

**Melanie Bobik**

# The Grammaticalization of Verbs. Verbs as Sources of Grammatical Change

**Research Paper  
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# Grammaticalization: Verbs as Sources of Grammatical Change

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# 1. Introduction

*Languages don't change; people change languages.*

(William Croft, 1990)

How and why do grammatical structures evolve? This question has been extensively discussed by linguists concerned with the study of grammaticalization, a discipline which may be defined as that part of language theory which focuses on “the interdependence of *langue* and *parole*”, dealing with the organization of categories and of coding (Traugott and Heine 1991b:1) or as Haspelmath (1999:1044) puts it, “grammaticalization shifts a linguistic expression further towards the functional pole of the lexical-functional continuum”.

The phenomenon under investigation is a universal one for there is a striking cross-linguistic consistency of the lexical sources of particular targets, i.e. grammatical forms. These regularities of grammaticalization pathways are interpreted as reflections of universal aspects of human cognition and perception. Precisely how grammatical forms evolve out of lexical structures is the main issue of this paper, and it will be argued that grammatical structures are shaped by discourse in an ongoing process. Following this view, grammar is therefore merely the label used for “certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse”. (Hopper 2002:156) Following this, frequent repetition in discourse plays a crucial role in the development of grammatical forms. The famous dictum, “grammars code best what speakers do most” is a central postulate of all discourse-based approaches to grammaticalization, and points to the assumption that grammars reflect coding mechanisms for those speech functions which speakers most often perform. (DuBois 1985:362-63) Analogically, entities of high frequency are candidates which are most likely to enter grammaticalization paths.

Furthermore, it will be argued that basicness is an inherent characteristics of most source concepts. It has been observed that for any given grammatical domain, there is only a limited number of lexical items that are likely to be sources for grammaticalization. Most of these constitute very basic human concepts and activities, depending on the socio-cultural situation in which the language is spoken. Since verbs form the core element of every sentence, expressing different conditions such as states, changes, activities, achievements etc., they provide a suitable source for grammatical targets. In Heine and Kuteva's (2002) *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization*, a book summarizing the most salient generalizations on the change of grammatical constructions, 53 out of 173 source concepts are verbs.

This paper consists of two major parts, each divided into chapters. The first section sets out the theoretical background for the study of grammaticalization and the second outlines some common pathways of verbs as sources for grammaticalization.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the research history of grammaticalization in order to provide a better understanding of this tradition.

Chapter 3 describes reanalysis and analogy, the two mechanisms involved in linguistic change and demonstrates how they interact within grammaticalization.

Chapter 4 details the characteristics of grammaticalization chains. The specific functional processes involved in the transition from lexical to grammatical material, i.e. semantic, phonetic and morphosyntactic changes, are set out and illustrated. The chapter concludes with examples of so called *degrammaticalization*, that is, cases of the reversed development (from grammatical to lexical items).

Chapter 5 attempts to locate the motivating factors behind grammaticalization. It will be demonstrated that although both metaphor and metonymy play a crucial role, the role of individual communicative needs must be taken into consideration.

Chapter 6 provides a bridge to the second part of the paper by listing some of the main verbal sources.

Chapter 7 deals with the evolution of auxiliaries, which encompasses the majority of verbal pathways of grammaticalization. The verb-to-tense/aspect/modality-chain is illustrated by (i) posture verbs which typically become aspectual markers, and (ii) by verbs of desire, motion and obligation that typically evolve into future markers.

In Chapter 8 European languages and languages with serial verb constructions are compared in regard to their potential of providing deverbal prepositions.

Chapter 9 is concerned with the evolution of complementizers, which often develop out of *verba dicendi*, such as *say*.

Finally, Chapter 10 illustrates the recent development of *be like* to one of the most popular quotatives in English speaking countries. It may not involve the grammaticalization of a verb, but it is an interesting case of a frequent lexical item taking on new functions in a very short period of time.

## **2. Grammaticalization and its Meaning**

Grammaticization, grammatization or grammaticalization? A variety of different terms are used for a phenomenon that has attracted a lot of attention in the past decades. The disagreement regarding its name is reflective of the diversity of perspectives to this subject. Thought to be less than a hundred years old, the term ‘grammaticalization’ is used for at least two different, yet related processes. The one most commonly referred to is the evolution of a grammatical morpheme out of a lexical morpheme. For example, positional verbs such as *sit*, *stand* and *lie* may become markers of durative aspect. This type of development is labelled the ‘lexical item > morpheme model’ and originates in Meillet’s account of grammaticalization which will be presented in the following chapter. The second and more recent tradition is associated with Talmy Givón’s ‘syntacticization’, a process “by which loose, paratactic, ‘pragmatic’ discourse structures develop - over - time into tight, ‘grammaticalized’ syntactic structures.” It considers grammaticalization to be a syntactic, discourse-pragmatic phenomenon. (Givón 1979:208) Syntacticization and the rise of grammatical morphology often go hand in hand and both models are therefore sometimes regarded as mutually dependent parts of the same process. (Givón 1979:220-22)

This chapter gives a short survey of the history of grammaticalization, its study and its major scholars. More detailed surveys can be found in Heine et al. (1991a), Hopper and Traugott ([1993]2003) and C. Lehmann (1995).

### **2.1. The Evolution of Grammaticalization**

Although there are links going back to von der Gabelentz, von Humboldt and even to Horne Tooke and Condillac, grammaticalization as a term was coined in 1912 by the French linguist Antoine Meillet, who defined it as “*le passage d’un mot autonome au rôle d’élément grammatical*”. (Meillet 1958:131) His article *L’évolution des formes grammaticales* is the first full-length paper on grammaticalization and marks the beginning of a perspective of grammaticalization which still prevails today. Meillet’s notion of grammaticalization hints at the study of the history of particular grammatical forms. (Hopper 1991:18) In his view, the transition from lexical items (*mots principaux*) to morphemes fulfilling grammatical function

(*mots accessoires*) is gradual: “*Et il y a tous les degrés intermédiaires entre les mots principaux et les mots accessoires.*” (Meillet 1958:135)

According to Meillet, new grammatical forms emerge through two processes. First, through analogy, whereby new paradigms come into being through formal resemblance to already existing paradigms, e.g. the replacement of plural *shoen* by *shoes* through analogy to the established plural *-s*. Secondly, they can develop through a process known as grammaticalization, defined as the “attribution of a grammatical character to an erstwhile autonomous word”. Meillet illustrates this process with the French verb *être* ‘to be’, whose meaning ranges from a full existential ontological sense, as in *je suis celui qui suis* ‘I am the one who is’, to a structure with a less fully locative sense in *je suis chez moi* ‘I am at home’, to an almost redundant sense, as in *je suis malade* ‘I am ill’, and finally to a purely grammatical function as a tense-aspect auxiliary in *je suis parti* ‘I left’. (Hopper and Traugott [1993]2003:19, Meillet 1958:131) Later in the same article, he goes even further by pointing out that,

Whereas analogy may renew forms in detail, usually leaving the overall plan of the system untouched, the ‘grammaticalization’ of certain words creates new forms and introduces categories which had no linguistic expression. It changes the system as a whole. (Meillet 1958:133)

How does such a change come about? In Meillet’s opinion, the main reason is a loss of expressivity in frequently used collocations, whose function may be rejuvenated through new collocations that perform the same role. Loss of expressivity is often accompanied by the weakening of phonological form and concrete meaning. Obviously, Meillet’s account of grammaticalization is strongly influenced by the “classical” attitude toward language that equates change with deterioration. (Hopper and Traugott [1993]2003:24-25) Still, his paper is considerably rich in its insights and even though subsequent works on grammaticalization have modified Meillet’s view, it still presents a challenging concept around which to create related modern ideas.