The general assumption of diachronic linguistics is that language change is not a « random walk through the space of possible combinations » (Battye and Robert 1995 : 11). A deterministic approach has been proposed by the Grammaticalisation framework to suggest that there is a tendency for items to evolve historically into increasingly more abstract elements on a pathway of change (Traugott and Dasher 2002 i.a.). In other words, change is unidirectional along pathways of evolution. Items evolving into n-words have typically gone through a polarity phase (Haspelmath 1997).

New proposals on the unidirectionality of change have suggested such deterministic evolution to depend on principles of acquisition: learners would attribute items the most specified feature compatible with the input (Willis 2011). Items can thus gain a stronger feature but cannot lose it, leading to an assumption of irreversible change. Once negative polarity items have become n-words, they are expected to neither retain nor recreate polarity uses.

These assumptions are tested here against the evolution of declining n-words in early French. Their declining status allows for the verification of whether the predicted irreversibility obtains, in a way that is not as tangible for productive polyfunctional words such as Dutch enig (Hoeksema 2011). In order to verify the predicted irreversibility, an exhaustive quantitative survey is offered of all the occurrences of early French declining n-words nul, nului and nesun in literary and legal material from the 12th to the 16th century. While nului in legal texts only has negative uses when it is about to disappear, it maintains a proportion of strong polarity uses in literary texts, which are the majority of polarity uses of nul that nonetheless still has weak polarity uses in the last stages of its history. Nesun however actually develops weaker polarity uses as it is disappearing after having lost them before the recorded period. This attests to recreation of weaker functions.

The novel quantitative investigation presented here contradicts an irreversible change scenario: negatives can maintain and recreate polarity uses. Such changes are however constrained: only movement along adjacent spaces represented on a semantic map is attested. This is speculated to be because adjacent functions share specific bridging contexts where an item can be analysed as expressing either function. This is tested here though new data. The function-by-function evolution of rien ‘nothing’ in vernacular texts is mapped in the critical period from late Old French to Classical French. What we expect to find is that as with other n-words considered above, in the period when rien is becoming a n-word in vernacular data, the remaining polarity uses are mostly represented within the bridging context of sans ‘without’. That would be because sans is a bridging context where a NPI can be readily reanalysed as a n-word. Bridging contexts would thus provide cues for reanalysis for new generation of speakers, thus explaining why there are defined pathways of evolution.

Main references


