

# *Andá a cantarle a Gardel: From the Abstract to the Concrete in el lunfardo porteño*

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## 1. Introduction

The principle of unidirectionality has been and continues to be a topic of enormous interest for the theory of grammaticalization (Heine et al., 1991; Fischer, 2000; Haspelmath, 2004; Norde, 2009). If grammaticalization is best understood as the process through which lexical elements develop grammatical meanings (Heine et al., 1991)<sup>1</sup>, the notion of unidirectionality rules out the possibility that a grammatical form might develop a concrete meaning. Although various scholars have attempted to call attention to counterexamples (Fischer, 2000; Norde, 2001), the general consensus is that the movement of an item from the grammar to the lexicon constitutes a statistical anomaly. In the introductory chapter of their comprehensive treatment of grammaticalization, Heine et al. (1991: 4-5) superficially recognize the existence of violations of the principle of unidirectionality but ignore them throughout the rest of the book. Moreover, Haspelmath (2004: 23) states: “The counterexamples [to the principle of unidirectionality] did not pose a serious threat to the original generalization, but a presumed absolute universal had to be weakened to a statistical universal.” However, from this arises the question: what can be learned from these violations, especially if they are legitimate cases of degrammaticalization? According to Haspelmath (2004: 23):

The basic generalization of unidirectionality stands unchallenged as long as nobody shows that degrammaticalization is as common as grammaticalization. If one is interested in generalizations rather than arbitrary facts, one must put aside the exceptions, because unless they can be subsumed under some further generalization, they cannot be explained.

It will be shown here, though, that while the movement from the abstract to the concrete is much rarer than its opposite movement, the theory of grammaticalization benefits from a rigorous investigation of these statistical anomalies.

In this paper, I present various lexical entries of *el lunfardo porteño*, a slang spoken in the Río de la Plata region of Argentina that dates back to the 19th century. I demonstrate that several of its concrete referents have abstract origins. Although I will not be able to propose a case of true degrammaticalization (or antigrammaticalization; see Haspelmath, 2004) or challenge the principle of unidirectionality, I show that the *lunfardo* words examined here can be subsumed under a type of non-prototypical lexicalization (Himmelman, 2004) capable of explaining this unexpected change from the abstract to the concrete. Moreover, I hypothesize that this change served to purposefully mask the speech of the original innovators of *el lunfardo*, rather than facilitating communication, as grammaticalization processes typically do (Heine et al., 1991).

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<sup>1</sup>Grammaticalization also includes those evolutions whereby a grammatical morpheme achieves a more grammatical status (Kurylowicz, 1975 [1965]: 52).

The structure of this paper is the following: in section 2, I review past studies on grammaticalization, unidirectionality, degrammaticalization, and lexicalization. In section 3, I describe *el lunfardo*, offering a brief history and some of its defining characteristics. This section is dedicated to the data: I examine in detail several examples of *lunfardismos* in which we see the representation of concrete entities through abstract notions. In section 4, I characterize these *lunfardismos* as “splits” (Himmelman, 2004), a type of lexicalization that operates exclusively within the lexicon. I propose a hypothesis regarding what motivates this type of semantic change in section 5, and I conclude in section 6 with a discussion of the relevance of the data.

## 2. On the nature of the phenomena involved

### 2.1. Grammaticalization and the principle of unidirectionality

Grammaticalization describes the phenomenon by which lexical elements acquire grammatical functions (Heine et al., 1991).<sup>2</sup> This transformation involves the shift of a concrete item to a more abstract item. For example, the development of the periphrastic future tense in various Romance languages such as Spanish is a case of a creative manipulation of the verb of movement *ir a* (“to go to”) in order to express a future tense (*Voy a estudiar esta noche*—“I am going to study tonight”). Here we see that *ir a* no longer expresses spatial movement (its concrete, lexical sense) but rather a grammatical, abstract usage that communicates a future tense. This change from the lexical and concrete to the grammatical and abstract typically is characterized metaphorically: an element “leaves” the lexicon and “advances” towards the syntax (see Himmelman, 2004 for a different model).

Heine et al. (1991: 48) state that grammaticalization is a problem-solving strategy through which a certain concept is expressed in terms of another. According to these authors, grammaticalization possesses a metaphorical base through which lexical items are extended to more abstract domains. The previously cited example *Voy a estudiar esta noche* shows how the literal notion of “going” is transferred metaphorically to become a future tense marker. The source structures of grammatical elements are described in terms of their relative degree of “metaphorical abstraction”, as shown in (1):

- (1) Person > Object > Activity > Space > Time > Quality

This scale indicates that a concept originating in one of the metaphorical categories listed above is derived from a category to its left. For example, the body part “back” is manipulated to represent the spatial concept “behind”; this is the Object-Space metaphor. Similarly, in the West African language Ewe, the Object-Quality metaphor can explain the development of the adjective *meɖbé* (“backwards”, “slow”) from the noun *meɖbé* (the body part “back”). The fact that more abstract concepts are derived from concrete concepts or less abstract concepts implies a *unidirectional* movement in the chain shown in (1). In other words, it is quite rare, but still possible, to obtain categorical metaphors such as Quality-Object or Activity-Object (Heine et al., 1991: 51). In connection with this, I will show numerous examples of a movement from the abstract to the concrete in *el lunfardo porteño*.

The hierarchy presented in (1) is crucial for the rest of the present work, and we shall return to it in section 3, but it suffices to say for now that metaphorical abstraction is one of the principal mechanisms through which the syntax is enriched at the expense of the lexicon.

### 2.2. Degrammaticalization

Given that unidirectionality has been considered one of the central properties of grammaticalization, it is not surprising that many scholars have subsequently spent much time questioning this supposed universal and attempting to show that the shift from the abstract and grammatical to the concrete and lexical constituted a viable change. This proliferation of studies on degrammaticalization has led to diverging definitions that describe distinct phenomena (Haspelmath, 2004; Norde, 2006 and 2009). Furthermore, some linguists have proposed several possible *types* of

<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have characterized grammaticalization somewhat differently. Haspelmath (2004: 26) has defined it as “a diachronic change by which the parts of a constructional schema come to have stronger internal dependencies.” Lehmann (2004: 155) considers grammaticalization of a linguistic unit to be “a process in which it loses in autonomy by becoming more subject to constraints of the linguistic system.”

degrammaticalization (Willis, 2007). For reasons of space and clarity, I do not wish to enter into detail about these manifestations of degrammaticalization, but it is clear that the matter has become much more complicated in recent years.

Given this, we need a point of departure in order to understand the phenomenon. To this end, I will refer to Norde (2009: 8) for a definition: “On the basis of (11) [reproduced here as (2)], degrammaticalization will be provisionally defined as a single shift from right to left on this cline.” This cline is based on the chain presented in Hopper & Traugott (2003: 7).

(2) Content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional affix (> Ø)

Although it may be controversial (Norde, 2006), this cline at least establishes a method with which we can identify the phenomenon. Nevertheless, (2) does not imply that a case of degrammaticalization constitutes the return of a grammatical element to its precise lexical origin, as Willis (2007: 276) points out: “[Degrammaticalization] is not to be understood in the sense that a particular linguistic item with a grammatical function returns to the same form and function that it formerly had as a lexical item. This is clearly either impossible —unless languages have memories— or else likely to arise only by pure chance.” Rather, degrammaticalization consists of a change from an affix to a clitic or from a clitic to a grammatical word. Changes from a grammatical word to a lexical item also classify as a case of degrammaticalization. Haspelmath (2004) adds an even more demanding qualifier: degrammaticalization (or “antigrammaticalization” in his terms) must pass through the same intermediate stages of a supposed case of grammaticalization (but obviously in reverse). This requirement effectively eliminates the various strategies of word formation that take place simultaneously.

### 2.3. *Lexicalization*

The term “lexicalization”, much like degrammaticalization, lacks a precise and coherent characterization. Many have considered lexicalization to be the opposite movement of grammaticalization on the basis that the lexicon and the grammar form the two poles of the grammaticalization chain (Norde, 2009). Moreno Cabrera (1998), for example, conceptualizes these two processes as parallel and complementary. In his view, the two processes interact in the sense that grammatical elements “feed” lexicalization, providing the necessary input for the formation of new lexical entries.

This formation of new lexical elements is what primarily distinguishes lexicalization from the other processes mentioned above. Moreno Cabrera (1998: 218) calls it a “lexicotelic” process that takes advantage of syntactic units to create new lexical words. Furthermore, lexicalization operates along another chain called the metonymical concretion hierarchy that I have reproduced below (Moreno Cabrera, 1998: 216):

(3) Quality > Time > Space > Process > Object > Person

According to this cline, the movement of an element or syntactic phrase to a lexical element is in essence the result of a metonymical process through which a concept is manipulated in order to express another contiguous, associated term. Moreno Cabrera illustrates this with the word “reading”: it is a form of the verb “to read” that has acquired the meaning of a noun (i.e. something that is read). According to this interpretation, “reading” (Process) was manipulated semantically to represent “reading” (Object) due to the contiguity between these two concepts. Thus the lexicon gains an element at the expense of the syntax.

Lexicalization is also characterized in terms of word formation in Himmelmann (2004). There exist various processes that lead to the appearance of new lexical elements such as: univerbation (i.e. “brainstorming”); idiomatization, in which idiomatic phrases are reinterpreted as inseparable units; splits, in which the polysemic meanings of a particular element are divided into two independent units (i.e. “mouse” may refer to a rodent and to a device that is connected to a computer) (Himmelmann, 2004: 29).

It is evident that analysts have treated lexicalization from different perspectives. Nevertheless, in this paper, the perspective used by Moreno Cabrera (1998) will be considered the most traditional and

prototypical. That is, lexicalization is used to refer to the change through which a syntactic structure is manipulated to represent a lexical entity that has meaning in itself and does not take it from context (like grammatical forms). I consider Moreno Cabrera's (1998) position to be prototypical because it depends upon the "box approach" in which the lexicon and the grammar are reduced to two large "boxes" that are separate and independent from one another. Lexicalization, under this approach, is a process of unidirectional change that leads from one box to another (Himmelmann, 2004). As we will see in section 4, though, I will explore a less prototypical, "non-directional" model of lexicalization (Norde, 2001; Himmelmann, 2004) that will help explain the movement from the abstract to the concrete in *el lunfardo porteño*.

### 3. From the abstract to the concrete in *el lunfardo porteño*

In this section, I present data from *el lunfardo porteño* that seem to represent movements from the concrete to the abstract. That is, I show that the creative manipulation in this slang has resulted in the formation of terms with concrete referents that previously had more abstract sources, a surprising fact given (1). Before I do this, it is important to provide a brief description of *el lunfardo*.

#### 3.1. *El lunfardo porteño*

*El lunfardo* is a vocabulary created by criminals in Buenos Aires and its surrounding areas that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The arrival of millions of immigrants from countries as diverse as Holland, Syria, Germany, Spain, Great Britain, and Italy (Greet Cotton & Sharp, 1988) irrevocably changed *porteño* culture and society, converting it into a new Babel (Ordaz, 1958). Those criminally inclined citizens of this new Babel took advantage of the linguistic diversity to establish their own code with the aim of avoiding detection by the authorities.

However, one should not confuse the original *lunfardo* with the common language of the street: "*El lenguaje de la calle está contaminado, naturalmente, por todos los que la transitan: el guarango [un lenguaje del bajo pueblo] ya es gesto rencoroso y pendenciero: el lunfardo, en cambio, es lenguaje gremial cuyo vocabulario resulta completamente oscuro para los no iniciados*" (Clemente, 1954: 52). With this distinction in mind, we can suppose that speakers of *el lunfardo* had a specific goal in mind: to develop a linguistic code among criminals that was borne out of the necessity to hide their transgressions (Clemente, 1954). Furlan (1971: 13) describes it as "*un vocabulario criptológico de ladrones para comunicarse y no ser descubiertos en sus planes por la policía [...] La cárcel es el laboratorio del lunfardo.*" But it is crucial to point out that *el lunfardo* cannot be considered a language in and of itself. Rather, it is a set of words and expressions used in conversation, but the syntax and grammatical constructions used to support those vocabulary items belong to Spanish (Teruggi, 1974: 21).

Despite its criminal origins, *el lunfardo* has survived to present day, though altered from its original version. Furthermore, it no longer belongs exclusively to the criminals of Buenos Aires but rather to the population at large—to such an extent that more recent definitions downplay the criminal aspect in favor of highlighting the role that immigration played in forming this colloquial slang (Teruggi, 1974; Conde, 2011). Teruggi (1998: 8) states that the task of separating *el lunfardo* from present-day Rioplatense colloquialisms would not only be a tremendous task, but likely an impossible one. Many have pointed out that various sociohistorical factors contributed to its spread, such as the incorporation of *lunfardismos* in tango lyrics and the development of mass communication<sup>3</sup>, among others (López Peña, 1972; Teruggi, 1974; Conde, 2011). Although it is likely that the survival of *el lunfardo* is due to a confluence of many other factors, it suffices to say that it has transcended the underworld and is now a hallmark of casual *porteño* speech<sup>4</sup>. In fact, Conde (2011) indicates that its

<sup>3</sup> Teruggi (1974) states that television, in particular, has contributed greatly to the spread of *el lunfardo*, especially outside of Buenos Aires. Many comedic programs employ *lunfardismos* as punch lines, thus exposing new audiences to the region's colorful slang. Conde (2011) cites radio, cable television, and the Internet as promoters of these linguistic innovations.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the adoption of *lunfardismos* by younger generations is likely unconscious on the whole. Teruggi (1998:8) notes that *porteño* youth do not have a clear idea of what exactly *el lunfardo* is, believing it to be an outdated form of speaking by older generations.

influence these days is certainly felt as far as Uruguay and the rest of Argentina, but perhaps even as far away as the larger cities of Chile, Bolivia, and Paraguay.

*El lunfardo's* creativity, expressivity, and playfulness perhaps are its most enduring characteristics. These traits are best exemplified through some of the transformations that standard Spanish words underwent in order to give birth to various *lunfardismos*. For example, paragoge—the addition of elements to the end of the word—resulted in *papa* (“an attractive woman”) becoming *papusa* (Teruggi, 1974: 39). Likewise, Italian word endings, such as *-eli*, *-ini*, *-oni*, and *-ato* are often applied to words with otherwise Castilian roots: *barato* (“inexpensive”) becomes *baratieli* or *baratieri* (Teruggi, 1974: 39). Lastly<sup>5</sup>, many *lunfardo* users (as well as speakers of more standard Rioplatense Spanish) habitually transpose the letters in a word to create a new word, a practice referred to as *vesre*, which itself is a transposition of the standard Spanish word *revés* (“reverse”). Examples include *feca con chele* for *café con leche* (“coffee with milk”), *lorca* for *calor* (“heat”), and *rope* for *perro* (“dog”). The motivations for these changes are discussed in detail in section 5.

### 3.2. The data

As mentioned previously, *el lunfardo's* creativity and expressivity perhaps are its most enduring characteristics. Given that creativity also forms one of the underlying principles of grammaticalization (Heine et al., 1991), it is not surprising that *el lunfardo* offers data that are relevant for the study of grammaticalization. In fact, many *lunfardismos* contradict the metaphorical chain of abstraction, presented in (1), from Heine et al. (1991). These examples, that I have taken from *Diccionario etimológico del lunfardo* by Conde (2004), referred to abstract entities before communicating something more concrete; in other words, we see a movement from the abstract to the concrete, an unexpected movement within the traditional view of grammaticalization. For the sake of convenience, I have reproduced the chain of metaphorical abstraction in (4):

(4) Person > Object > Activity > Space > Time > Quality

Table 1 organizes 11 examples from *el lunfardo* that contradict (4). Beginning at the left, I list the relevant *lunfardismos* followed by their etymological origins (Conde, 2004). The third column indicates the meaning of the *lunfardismo* in standard Spanish. The fourth column details the movement in (4) from its origin to its meaning in *el lunfardo*.

(5) Table 1 (examples taken from Conde, 2004)

<i>Lunfardismo</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Standard Spanish</i>	<i>Movement</i>
1. <i>sabiola</i>	From Sp. <i>que posee sabiduría</i> (“possessing wisdom”)	cabeza (“head”)	Quality → Object
2. <i>pensarosa</i>	From Sp. <i>llena de pensamientos</i> (“full of thoughts”)	cabeza	Quality → Object
3. <i>piojosa</i>	From Sp. <i>que tiene piojos</i> (“having lice”)	cabeza	Quality → Object
4. <i>aceitosa</i>	From Sp. <i>que tiene aceite</i> (“having oil”)	cabeza	Quality → Object
5. <i>delantera</i>	From Sp. <i>parte anterior de una cosa</i> (“front part of an object”)	pecho (“chest”/ “a woman’s breasts”)	Space → Object

<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to summarize here all of the linguistic innovations found in *el lunfardo*. The examples offered here are presented solely to give the reader a sense of its playfulness and creativity. Teruggi (1974) and Conde (2011) provide much more comprehensive accounts of *el lunfardo's* salient characteristics.

6. cocina	From Sp. <i>sitio en la casa donde se guisa la comida</i> (“place in the home where food is prepared”)	estómago (“stomach”)	Space → Object
7. mirón	From Sp. <i>que mira</i> (“to see”)	ojo (“eye”)	Activity → Object
8. vichador	From Sp. <i>que vicha</i> (“to see, to peep”)	ojo	Activity → Object
9. vista	From Sp. <i>ver, percibir con los ojos</i> (“to see, perceive with the eyes”)	ojo	Activity → Object
10. pisante	From Sp. <i>pisar, ir andando de un lugar a otro</i> (“to walk”)	pie (“foot”)	Activity → Object
11. caminante	From Sp. <i>caminar, ir andando de un lugar a otro</i> (“to walk”)	pie	Activity → Object

As can be seen in Table 1, the data presented in 1-11 find their origins in concepts that are relatively more abstract in standard Spanish (for example, the adjectives *aceitoso* [#4] and *delantera* [#5]) but are recruited to refer to relatively more concrete entities such as the head in #4 and the chest in #5. The development of these *lunfardismos* operates from right to left—from the abstract to the concrete—against what we might expect from the chain in (4). Also observable in Table 1 is the fact that all of the referents are body parts. I address this in section 5.

#### 4. Analysis

In light of the fact that the words in (5) begin in a more abstract domain (Activity or Quality, for example) and end in a more concrete domain (Object), the question arises: How can we classify this change? What comes to mind is degrammaticalization and lexicalization, two phenomena that move against the current of grammaticalization, as presented in (1). First, I will consider degrammaticalization.

Although I consider these *lunfardismos* to be strong evidence of the violation of the chain of metaphorical abstraction as conceived of by Heine et al. (1991), their status within the theory of grammaticalization is less certain. The mere fact that, in *el lunfardo*, abstract concepts may be used for the expression of concrete objects does not allow us to proclaim automatically a case of degrammaticalization. As we saw previously, there exists a variety of definitions for this process in the literature, but what seems to be common among all of them is that the first step begins with a grammatical element, be it an affix, a clitic, or any other grammatical word. What is observed in (5), however, does not involve the grammar of Spanish in any way; on the contrary, we see a semantic change or a process of word formation. Furthermore, as Haspelmath (2004: 27-28) has pointed out, the true cases of “degrammaticalization” are those changes that lead from the terminal point back to the beginning of a case of grammaticalization and that also pass through the same intermediate stages. Haspelmath has observed that the majority of attested examples of “degrammaticalization” lack these prerequisites and exploit other word formation strategies to coin a new word. This author defends his position well, successfully distinguishing between the opposite of grammaticalization (antigrammaticalization) and those instances that imitate them to a certain extent. Therefore, I believe we must rule out degrammaticalization as an adequate explanation for our data, on the basis of Haspelmath’s (2004) observations and the grammar’s absence in the formation of the *lunfardismos* listed above.

Lexicalization, at first sight, also seems to be a good candidate to account for the data. In Moreno Cabrera’s (1998) metonymic concretion hierarchy introduced in (3), lexicalization is defined as the passage from abstract domains on the left (such as Quality and Time) to more concrete domains on the

right (such as Object and Person). This movement to the right coincides exactly with the observed changes in the column titled *Movement* in Table 1 in (5).

However, the issue is not resolved so easily; we must confront the same theoretical problem that we encountered with degrammaticalization. That is, the syntax does not constitute a central component of this process: a word changes its meaning without involving the grammatical system. Furthermore, it seems that the change takes place exclusively within the lexicon, though its “borders” may be somewhat blurry (Himmelman, 2004). The lexicon gains new members but not necessarily at the expense of the syntax, a fact that rules out lexicalization as well—at least its prototypical formulation articulated by Moreno Cabrera (1998).

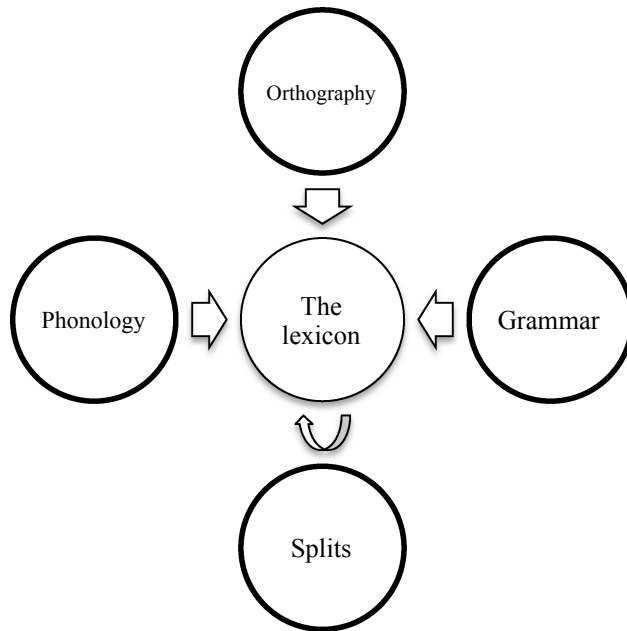
To adequately describe the observed phenomenon, I must mention the notion of prototypicality, a topic treated in depth in Himmelman (2004). He has called attention to the problematic usage of common metaphors to characterize the movement from the lexicon to the syntax and vice versa. The metaphor that concerns us here is called the “box approach” in which the lexicon and the syntax are conceived of as boxes full of lexical and grammatical material, respectively. However, according to Himmelman, this metaphor does not capture the nuances that exist between functional words from closed classes and those from open classes with lexical meanings. To liberate the theory from the rigidity of this metaphor, Himmelman proposes an alternative, less prototypical lexicalization that occurs when new lexical items are created.

His alternative position is illustrated via diverse means of word formation such as univerbation, idiomatization, and splits, as we saw in section 2.3. A split occurs when “a new lexeme is derived from another (single) lexeme by severing the various semantic and formal bonds uniting the uses of a polysemous item resulting in two items of similar or even identical shape (which over time may become more and more dissimilar)” (Himmelman, 2004: 29). This formation of words is exactly what is seen in *el lunfardo*. For example, the adjective *sabiola* (see (5) #1) originally meant “the quality of possessing wisdom.” However, subject to creative manipulation throughout time, this adjective gave birth to another meaning, *cabeza* “head”, and subsequently was cut off from this new lexeme. In fact, it is rather easy to imagine that whoever uses *sabiola* to refer to the head may not realize the historic and semantic connections between the two forms (Himmelman, 2004: 29).

Assuming the above, it is possible that one might ask if the limits of lexicalization are being abused if a grammatical element plays no role in the formation of a lexical element. On this point, I coincide with Himmelman (2004: 30) that there exists no justification to treat the exploitation of the grammar by the lexicon as a unique process when all manner of linguistic elements can be exploited by the lexicon, such as sounds, syllables, and abbreviations<sup>6</sup>. This is seen below in Figure 1 (6). On the basis of this fact, Norde (2001: 236) calls lexicalization a non-directional process. The definition of lexicalization offered by Moreno Cabrera (1998)—that it is a lexicotelic process that benefits the lexicon at the expense of the syntax—is thus incomplete in the sense that the grammatical system does not necessarily have to lose an element.

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<sup>6</sup> To illustrate this point, it bears mentioning that Teruggi (1998: 108 and 255) lists in his *lunfardo* dictionary the masculine noun *dorremifá* (“robbery”) and verb *solfear* (“to rob”), both of which are derived from the syllables *do*, *re*, *mi*, *fa*, and *sol* that are commonly used to represent notes in a musical scale.

(6) Figure 1<sup>7</sup>

I understand Figure 1 in the following way: the circle in the center represents the lexicon. The remaining circles—grammar, orthography, phonology, and splits—illustrate the various processes of lexicalization that begin outside of the lexicon. They should give the impression of a multiplicity of lexicalization processes, as mentioned above. In short, we see a “non-directional” phenomenon (Norde, 2001: 236). What interests us most is the curved arrow that connects the lexicon and the splits. It shows that a preexisting lexical element brings about the formation of another lexical element that shares the same form despite their diverging meanings. Moreover, the curved arrow does not imply the loss of either of the two: both words survive and in this case the lexicon is enriched from the interior.

## 5. Discussion

I showed in section 3.2 that the *lunfardismos* under consideration were shifted from the abstract to the concrete. More specifically, these elements moved to the left in the chain of metaphorical abstraction (Heine et al., 1991), beginning in more abstract domains such as Quality, Space or Activity and ending at more concrete points such as Object. In this section, I will utilize the contributions of Heine et al. (1991) to formulate a hypothesis regarding why this anomaly might occur.

First, it is important to recall that grammaticalization (and more to the point, the recruitment of concrete concepts to conceptualize more abstract concepts) has been proposed as a technique to resolve communicative problems (Heine et al., 1991). If this claim is indeed true, we might be in a position to state that linguistic evolution is motivated by external factors and that speakers “gain” something, such as the capacity to express a concept far from concrete experience. Following this line of thought, it is worthwhile to think in reverse and ask: what do we gain if we employ abstract concepts to conceptualize concrete entities? If these concrete concepts are already near our daily concrete existence, why do we need abstract notions to verbalize them?

The truth is that—at least at the macro level—the answer is not immediately apparent. There is much that remains to be learned about unexpected or contrary movements in the chain, and the motivations that underlie degrammaticalization (and/or antigrammaticalization) remain outside the scope of this paper. However, at the micro level, with respect to *el lunfardo*, a slang invented by criminals, the “masking” of language would be a fundamental strategy to avoid comprehension by the police, enabling *lunfardo* speakers to continue their illicit activities. Whereas the movement from concrete domains to the more abstract domains facilitates communication and helps to resolve

<sup>7</sup> I thank Meghann Peace for her help in the conception of Figure 1.



communicative problems, the opposite movement, which has been observed in the present data, serves to create confusion among those who have not been baptized professionally in the *porteño* underworld. That is, the originators of *el lunfardo* systematically exploited abstract concepts to codify common concrete referents with the aim of establishing a slang impenetrable to the uninitiated. Nevertheless, the quantity of *lunfardismos* that follow this pattern is rather limited; although it is possible that there are more examples, the 11 that were included here were the only ones that I could find in Conde (2004). Perhaps the scarcity of these examples shows that this type of movement constitutes one of *various* mechanisms through which the meaning is disguised in *el lunfardo* (F. Ocampo, personal communication).

Although it seems that this alternative movement is not observed with much frequency, a glance at Table 1 (5) reveals that all of the *lunfardismos* mentioned are associated with the human body: the head, the chest, the eye, the stomach, the foot. Heine et al. (1991: 34) state that body parts constitute a basic source of referential points for grammaticalization. That is, the physical location of a body part relative to another is exploited to express grammatical relations: “breast”, “face”, and “eye” are often recruited in the world’s languages as source concepts to express the notion of the space in front of something. These authors also state that the head has been used in some African languages to represent the abstract concept of “cause” or “purpose”. Although these are examples of the movement Body part → Abstract concept, it appears that we witness the movement Abstract concept → Body part in *el lunfardo*.

Why, then, are the concrete referents in Table 1 exclusively body parts? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer at the moment. However, it appears that metonymy is at work. Metonymy allows speakers to refer to an entity by referencing another one closely associated with it and to focus on specific aspects of what is being described (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 35-37). The human body is subject to this manipulation because the body parts associate metonymically with the actions that they execute: the foot is connected to the act of walking and the eye is associated with the act of seeing. The various functions that they carry out serve to rename the body parts. Again, I am not able to explain with absolute certainty the psychological motivations underlying this type of change. I suspect, though, that we see only body parts in Table 1 because the original *lunfardo* speakers had taken advantage of the utility of these terms for their particular communicative goal of subterfuge, while simultaneously referring to high frequency entities close to their daily experience. As we begin to find more examples of unexpected changes such as these, future investigations should examine in more detail the psychological motivations for these linguistic curiosities.

## 6. Conclusion

The *lunfardismos* examined in Table 1 were forged from previously existing abstract terms that served to label referents that were closer to speakers’ daily experience, most likely with the intention of creating a linguistic code. I have also shown that the change from the abstract to the concrete in *el lunfardo porteño*, although surprising given what we have learned from the pioneering work of Heine et al. (1991), can be explained via lexicalization. This was considered here as a “non-directional” process (Norde, 2001: 236) in which lexical renewal takes place from the interior of the lexicon without involving exterior domains (such as the grammar). In this sense, I have offered support for Himmelmann’s (2004) observation that grammaticalization and lexicalization constitute orthogonal processes, rather than parallel, complementary processes as Moreno Cabrera (1998) has conceived of them.

Additionally, this paper has highlighted the importance of investigating the motivations for grammaticalization, degrammaticalization, and lexicalization. Although my contribution may be modest, I have shown that the psychological mechanisms that propel linguistic evolution remain largely unknown to us.

Though the *lunfardo* data here do not allow us to make any grand claims about the viability of unidirectionality or degrammaticalization, they do show that some speakers of a substandard variety of Rioplatense Spanish have conceptualized concrete notions through abstract ideas, something that is typically not observed in standard communicative situations. Facilitating communication, especially in more marked communicative situations, may not be of primary importance. Rather, as we have seen here, language use can be manipulated in creative ways to obfuscate meaning, and the movement from the abstract to the concrete is one way to achieve this goal.

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