Priming and language change
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In this talk I will introduce the idea for a new research programme that I'm currently trying to set up. The goal of this project is to regard the psycholinguistic mechanism of PRIMING as one driving mechanism in language change and to put this hypothesis into empirical testing.

This general research idea will be mainly exemplified for the case of unidirectional change (cf. also Rosenbach & Jäger forthc.). It is a common observation in historical linguistics that certain types of changes typically proceed in one direction only (see, most prominently, the hypothesis of unidirectionality within the grammaticalization framework, e.g. Hopper & Traugott 2003). It is less clear, however, why this should be so. In this talk I will present two cases of ASYMMETRIC PRIMING from the psycholinguistic literature that may account for two well-known unidirectional changes:

1. **Spatial/temporal metaphors**: Boroditsky’s (2000) experiments show that spatial concepts (like behind the door) can prime isomorphic temporal concepts (like behind schedule), but not vice versa.

2. **Phonological reduction**: Many psycholinguistic investigations (cf. e.g. Shields and Balota 1991) show that the repetition of a word is more likely to be phonetically reduced than the first mentioning (see also Bard et al. 2000 for evidence that this effect also holds across speakers in dialogue). This indicates that a full form can prime a reduced form, while the reduced form does not prime the full form.

In Rosenbach & Jäger (forthc.) we propose that such asymmetric priming can account for the process of phonetic reduction (cf. e.g. Lehmann 1995[1982]) and the pathway from space to time (cf. e.g. Hopper & Traugott 2003[1993]: 85, and references given therein) in grammaticalization. Generally speaking, in these cases a form or concept A primes a form or concept B, but not vice versa, and this cognitive asymmetry corresponds precisely to the observed unidirectional pathway from A to B in diachronic change. This observation easily leads to the formulation of falsifiable predictions that can be tested with present-day speakers, under the uniformitarian assumption that the same cognitive mechanisms that we find to be operating in present-day speakers also have operated in past speakers of a language.

While the focus of this talk is on unidirectional change, I will also sketch the idea of relating priming to the issue of contact-induced change.

References: