Auxiliation: An enquiry into the nature of grammaticalization

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“Auxiliation” is Kuteva’s term for the process whereby a lexical source construction develops into an auxiliary, defined as a morpheme functioning at any point(s) along a cline between lexical verb and TAM marker. The theoretically and empirically most interesting material is presented in the first three chapters following the introduction, which are largely based on previously published articles; the final two chapters are, in my opinion, too speculative to be convincing.

Kuteva first introduces some of the basic tenets of grammaticalization theory by illustrating the motivated nature of the semantic link between auxiliaries and their lexical sources (chapter 2). She then discusses the notion of SPECIFICATION, the addition of semantic content, as a mechanism of semantic change in grammaticalization. Examples are given of the development of a present perfect marker into a hodiernal past in Alicante Spanish and of the possessive structure ‘X has Y’ into the perfect structure ‘X has done Y’ in Bulgarian. Chapter 3 presents a convincing argument against the idea that grammaticalization is teleologically motivated (i.e., novel grams arise to fill “functional gaps”). Using data from Bulgarian (Slavic), Mandan (Siouan), Kabyle (Berber), Imonda (Papuan) and Kxoe (Khoisan), Kuteva shows how languages in which verbs meaning ‘sit’, ‘stand’ or ‘lie’ function as the unmarked (canonical) means of encoding spatial position often develop progressive auxiliaries derived from these verbs, regardless of whether a perfective/imperfective distinction existed already in the TAM system of these languages.

In chapter 4 Kuteva presents evidence from over thirty genetically and geographically diverse languages for the grammatical category “avertive” (expressed lexically in English by almost, nearly, etc.) resulting from auxiliation (mostly of verbs meaning ‘want’, ‘be’, ‘have’ and ‘fail’). The avertive is similar to the proximative (expressing imminence), but Kuteva argues that avertive and proximative are always distinct, even when encoded by the same form. The arguments presented in support of this view are not convincing, however, and tests such as cancellability are not applied. (Linguistically encoded meaning should not be cancellable, supporting polysemy, whereas an interpretation derived through inference can be cancelled, supporting a unitary account.) A further claim is that avertives (which encode imminence, past time reference and counterfactuality) may develop into proximatives through generalization (loss...
of past time reference and counterfactuals). Kuteva’s arguments here are, however, merely suggestive, and her own notion of specification could be used to account for a development in the reverse direction motivated by the conventionalization of inferences.

The final two chapters discuss the discourse contexts motivating auxiliation, in particular the development of counterfactuals from markers of future-in-the-past. Kuteva’s basic claim is that such developments derive not just from the conventionalization of *invited* inferences (i.e., implicatures), but also (and significantly) from the conventionalization of inferences which are not intended by speakers (i.e., mistaken inferences). I found this hypothesis to be very poorly supported, but space precludes a detailed critique. Despite the more speculative nature of the final chapters, the book as a whole has a lot to offer readers with an interest in typology or grammaticalization; it should also be accessible to those with a general knowledge of linguistics but little prior exposure to grammaticalization.