

Re-focalization in Songhay diachronic morphosyntax

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Diachronic morphosyntax in mainstream Songhay languages of West Africa is dominated by the redistribution of morphemes among functional slots in otherwise stable constructions. Some such shifts were “hermit-crab” restructurings, catalyzed by accidental phonological similarities among preexisting morphemes and motivated as devices to keep inherited constructions afloat. Other phonologically mediated convergences stopped short of full morphemic merger but nonetheless induced important reorganizations. Because morphemes in functionally parallel constructions in different Songhay languages are not strictly cognate, the diachronic developments can easily be misconstrued as the result of independent gradual grammaticalizations of proto-syntactic structures. Focalization constructions are often borrowers rather than sources, borrowing morphemes from relatives, VP-chains, aspect-negation, and subjunctive marking. The observed stability of the relevant constructions in mainstream Songhay contrasts sharply with their instability in Northern Songhay, a strikingly high-contact subfamily isolated from its relatives. This suggests that morpheme replacement within stable constructions characterises situations of normal transmission.