
From expressive to descriptive: The loss of expressivity as a case of desubjectification

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The study of expressivity has seen a growing attention on diachronic dynamics, revealing the cross-linguistic tendency that expressive meaning oftentimes evolves out of descriptive meaning (cf. e.g. Eng. descriptive noun *boor* > expressive ‘crude person’, Davis & Gutzmann 2015, or European Port. adverb *lá* > modal particle of illocutionary modification, Müller 2024). As put forth by Davis & Gutzmann 2015, this tendency matches well the unidirectional subjectification thesis (Traugott 1989, Traugott 1999), that states that meanings typically tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition. In multidimensional semantics, this can be understood as adding expressive meaning to a descriptive item. The opposite trend (desubjectification) is typically neglected or considered to be somewhat unnatural (López Couso 2010).

The present contribution discusses the diachronic loss of expressivity as desubjectification, i.e. where lexical items fully or partly evolve from expressive > mixed > descriptive. An example is the Brazilian Portuguese personal pronoun *você* (‘you’), whose meaning changed from mixed (expressive meaning: descending social relation + descriptive meaning: addressee) to descriptive, i.e. where the use condition has been dropped (Müller to appear).

In this sense, the contribution (i) aims to contribute to the description of the common diachronic paths associated with expressivity and (ii) highlights the merits that the study of expressivity offers to more general theories of language change.

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