

Un problème vraiment clé: degrammaticalization of French [N+N]-compounds

Our communication will study the recent adjectival uses of the N2's in French [N+N]-compounds. It can in fact be observed that nouns such as *clé*, *charnière* and *éclair*, that occur with an attributive function in appositive compounds (Scalise & Bisetto 2009) such as *mot-clé* 'key word', *époque charnière* 'hinge period' and *visite éclair* 'lightning visit', frequently appear in adjectival contexts (cf. Amiot & Van Goethem 2010). The following examples, retrieved from the web by the linguistic search engine *WebCorp* (February 2011), illustrate the phenomenon:

- (1) (...) *je me suis orientée vers le métier de Responsable Administration des Ventes, conservant ce rôle très opérationnel et très charnière dans l'amélioration de la satisfaction des clients (...)*
'lit. (...) this very operational and very hinge role (...)'
(adverbial modification + coordination with an adjective)
<http://www.viadeo.com/fr/profile/marion.de.germiny>
- (2) (...) *nous aurions donc passé des heures dans des wagons inconfortables, pour une visite plus "éclair" d'un endroit que, semble-t-il, beaucoup connaissaient déjà.*
'lit. (...) a more lightning visit (...)'
(comparative construction)
http://www.culture.gouv.fr/mpe/recherche/pdf/R_430.pdf
- (3) *Cette stricte séparation est vraiment clé à mon sens.*
'lit. this strict separation is really key in my view'
(predicative construction + adverbial modification)
<http://blog.developpez.com/zedros/c950/java/wicket/>

Our first data suggest that *clé*, just like English *key* (cf. Denison 2001, De Smet 2011), has recently reached a very high degree of 'adjectivisation', since it can for instance be found, even if it is uncommon, as a perfect synonym for the adjective *important*, in predicative contexts with an impersonal subject:

- (4) *S'il est clé d'obtenir la sympathie et l'adhésion du peuple, soyez gentil avec les autochtones.*
'lit. If it is key to obtain the sympathy (...)'
<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/jschell7/French>

The fact that bound nouns develop free, adjectival, uses indicates that linguistic change does not always follow the syntax > morphology path, a typical cline in grammaticalization, but can also take place in the opposite direction, giving hence evidence for the degrammaticalization hypothesis (cf. Prévost 2006, Norde 2009). In our communication, we will study this degrammaticalization process and its exact actualization more in depth. More precisely, adopting a construction-based approach (Booij 2010, Croft & Cruse 2004, Dahl 2001, Himmelmann 2004), we will examine in which adjectival contexts the N2's *clé*, *charnière* and *éclair* occur in the examples retrieved by *WebCorp* and how the extension from one construction to another takes place, going presumably from the constructions closest to the original [N+N]-compound setting (adverbial modification, attributive construction, comparative and superlative constructions) to the ones that are most distant from the original compound context (predicative construction with nominal or even non nominal subject). Moreover, this study will also give us the opportunity to evaluate the degrammaticalization process. In particular, we will highlight the question of its homogeneity in our case study: that is, do the different criteria (degree of autonomy, semantic change and category change) evolve at the same rate?

References

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