Periphrasis in Synchrony and Diachrony

John Charles Smith

University of Oxford
(St Catherine's College and Research Centre for Romance Linguistics)

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I examine some issues which arise when we attempt to define the notion of periphrasis, with particular reference to the Romance languages.

Multi-word constructions with a largely identical structure and (core) function, such as the Romance compound past, may none the less diverge quite widely in the extent to which they are defined as periphrastic according to the various metrics which have been proposed. Moreover, whilst a given multi-word construction may be more (canonically or prototypically) periphrastic in language A than language B according to one criterion, the reverse may be true when some other criterion is applied.

These differences, although real, should not blind us to the fundamental similarities between multi-word constructions (such as the compound past) with a common origin and broadly the same (core) value in a variety of Romance languages.

Central to an understanding of the problems involved is the fact that many (perhaps most) of the criteria proposed for defining a construction as a periphrasis ignore diachronic implications. It seems impossible to have a conception of periphrasis which does not involve the essentially diachronic notion of grammaticalization. However, I shall argue that it is not grammaticalization *per se* that is important in defining periphrasis, but one aspect of it — reanalysis. Extensions (in the sense of Harris & Campbell 1995) are not criterial.

An additional observation is that the data which serve to define several key concepts which have been used to identify periphrases, such as overabundance and paradigmatic intersectivity, are subject to sociolinguistic variation. It follows that these concepts, and hence the notion of periphrasis itself, if defined in these terms, are sociolinguistic variables.

I conclude that any definition of periphrasis cannot be purely synchronic and structural; it must take into account diachrony and sociolinguistic variation.

REFERENCE:

Harris, Alice C. & Lyle Campbell (1995). *Historical Syntax in Cross-Linguistic Perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.