,
 bloody and troubled'

Finally, *under* is often attached to a content word, forming a new item, like:

- 6) OE *under* + *standan* > *understandan*
 'understand'
 OE *under* + *licgan* > *underlicgan*
 'underlie'

This process is a regular method of glossing a Latin compound with *sub* (or its variant) as its first element, e.g.

- 7) *subdistinctio*, þæt is undertodal (Ælfric's grammar 291: 5)
 'subdivision that is underdivision'
 L *subpono* > OE *ic underlecege* (Ælfric's grammar 276: 8)
 (> *suppono*) 'I submit'

² There is no point in a short essay like this to support general statements by a detailed bibliography which comprises hundreds of publications; obviously, exact citations are acknowledged.

The categorial affiliation of *under* does not pose any thorny problems, it depends, of course, on one's theoretical preferences – which, however, is not the case with a semantic scrutiny.

Generally speaking, absolutely accurate and precise measurements of spatial cognition are limited by uncertainties in identifying the location of objects in relation to one another. Perceptually based intuition may not be identical pragmatically and interculturally; lexical items which express spatial concepts may be interpretable in many ways “depending on the choice of referent, relatum and perspective” (Levelt 1996: 79). In my earlier reflections on space and language I said “people see and understand space, time, objects etc. in a natural, naïve way, not as an intellectual construct of physics, geometry or philosophy”, and “choose the most salient spatial attributes and the spatial characteristics most relevant to people's needs” (Nagucka 1997: 53). As language cannot be an ideal one-to-one reflection of reality, I assume that a spatial image, a spatial concept, a spatial picture in general, which worded by an OE *under* phrase was very close in meaning to its literal ModE descendant and comparable to the dimensional relations conceptualised nowadays (understood within the current psycholinguistic framework) (cf. O'Keefe 1996: 289-291). Take one more example:

- 8) ða wæteru ðe synd under ðære heofonan (Genesis I, 9).
 aquæ, quæ sub coelo sunt
 ‘the waters which are under the haven’

Whether we say that

X is under tree (ex. (2)),
 X is under the roof (ex. (3)),

or

X is under the heaven (ex. (8))

spatial location and exact distance cannot be measured with the precision of nanoscience, neither are they relevant to ordinary language understanding. Similarly, the physical dimensions, shapes, colours etc. of a given object or place may not even be perceived and cognitively recorded, simply because they do not participate in the nature of the *under* spatial relationship. A spatial image created on the basis of visual conception may contain a myriad of tiny details unnecessary for understanding the basic idea of being below. And although language is not precise enough in expressing, even naively, the most characteristic features of the objects in question, it nevertheless grasps the essence of the relation. What is vague in this respect is *under* with the verb in the function of an adverb, meaning simply beneath, below. Take as an example sentence (5a),

now. Irrespective of this physically determined concept, the OE preposition *under* developed an abstract idea of support on the one hand and an idea of influence on the other hand. Since abstract relations in general are difficult to understand and even more difficult to acquire and apply to a variety of novel relational situations, such concepts were instantiated with the use of concrete familiar terms. But this process does not result in desemantisation and decategorisation of the lexical element, *under* in our case; just the opposite, it gains new features functionally ascribed to a field of abstract ideas without changing its categorial affiliation. It is still a preposition/adverb, meaning below, beneath enriched by an additional element, abstract notion of influence or control by an object being positionally above. Physical position changes into abstract position, or concrete space is transformed into abstract space. It seems that Davidson's view on metaphor is particularly relevant and to the point for our examples, and I find in it some support for my understanding of the process. He says: "A metaphor ... is wholly dependent linguistically on the usual meanings of words, however fresh and astonishing the thought it is used to express; and the interpreter, though he may be hard pressed to decode or appreciate a metaphor, needs know no more about what words mean than can be, or ought to be, found in a good dictionary" (2005: 143). Accepting this understanding of the idea of metaphor one may assume that metaphorisation could be one of the processes of grammaticalisation (cf. Traugott – Dasher 2005: 28-29). Take the following OE examples:

- 9) Soðlice ic eom man under anwealde gesett. 7 ic hæbbe
 þegnas under me (Matthew 8:9, Anglo-Saxon version).
 7 ꝥ ec ic monn *amm* under mæht hæfis ꝥ hæfo under
 et ego homo sum sub potestate habens sub
 mec ðeignas ꝥ innheardmenn
 me milites (Lindisfarne version).
 7 ic monn eam under mæhti geseted hæbbende under
 me cempa (Rushworth version).
 'For I am a man under authority, having soldiers
 under me'³ (Authorized version).

Another example, not based on a Latin source, is found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 901 and runs:

³ These words were said by the centurion who in the preceding verse stated that he was not worthy that Jesus should come to his house; the phrase *under my roof* may be understood literally or metonymically 'into my house'.

- 10) Se wæs cyning ofer eall Ongelcyn butan ðæm dæle
 þe under Dena onwalde wæs
 ‘He was king over the whole English people except for that part which was
 under Danish rule’

Doubtlessly these new situations do not convey the same concrete information as the previous sentences which refer to physical spatial relations. But they express abstract concepts in a manner close to spatial indications. Transferring a spatial understanding to abstract ideas does not stem from the process of desemantisation and, obviously, not from the process of decategorisation. What I am suggesting is that grounding abstract concepts deeply in concrete images involves only the process of transfer to a new semantic field of abstract cognition, undergoing something like deconcretisation and abstractivisation. This interpretation may imply that the changes take place in the sphere of cognitive world, partly in the semantics but not in the grammar. However, one may argue that a kind of decategorisation is involved when the preposition participates in compounding, e.g.

- 11) a. underburh
 ‘suburb’

 undercýning
 ‘a dependent tributary king, one who rules under another’

 b. undelicgan
 ‘underlie’

 understandan
 ‘understand’

We are asking here: is compounding (i.e. the process of forming a new word by combining two or more existing words) a special case of grammaticalisation? Perhaps we can say yes, because to a certain extent the preposition/adverb acquires a new grammatical function of modifying the element that follows. On the other hand, it does not lose its generic categorial affiliation, neither is it substantially affected by phonetic weakening, which are clear indications of grammaticalisation proper. Contrary to *L sub* ‘under’ which was eroded phonetically the OE *under* + X (noun or verb) has not reached the stage of prefixation with no word accent at all. For *understand* some dictionaries inform that this verb literally means ‘stand under’ (*Webster, OED* Second Edition) and show that it may still be understood as such, e.g.

12) Why, stand under and understand is all one

(Shakespeare, *Two gentlemen of Verona* II, V: 31).

The belief in the effectiveness of the theory of grammaticalisation to explain semantic changes is justifiably reasonable but it is sometimes shaking when confronted with historical data.

My observations of the historical behaviour, particularly in Old English, compared with its ModE usage suggest that this word is rather resistant to conspicuous grammatical modifications: first, its categorial status of preposition or adverb has been firmly established since Indo-European, unless one accepts prefixation and compounding as decategorising processes. Secondly, the semantic content to indicate spatial relations of one physical object with regard to another may be extended to abstract relations, but does it involve desemantisation (bleaching), so typical of the early processes in the cline of grammaticalisation?

I leave this question open. Finally, the phonological shape of *under* is not eroded, the changes of /u/ > /ʌ/ and /-er/ > /ə/ are of a general, common character – and the word does not tend to be completely reduced. Taking all in all, is it just an unfinished, interrupted, imperfect cline of grammaticalisation? Despite exciting progress in identifying the mechanisms of linguistic change set by a theory of grammaticalisation, there are still some aspects which do not fit the pattern and which pose more questions than answers found.

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