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### Grammaticalization

Exotic foreign tongues with strange sounds, unknown words, and peculiar patterns are what first come to mind when a person thinks of languages that are different from his own. But one does not have to look to the distant regions of the globe to find an unfamiliar tongue; he merely needs to look back in time to an earlier form of his own language. For example, texts written in Old English (dating from the mid-5<sup>th</sup> to mid-12<sup>th</sup> centuries) cannot be understood by present-day English speakers unless they have specialized training in Old English. And English is not unique in this regard; all languages change with time.

One of the many forces responsible for language change is grammaticalization. Simply put, grammaticalization is the process by which words or structures become less meaning-filled and more grammatical in their function. Grammaticalization theory explains how autonomous, concrete linguistic items such as nouns and verbs can evolve into grammatical elements such as prepositions, auxiliaries, and affixes. In early English, for example, the word *will* (in its various spellings) was a full lexical verb meaning ‘want to’ or ‘desire’; but in present-day English, *will* has morphed into a grammatical, future-marking auxiliary verb.

As an area of linguistic study, grammaticalization is influential in historical linguistics where it is used to explain observable language change as well as to reconstruct the pre-history of languages. Interest in grammaticalization goes back more than one hundred years, but theories were expanded in the 1980s and 1990s as a renewed interest in historical linguistics sparked research, conferences, and writing on grammaticalization topics (Wischer and Diewald ix).

## MECHANISMS OF GRAMMATICALIZATION

Linguists use the term grammaticalization in different ways. What is included in the process, what gets left out of the process, and even whether or not grammaticalization deserves to be called its own process are all up for debate. But linguists who do ascribe to a grammaticalization theory generally agree that the process consists of the mechanisms of semantic bleaching, reanalysis and extension, and phonetic reduction (Harris).

***Semantic Bleaching.*** Semantic bleaching, like its name implies, occurs when the meanings of words are bleached away, leaving only faded meanings in their place.

One main cause of semantic bleaching is people's desire to be expressive. When people use a word or phrase for a particular meaning often enough, it starts to lose its effectiveness. It becomes commonplace, and its ability to impress listeners is diluted. Over time, speakers tend to use different words and phrases to express the original meaning, allowing for further bleaching and fading of the original word's meaning. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents the word *awesome* in its earliest use in 1598 as meaning "full of awe, profoundly reverential." But by 1961, *awesome* had assumed the weakened meaning of "remarkable," and by the 1980s the word's meaning had faded to a mere slang term for "commendation: 'marvelous'[or] 'great'" (OED).

Another influence on semantic bleaching is the use of metaphors. Metaphors express abstract ideas by conceptual mapping from concrete domains to abstract domains. For example, concrete food terms are often used to express abstract ideas and thoughts. "People speak of troubles *brewing*, anger *simmering*, resentment *boiling*, fanaticism *fermenting*, and employees *seething* . . . . People *chew* over new suggestions and *digest* new information; the masses *swallow* whatever lies the newspapers *feed* them, [and] students *regurgitate* facts at the

examination” (Deutscher 121). Another common metaphorical mapping occurs between the concrete spatial domain and the abstract temporal domain. In fact, Guy Deutscher asserts that “in language—any language—no two domains are more intimately linked than space and time. Even if we are not always aware of it, we invariably speak of time in terms of space” (134). This mapping gives rise to the abstract use of prepositions such as *from*, *in*, *at*, *before*, *after*, *within*, and *through* to denote temporal relationships. “All the [preceding] prepositions originally denoted spatial terms, and all of them were metaphorically extended into the domain of time” (Deutscher 134). As words become more and more abstract, they are bleached of their original meaning. At some point, words in their bleached form become so established in people’s speech that they enter the lexicon with their own meanings and are no longer thought of as metaphors.

***Reanalysis and Extension.*** People use the rules of their native language without even consciously knowing what those rules are. It is this subconscious knowledge that allows people to put groups of words together in meaningful ways so that they can be understood by others and so that they can decode the strings of words that others say. Reanalysis occurs when people make alterations in the way they group together or chunk words for meaning. In their book *Grammaticalization*, Hopper and Traugott assert, “Unquestionably, reanalysis is the most important mechanism for grammaticalization” (39).

Let us take a look at an example of reanalysis to make this concept clear. In English, a participle form of a verb is often used as an adjective before a noun (e.g. decorated trees, wrapped presents, prepared documents). One might then construct a sentence such as the following:

- (1) Nicole has prepared documents.

During the stage of English in which participles were used only to ascribe properties to nouns, such a sentence would unambiguously be chunked to keep the participle and noun together (Eckardt 1). As the main verb, the word *has* would show ownership, and the noun phrase *prepared documents* would mean *documents that have been prepared*.

(1a) [Nicole][has][prepared documents]

However, over time, the proximity of the verb *have* to a participle allowed the use and meaning of the verb *have* to change from a main verb into an auxiliary verb, creating a new tense construction: have + participle (Eckardt 2).

(1b) [Nicole][has prepared] [documents]

The difference between (1a) and (1b) is an example of reanalysis. The manifestation of the sentence itself (that is, its word order) has not changed, but the grouping of words and the meanings of the word groups has changed.

Extension, the use of a reanalyzed linguistic form in novel contexts, can also be seen in the auxiliary verb *have*. The new tense not only subtly changed the meaning of the words involved, but its pairing of have + participle also came to be used in instances that never could have been realized when participles were constrained to be only adjectives (Eckardt 1,2). For example, a participle form of the verb *arrive* cannot be used as an adjective (\*the arrived man), but it can be used as the main verb in a perfect tense construction (The man has arrived).

**Phonetic Reduction.** Phonetic reduction occurs when speakers of a language de-emphasize a phoneme, eventually leading to the loss of the phoneme. In grammaticalization, phonetic reduction often follows semantic bleaching. Dr. Leendert Plug asserts, “In much of the literature, reduction is considered to be primarily physiologically driven; it results from a general tendency of speakers to minimise articulatory effort, and occurs when speakers are under relatively few

constraints to articulate clearly” (2). In other words, phonetic reduction is caused by the tendency of people to lazily say as little as is necessary to communicate.

Examples of phonetic reduction abound. In English, for example, it would not be uncommon to hear the five-syllable question “Do you want to go?” reduced to just “wanna go?” While any part of a phrase or word is susceptible to phonetic reduction, it is the ends of words that are the most vulnerable. Many speakers don’t bother to pronounce the end of a word as carefully as they do the beginning, perhaps because they think the listener already received the gist of the meaning, or perhaps because their energy or interest in the word drops off. For whatever reason, word endings are always subject to erosion. In English for example, although the past tense of most verbs is spelled with an ‘-ed’ ending, many of these words are pronounced with just a ‘-d’ or ‘-t’ ending; *loved* is pronounced as ‘*lovd*’ and *rebuked* as ‘*rebukt*.’ What is common pronunciation for English speakers now, however, was not always so. In 1712, Jonathan Swift chided those who did not pronounce the full ‘-ed’ syllable: “By leaving out a Vowel to save a Syllable, we form so jarring a Sound, and so difficult to utter, that I have often wondred how it could ever obtain” (Deutscher 89).

### **AN EXAMPLE OF GRAMMATICALIZATION IN ENGLISH**

The word *go* is a common little word in English. As a full lexical verb it means ‘to physically move from one place to another’ as in *I go to the park*. But over time, the word *go*, or more specifically *be going to*, has taken on the grammatical function of marking future tense.

Consider the following sentences:

- (2) She is going to the store.
- (3) The noise is going to stop.
- (4) He’s gonna stay home.

Sentences (2) and (3) both contain the words *is going to*. In sentence (2), *go* denotes movement toward a physical location, the store. In sentence (3), however, no movement from one place to another is happening at all; in (3) the phrase *is going to* denotes future tense and could easily be replaced with the auxiliary verb *will* (The noise will stop). The process by which *go* changed from a full lexical verb to a grammatical tense marker is a case of grammaticalization with evidence of semantic bleaching, reanalysis and extension, and, as is seen in sentence (4), phonetic reduction.

In his book *The Unfolding of Language*, Guy Deutscher takes his readers on a journey tracking the grammaticalization of *go*. The phrase *going to* was originally used to express physical movement or traveling to a physical place as in ‘going to the lake’ or ‘going to church.’ A document written in 1439 regarding the arrest of a runaway contains one of the earliest uses of the construction ‘going to *do* something.’ In its description of the movement of the arrested man, the document contains the words “as they were goynge to bringe hym there.” Here, physical movement was still involved; but rather than movement to a place, it was movement for a purpose. Over the decades, this expression of ‘physically moving somewhere for the purpose of doing something’ was used more and more frequently. By the mid-1600s, the words *going to* had made a metaphorical shift in meaning from movement in space to movement in time. Semantic bleaching also occurred by a gradual erosion in meaning. In sentence (2) above, *going* has a distinct meaning in itself, but in sentence (3) *going to* no longer specifies a separate action (Deutscher 147-155).

Reanalysis and extension also play a part in the grammaticalization of *go*. Consider the analysis and chunking of the following sentence:

- (5) She is going to shop.

(5a) [She] [is going] [to shop].

(5b) [She] [is going to] [shop].

Sentence (5a) means she is physically moving somewhere for the purpose of shopping, while sentence (5b) means she will shop in the future. Sentence (5) could be chunked and analyzed in either way. But by extension, meanings such as sentence (5b) began to be used in situations where they could not have a counterpart such as (5a). Consider the following:

(6) The snow is going to stop.

(6a) \* [The snow] [is going] [to stop].

(6b) [The snow] [is going to] [stop].

The analysis of sentence (6a) makes no sense; snow does not go somewhere so that it can stop. Therefore sentence (6) shows an example of extension: the original use of the words *is going to* do not work in this sentence, while the extended new grammatical use of *is going to* does work.

Phonetic reduction is also evident in the grammaticalization of *go*. The erosion of sound is easy to see as *going to* becomes *gonna*. In its semantically bleached state, *going to* carries less specific meaning; and people are less careful in pronouncing it because they have less risk of being misunderstood. Notice that when *going to* is used in contexts where it retains its original meaning of concrete movement in space, it is not phonetically reduced. For example, we could not express sentence (2) as “She is gonna the store.” But when *going to* is used in its grammatical sense as a future marker, it is unsurprising that it is often reduced, especially in speech, to simply *gonna*.

## ISSUES RELATED TO GRAMMATICALIZATION

**Clines.** A cline is a pathway along which a linguistic form moves from one word class to another. Hooper and Traugott clarify the term thus: “The potential for change from lexical noun,

to relational phrase, to adverb and preposition, and perhaps even to a case affix, is an example of what we mean by a cline” (6). Similar clines can be found across different languages. There is no abrupt shift from one state to another along a cline, but rather a gradual transition. In fact, earlier forms often coexist with later ones (Hopper and Traugott 6).

A cline can be thought of diachronically as a path charting the historical changes in a given linguistic form, or it can be thought of synchronically as a map of the coexisting forms along a continuum from lexical to grammatical. Linguists may not agree on the labeling of the points along a cline or where exactly on the cline a particular linguistic form belongs, but they do generally agree on the positioning of the points relative to each other. Many books on grammaticalization reference Hooper and Traugott’s cline of grammaticality which shows the following order of points:

content word > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional affix (Hooper and Traugott 7).

***Unidirectionality.*** It has been generally held that linguistic forms move along the cline of grammaticality in only one direction: from lexical to grammatical. This hypothesis has been a cornerstone in grammaticalization theory and has been used as a basis for predicting language change and reconstructing language history (Fischer, Norde, and Peridon 1).

But not all linguists agree with the single-direction premise. In 2004 Fischer, Norde, and Peridon wrote, “In recent years . . . the unidirectionality hypothesis has been criticized both on theoretical and methodological grounds as well as with reference to a number of well-described changes in which the directionality of grammatical change appears to be reversed” (2). Linguists agree that some counter examples of grammaticalization exist, but they have differing views on the degree to which these examples poke holes in grammaticalization theory.



## CONCLUSION

As a linguistic theory, grammaticalization has been used to explain how current linguistic features in language relate to each other and how those features may have come into being. It also helps explain the gradience so prevalent in the systems of language, and it can be used to inform people's perception of language issues for the future. Grammaticalization has received much attention over the last several decades because of the light it sheds on both diachronic and synchronic language studies. And although linguists disagree on the nature, the scope, and even the very being of grammaticalization, they all would agree that languages change!

People's desire to express themselves in fresh and forceful ways, people's laxity in speech whereby they articulate as little as necessary to still be understood, people's potential to interpret others' language in new ways, and many other factors contribute to the restlessness that pushes language to decay and to create at the same time. Languages are in a constant state of flux, and the study of the changes involved is a fascinating and rewarding journey indeed.

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