



Literatura y Lingüística

ISSN: 0716-5811

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Chile

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Literatura y Lingüística, núm. 18, 2007, pp. 201-211

Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez

Santiago, Chile

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## Grammaticalization: 'The development of some English modal auxiliaries'

Leonardo Véliz Campos\*

### Abstract

This paper approaches the topic of Grammaticalization from a diachronic perspective, with particular emphasis on the development of some English modal auxiliaries. The first part contextualizes the topic within the field of Cognitive Linguistics; the second, deals with a brief description of lexical and grammatical items. The third part of the paper provides some crucial information on the history of Grammaticalization. A final section outlines some of the mechanisms involved in the process of Grammaticalization together with the analysis of some English modal auxiliaries and the importance of it in when studying and understanding English as a foreign language.

**Key words:** Cognitive Linguistics, Grammaticalization, lexical and grammatical items.

### Resumen

En este artículo se hace una reseña de una perspectiva diacrónica a un tema llamado Gramaticalización, con particular énfasis en el desarrollo de algunos de los verbos auxiliares modales en Inglés. En la primera parte se contextualiza el tema en el campo de los estudios de la Lingüística Cognitiva y, en la segunda, se aborda la distinción entre categorías léxicas y categorías gramaticales en una breve descripción. En la tercera parte se entrega información acerca de la historia del proceso de gramaticalización. La sección final plantea algunos de los mecanismos que son parte del proceso de gramaticalización, junto con un análisis de algunos verbos auxiliares modales en inglés que resultan ser de suma importancia en el estudio y la comprensión del inglés como lengua extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** Lingüística Cognitiva, Gramaticalización, Unidades Léxicas y Gramaticales.

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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics is a relatively new subfield of linguistics which grew out of the work of a number of researchers in the 1970s who were deeply interested in the relationship between language and mind, and who did not follow, at that time, the prevailing tendency to explain linguistic patterns by means of appeals to structural properties internal and specific to language.

Most of the ideas and assumptions raised by cognitive linguists such as Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff, among others, were in direct connection with the idea of meaning rather than form and function. These linguists began developing their own approach to language description and linguistics theory, focused on a particular set of phenomena and concerns. One of the most important assumptions shared is that meaning is so central and important to language that it must be a primary focus of study. Linguistic structures serve the function of expressing meanings and hence the mappings between meaning and form are a crucial subject of linguistics analysis.

This particular view is in direct opposition to the ideas developed at the time within Chomskyan linguistics, in which meaning was only 'interpretive' and peripheral to the study of language. The central object of great interest was syntax.

Cognitive linguistics, as a relatively new line of research related to language and mind, holds that our shared experience of the world is not only stored in our memory but also in our everyday language and can thus be gleaned from the way we communicate and express our ideas. In order to open this mine, however, we have to go beyond the logic of clause patterns and examine figurative language, more specifically metaphors. Metaphors live with human beings and are present in all different forms of language; formal, informal, spoken, written or even body language in

which the pragmatic aspect plays a significant role in the realization and the possible form and meaning a metaphor could take.

This paper is not intended to analyse the notion of metaphor but to go deeply into the analysis of Grammaticalization, a different notion which is part of cognitive linguistics as well. Metaphors, as cognitive tools for conveying pragmatic meanings, will eventually be dealt with in an upcoming paper.

In the nineteenth century the study of the development of grammatical forms was motivated by the general interest in the etymological roots of languages. The term 'Grammaticalization' was probably first coined by the French linguist Meillet. According to Meillet (1912), the aim of studying Grammaticalization is to investigate 'the transition of autonomous words into the role of grammatical elements' (1912:133).

A famous case in English is the transition of the lexical verb 'go' into an auxiliary which is, nowadays, used to express futurity.

## 2. Lexical vs. Grammatical items

It is widely claimed that Grammaticalization is a diachronic phenomenon which happens to occur in most languages whereby certain lexical meaningful items become functional and grammatical. In order to be able to distinguish the real difference between a lexical and a grammatical item, clear examples as well as simple words will be used to draw reasonable and satisfactory distinctions.

When a little child is beginning to speak or even when a foreigner or traveller is trying to pick up the first words of the language she/he wishes to speak, they do so by learning content words first (also known as open-class items) rather than function words (closed-class items), i.e. words which carry lexical meaning. It is necessary to point out that there is no difference whatsoever when talking about content, open and lexical items which are just different names- adopted by different approaches- referring to the same category. This can be viewed in the following diagram:

- (i) Open class ----- Closed class
- (ii) Content words ----- Function words
- (iii) Lexical items ----- Grammatical items
- (iv) Major class ----- Minor class

The first two (i) and (ii) are names given by Traditional Grammarians, whereas (iii) is usually the name given by Cognitive linguists. Finally, the last term (major and minor) is commonly used by Cognitive-functional linguists, more specifically by T. Givón (1984).

Getting back to our main concern, lexical items are the ones which can be understood in isolation- and do not require any grammatical device to be fully understood- such as nouns, more specifically concrete nouns. A clear example is paying attention to the types of words little children pick up when beginning to speak as they acquire concrete nouns first, and then abstract nouns. I have never ever learnt of little children learning words such as freedom, patience, and necessity as their first words when beginning to speak; rather, they pick up words like 'cat', 'house', 'car', and so on. These lexemes carry meaning by themselves; in other words, they are independent as they do not need any type of preposition, for instance, to establish grammatical relationships in the sentence. On hearing, seeing or uttering the word 'cat' anybody who speaks English would be able to figure out the meaning underlying the concept 'cat'. Moreover, rather than understanding and being able to work out the meaning of a certain concept it is even more important to notice that a word like cat is worth learning in isolation because of its meaningfulness in a certain context or situation, whereas the complex preposition 'by the way'-for example- makes no sense whatsoever, and besides, there is no point in learning it in isolation as it requires a specific context, together with other lexical items in order to understand the way it works and functions in a sentence.

The above-mentioned complex preposition is one, among many other items, which belongs to the so-called closed class or grammatical items, where the latter is, and will be, the notion I will be discussing.

Grammatical items are words or phrases which have very little lexical meaning or have ambiguous meaning which is difficult - perhaps impossible- to define according to their features and characteristics, but it is easier to define them according to their usage in context. What is the real meaning of the preposition 'at'? Before answering this question directly, there could be another question that could probably arise: In what context? Meaning what? Expressing time, place, or placed in fixed expressions or collocations?

Would it possible to describe and define the following preposition in terms of its features and properties?

- The man *at* the door

- The meeting will be over *at* two o'clock
- I was at the beach *at the weekend*

This particular function word or grammatical item is impossible to be described by its natural properties, features and characteristics. Nobody would dare to say: a preposition has such and such characteristics. They are big; some of them are very expensive whereas others are not very nice.

This would be an inconceivable response for anyone to think of. Rather, the possible descriptions and definitions that we could give about this item, and many others with similar characteristics, are in direct connection with their usage and function they serve as grammatical devices inside the sentence.

### 3. A Brief History of Grammaticalization

The main concern here is not to draw a historical line as to when the process of Grammaticalization started to occur in languages, but to refer to earlier research on this field and the contributions made by early researchers concerning this fascinating phenomenon that has been widely named as "Grammaticalization".

The concern for the nature of language, more specifically the idea of language change goes back to hundreds of years ago. In fact, in 1822 The German philosopher and humanist W. Humboldt made the first speculations about the origins of grammar. Such was the importance of his ideas that these speculations about the genesis of grammar were regarded as the most sophisticated thoughts on this field.

By the end of the nineteenth century a clear tradition in the study of Grammaticalization had been established, lacking only the name itself. An interesting account of the origins of Grammaticalization forms and their evolution is to be found in the survey of linguistics by the German neogrammarian George Von der Gabelentz (1891).

Gabelentz, in one of his published lectures, invites his readers to visualize linguistics forms as "*employees of the state*", who are first hired by a certain company, then promoted, put on half-pay, and finally retired, while outside hundreds of applicants wait patiently for their turn to get a job.

This analogy is definitely marked by the idea of process in which a

series of events take place. Some of them have a remarkable effect on the entity involved in the process, making considerable changes either in the form or the function.

Years later, the French linguist Antoine Meillet was the one who coined the term "Grammaticalization". His contributions have been considerable to the development of the Grammaticalization theory; not only was he the first to recognise the importance of it as a central area of language change, but also he was the first to describe how new grammatical forms emerged, mainly, through two different processes or mechanisms.

Two of the most widely-recognised mechanisms in Grammaticalization are: Analogy and reanalysis. The former consists of new elements which come into being through relationships to already existing ones. Reanalysis, on the other hand, consists of a change in the structure of an expression -or class of expressions- that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation.

## 4. Grammaticalization

Concerning the search for the natural source of words, the origin of grammatical forms, tense markers, plural and case markers, Grammaticalization has been a perennial concern of linguists and their precursors.

Some years earlier Gabelentz (1891), a German Linguist, drew an analogy between "an employee of the state" and Grammaticalization to account for this process.

Gabelentz (1891) pointed out that an employee goes through a very slow process when being hired from a certain company up to the moment he/she retires. A series of crucial events accompany this long-lasting process. The employee is first hired, trained, and then promoted, put on half-pay and finally retired.

Similarly, Grammaticalization goes through a very similar process. A lexical element begins to experience certain changes and go through various processes until the element is grammaticalized. Once grammaticalized, it can even go further until it is more grammaticalized as shown in the examples below.

1. She is going to London
2. She is going to London to visit the British Museum
3. She is going to visit the British Museum

#### 4. She's gonna visit the British Museum

In the first three sentences we can tell the difference with respect to the others. The first two sentences show us that "go" is behaving as a full verb in which the idea of motion/movement is implied together with a directive adverbial. These constructions (one and two) in old English were only possible with a subject-agent- meaning "someone moving toward a particular goal".

However, from the third sentence onwards we can see the turning point. The directional adverbial has now been dropped and the meaning focuses on the subject's intention rather than the idea of motion or movement which is implied in sentence number one.

*She is going to visit the British Museum* takes us one step further because here the subject is no longer an agent initiating an action chain meaning **someone moving towards a goal**, but rather someone who shows the intention to do something. This idea can also be applied to the following example.

Peter! I will introduce you to my best friend, Susan. She is a secretary and I am sure *you are going to like her*.

In the previous sentence the sentence in italics does not convey the idea of a subject being a doer, but the experiencer of an attitude (the affection towards Susan), so the meaning of *going to* is not intentional now, but a kind of prediction based upon present circumstances.

In the above examples (1,2,3, and 4), the last two versions do not show a change in the semantic meaning, but document the phonological changes which accompany the transition of *going to* into a grammatical form.

### 5. Some mechanisms involved in Grammaticalization

Before we begin to talk about the mechanisms involved in the process of Grammaticalization it is highly important to outline what really motivates this process and what the probable paths of progression are through time.

Firstly, when we speak of progression we concentrate on change, particularly language change but, what is thought to be changing? We



speak loosely of language change, but this phrase is a bit misleading. Language does not exist separate from its speakers. It is not an organism with a life of its own; rather it coexists with the users.

Some of the most important mechanisms, as suggested before, involved in the process of grammaticalization are *analogy and reanalysis*. Semantic bleaching will also be mentioned as an important mechanism of grammaticalization.

Reanalysis and analogy have been widely recognised as significant for language change, most specifically morphosyntactic change. Reanalysis modifies underlying representations, whether semantic, syntactic, or morphological, and brings out rule change, whereas analogy only refers to the attraction of extant forms to already existing constructions.

It is also crucial to mention that different types of reanalysis can be found. One of the simplest types of reanalysis, and one very frequently found in grammaticalization is fusion: the merger of two or more forms across word or morphological boundaries. One of the most typical examples is "compounding", which is the act of combining two or more words into one, usually with consequences for semantics, morphology and phonology.

A clear example of compounding is the development of many highly productive derivational affixes in English. Present Day English (PDE) **-hood, -dom, -ly** originated in full nouns meaning "condition", "state", "realm", and "body". For instance, if we have a look at the word **manly**, anyone would tend to think that this word is an adverb because it takes an affix, which is **-ly**. But, first of all, we must say that this single word is not an adverb, and secondly this construction originally is one composed by two single nouns.

In Old English (OE) **liç** → meant "body", which is actually a noun.

So, the construction → **man-liç** meant "body of a man", which is actually the use and the meaning we now give to the previous construction.

Another important mechanism of change in grammaticalization is actually related to *habituation*. Semantic bleaching has been recognised as a process by which a grammatical morpheme loses components of their original lexical meaning, and therefore it becomes much more general and abstract. Thus, **will** loses the volitional aspect of its meaning and **be going to** loses the spatial movement components, becoming now a construction which expresses not only space and movement, but also intention and prediction.

## 6. English modal auxiliaries

Grammaticalization is a remarkable phenomenon that has attracted most linguists' attention from the very beginning, particularly those working on syntactic change. It deals with change in the status of lexical verbs such as **may, can, must, will** and how they have become auxiliaries.

Most of these changes which will be listed below did not come about overnight; it took hundreds of years for them to become what they are in Present Day English. For instance, we can document the development of the definite article **the**, out of the demonstrative **that**, and the development of the indefinite article **a/an** out of the numeral **one**.

If we pay attention to the function of articles such as **the** and **a** we must focus on the nouns that the hearer can identify as already known in the discourse or conversational context and those that are being introduced for the first time. For example:

I met a man at the bank vs. The man I met at the bank

*In the first sentence it is clear that the noun "man" is an element which is being introduced for the first time and therefore is unknown for both, the hearer and the speaker. On the other hand, the second sentence shows a construction a bit different, using a definite article now, expressing the idea of knowing something or someone previously.*

Similarly, the English modal auxiliaries, which express grammatical distinction within the categories of tense (future will) and modalities such as possibility (can, may), all of them developed from verbs.

"Will", which now indicates future tense, developed from a verb, **wi-llan**, meant "to want"; "can" derived from a verb **cunnan**, meaning "to be acquainted with or to know"

"May", on the other hand, derived from **magan**, meaning "to be able to, to have the power to". **Could and might** developed from the past tense forms of **cunnan** and **magan** respectively.

I have already mentioned the more complex phrase of **be going to**, which in Shakespeare's English still described actual movement in space, and then fuses into **gonna**. In Shakespeare's time it was impossible to conceive something, an object, a thing, as subject of the construction **be going to** because this construction required an agent, i.e. someone moving towards a specific goal.

These facts are interesting enough as isolated facts about one language, but they develop a profound importance with the discovery that all over the world- in languages that are not related genetically or geographically- we find analogous examples: definite articles developing from demonstratives, indefinite from numerals and so on so forth.

## 7. Conclusions

Language is a fascinating fact that is part of our everyday lives. The economy, the government, policies, people are changing all the time and so is language. Language is not a static thing that remains the same all the time. Language is a living organism which is susceptible to change throughout time. This is one of the most important reasons for Grammaticalization.

From my viewpoint, Grammaticalization is a phenomenon which has been present in human history, something that has always existed, i.e., it is a process that should be regarded as diachronic rather than synchronic, even though it is quite difficult to account for all the changes that have come about in languages since we do not have written records of those ancient languages which have died out.

Grammaticalization is a fascinating phenomenon as we are not paying attention to way someone acquires grammatical patterns but to the way language itself acquires grammar. However, we need a lot of time to experience this phenomenon since it does not happen overnight.

When we speak of Grammaticalization we are mainly looking at the way grammar is created, the way something becomes something else. It is interesting to see the way a child grows up and grows older little by little. He/she experiences physical, psychological changes as time goes by. It is a process full of changes, challenges, surprises, achievements that do not take place all in one day. Thus, Grammaticalization is constantly going through different changes over time; some lexemes change their function, others come into being, whereas a small group loses their meaning, function and use in language.

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