Unit 7 Grammaticalisation Revisited

Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to

1. Explain how all grammars evolve in the process of Grammaticalisation
2. Analyse sentence structures more effectively

7.0 Introduction

In Units 2, 3 & 4, we briefly discussed ***grammaticalisation*** – the concept (Units 2-3) and the process (Unit 4). We defined grammaticalisation as the process whereby lexical items (words and phrases with concrete meanings) acquire more abstract meanings in the collective mind of the speakers, thus assuming *grammatical* functions in the language system. Examples: many English prepositions started off as 'concrete' word-meanings: a + cross → *across*; in + side → *inside*; ane (meaning, one) → one; a/an; a + head → *ahead*; a + breast → *abreast*; be + low → below, etc. We also talked about 'concrete' verbs acquiring more abstract 'grammatical' functions within the language system (i.e., modal / auxiliary verbs, etc.). Examples from Tok Pisin included the adjective-forming suffix –***pla*** (-***pela***) that originated from the English word 'fellow' (wanpla, tupla, gutpla, etc.), possessive pronoun/adjective ***bilong/ blong/ blo/ lo***, which stems from the English word belong, and the transitive verb marker –***im***, which stems from the objective case of the English personal pronoun *he* → ***him*** (as in ***kukim*** *kaikai/* ***rausim*** *rabis*, etc.)

In Unit 4, we traced the evolution of human language from its origins to the modern era, marvelling at the amazingly rapid language change, which has resulted in the mind-boggling phonological and syntactic diversity of world languages. For example, the Indo-European language family, whose many languages, as diverse as Farsi, Urdu, Turkish, Russian and English, all sprang from a common ancestor (Proto-Indo-European, or PIE) only about 10,000 years ago (Gray & Atkinson, 2003).

In this unit, we will tie it all together in a holistic view of 'live' and constantly emerging linguistic structures, in all their interconnectedness and change.

7.1 Grammaticalisation Creates Grammar

Grammaticalisation occurs because of *re-analysis* of word-meanings in the collective mind of language speakers – concrete word-meanings become more abstract; the concrete meaning gets 'bleached' out of the word form, which then acquires a purely grammatical function. For example, tense, aspect, and modality markers often derive from a small group of verbs with originally very concrete meanings. Speakers of many languages typically re-analysed common concrete verbs (such as those below), associating them (by resemblance) with more abstract grammatical meanings:

Want (will) → FUTURE	[I *will* do it, etc.]
Go → IRREALIS → FUTURE	[I am *going* to do it, etc.]
Come → PERFECTIVE → PAST	[I *came* to like him, etc.]
Have → PERFECTIVE → PAST	[I *have* done it, etc.]
Be → PROGRESSIVE → HABITUAL → FUTURE	[I *am* going, etc.]

Know → can[1] → HABITUAL-POSSIBLE-PERMISSIBLE [We can do it; Yes, we can!]
Do → PERFECTIVE → PAST [I did see him/ I did not do it, etc.]

This is how all grammars developed! Speakers begin to use concrete words in an abstract way (because of on some resemblance or contiguity of meaning), and when this usage becomes the norm in a speech community, it becomes a rule of grammar!

Remember how Wittgenstein described the countless 'language games' people play, creating 'meaning ***as use***'? Primeval languages spoken must have been much like the 'game' he described in §2 of *Philosophical Investigations* (a very *practical* language, with simple, *concrete* word-meanings):

> That philosophical *concept* of *meaning* has its place in a primitive idea of *the way language functions*. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours.
> Let us imagine a language ...The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out; --B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. -- Conceive this as a complete primitive language.
>
> Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*. Retrieved 11/18/2008 from http://www.galilean-library.org/pi10.html

We already know that, if we scratch the surface of some most abstract of word-meanings, we can uncover surprisingly simple concrete concepts that gave rise to them:

etymology: from Gk. ***etymologia***, from ***etymon*** "true sense" (neut. of ***etymos*** "true," related to ***eteos*** "true") + ***logos*** "word."

exasperate: from L. exasperatus, past participle of exasperare "roughen, irritate," from ***ex***- "thoroughly" + ***asper*** "rough."

excursion: from Latin ***excursum***, pp. of ***excurrere*** "run out," from ***ex***- "out" + ***currere*** "to run"

exist: from L. ***existere*** "stand forth, appear," and, as a secondary meaning, "exist;" from ex- "forth" + sistere "cause to stand" (compare: *assist*).

helicopter: From Gk. ***helix*** "spiral" + ***pteron*** "wing" → helico**pter** 'spiral **wing**'

ptero**dactyl**: '**wing**-fingers' from Gk. ***pteron*** "wing" + ***daktylos*** "finger"

profile: from L. ***pro***- "forth" + ***filare*** "draw out, spin," from Late Latin ***filare*** "to spin, draw out a line," from ***filum*** "thread."

aptitude: "quality of being fit for a purpose or position," from Late Latin ***aptitudo*** "fitness," from L. ***aptus*** "joined, fitted".

[1] Forerunner of know, ***can*** is now just an auxiliary (modal verb), *know* took over its earlier role

Many scholars[2] currently agree that human language arose spontaneously out of our existential need for cooperation, and that it was originally a simple code of voice signals to represent concrete objects or actions. We can draw a parallel between the development of speech and inner thought in the child and what may have occurred in our ancestors' collective mind in the course of co-evolution of language and the brain:

> In mastering external speech, the child starts from one word, then connects two or three words; a little later, he advances from simple sentences to more complicated ones, and finally to coherent speech made up of series of such sentences; in other words, he proceeds from a part to the whole. In regard to meaning, on the other hand, the first word of the child is a whole sentence. Semantically, the child starts from the whole, from a meaningful complex, and only later begins to master the separate semantic units, the meanings of words, and to divide his formerly undifferentiated thought into those units. The external and the semantic aspects of speech develop in opposite directions – one from the particular to the whole, from word to sentence, and the other – from the whole to the particular, from sentence to word.
> This in itself suffices to show how important it is to distinguish between the vocal and the semantic aspects of speech. Since they move in reverse directions, their development does not coincide, but that does not mean that they are independent of each other. On the contrary, their difference is the first stage of a close union.
> …A child's thought, precisely because it is born as a dim, amorphous whole, must find expression in a single word. As his thought becomes more differentiated, the child is less apt to express it in single words but constructs a composite whole. Conversely, progress in speech to the differentiated whole of a sentence helps the child's thoughts to progress from a homogeneous whole to well-defined parts.
> Thought and word are not cut from one pattern. In a sense, there are more differences than likenesses between them. The structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment. Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form. The semantic and the phonetic developmental processes are essentially one, precisely because of their reverse directions (Vygotsky: 1934).

By analogy, our collective mind has co-evolved with Language over millennia – from holophrastic chunks of complex meanings, represented by simple structures, to more differentiated, precise, abstract meanings, represented by more complex linguistic structures.

Grammaticalisation of concrete lexical items in the course of socio-historical evolution of language is what linguists now believe is the 'possible origin of grammatical structure – from a proto-language, initially involving perhaps unordered and uninflected strings of content words' (Christiansen/Chater: 2007).

While biological evolution is a very slow process, linguistic change is hundreds of times faster. Biologically, we have not changed much in the past 200 000 years; languages, on the other hand, have become unrecognizable in just a thousand years:

> Whereas Danish and Hindi needed less than 5,000 years to evolve from a common hypothesized proto-Indo-European ancestor into very different languages (McMahon, 1994), it took our remote ancestors approximately 100,000–200,000 years to evolve from the archaic form of *Homo sapiens* into the anatomically modern form,

[2] Terence W. Deacon, Morten H. Christiansen, Nick Chater, etc.

> sometimes termed *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Indeed, … the rapidity of language change, and the geographical dispersal of humanity suggests that the biological adaptation to language is negligible (Christiansen/Chater: 2007).

Christiansen & Chater also argue that 'a growing bulk of work in computational and comparative linguistics has begun to substantiate the viewpoint that **language structure emerges from processing constraints**' (Ibid., emphasis mine – OT).

What ***processing constraints*** are they talking about? They mean, of course, the way our brains process information. The way we ***think*** constitutes the limitations of the human brain! Therefore, these 'constraints' of human understanding are what we already know as the three principles of human understanding – associating ideas by resemblance, contiguity, and cause/effect!

Grammaticalization, then, is the process whereby functional items (including closed class words and morphemes) develop from what are initially open-class items (Christiansen/Chater: 2007). This *transitional* process of grammaticalization involves

1. A '***bleaching***' ***of meaning*** (i.e., you do not mean '*possess*' when you say that you *have to go*, etc.);
2. ***Phonological reduction*** (i.e., going to → gonna); and
3. *Increasingly* ***rigid dependencies with other items*** (= 'set' expressions, sequences of words; *I am going to Lae tomorrow* vs. *I am going to* ***(gonna)*** *see them tomorrow*).

ALL grammars have evolved in the process of grammaticalisation of content words: Unordered /uninflected content words, believed to be typical of the original **λ**[3], acquired ***new roles*** / ***grammatical meanings*** amongst the language speakers.

The psycho-physical & social nature of grammaticalisation as part of language change has become a 'hot' topic in modern linguistics, promising to solve the mystery of language origin and evolution. Pidgins and creole languages are particularly important in explaining how all grammars came about, shaped by the universal principles of human understanding.

Activity 7.1

What are the rules of Tok Pisin grammar? Read the description of Tok Pisin clause structure from *The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Grammar* (Mihalic: 1971) in your Resource Book. Can you see any similarity with English sentence structure?

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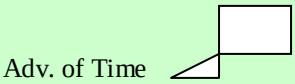
[3] Greek letter liamda (L) = λ which I use to symbolize the word 'Language'

7.2 Practical Sentence Analysis – G-nalysis

S V $C_{(DO)}$ S_2 V_2 $C_{2(DO)}$
When Emerson takes up the challenge, /*It's never been done before*/ becomes /*Consider it done!*

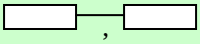


S_2 & C_2 are both *nouns* and *sentences* in their own right:
It (S_3) /has never been done before (V_3)/($C_{3(zero)}$)
[You] (S_4)/ consider (V_4)/ it ($C_{4(DO)}$) done {'done' answers the question *Consider how?* and is therefore an adverb of manner
Complex sentence structure

S V $C_{(PN)}$ $_{(IO)}$
Specter's defection/ was /a bit of a solar plexus blow to the Republicans.

Simple sentence

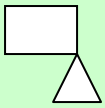
S V S_2 V_2
School/ will soon be in recess,/ final exams /are scheduled to start in early June.



Compound sentence structure

When is it like that?
S V S_2 V_2
It /is like fixing a flat/ when the whole truck/ is broken.

How is it?
(Adv. of manner phrase)



Adv. of Time
Complex sentence

S V $C_{(DO)}$ S_2 V_2 $C_{2(PA)}$ S_3 V_3 $C_{3(PN)}$
We /are seeing /a light at the end of the tunnel, but /we/ are not /sure /it/'s not /an oncoming train!

but

That what?

Noun clause Compound-Complex structure

Activity 7.2

G-nalyse the sentences below. Compare your g-nalysis with mine (look for it at the end of this unit)

1. Adjective clauses modify nouns and pronouns.
2. A clause is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate.
3. Synthesis and analysis of word-meanings creates complex meanings, expressed by phrases, clauses and sentences.
4. Dialectical linguistics views language in all its complexity, interconnectedness, development and change.

Summary

Grammaticalisation is the process of language change, driven by the way the human brains think (generalize, based on associating ideas by Resemblance, Contiguity, and Cause/Effect). It occurs because of *re-analysis* of word-meanings in the collective mind of language speakers: concrete word-meanings become more abstract, acquire grammatical functions and thus form the grammar of the language. Language structure is shaped by human brain, by the mechanism of human thought (generalisation).

References

Gray, R. D. & Atkinson, Q. D. (2003). Language-tree divergence times support the Anatolian theory of Indo-European origin. *Nature, 426,* 435-439.

McMahon A.M.S. (1994). *Understanding language change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Answers to Activity 7.2

S V $C_{(DObjects)}$
Adjective clauses/ modify /nouns and pronouns. (Simple sentence structure)

Which group of words?
S V **$C_{(PN)}$**
A clause / is /a group <u>of words</u> <u>containing a subject and a predicate</u>. (Simple sentence)
Which group?

S V $C_{(DO)}$
Synthesis and analysis <u>of word-meanings</u> /creates /complex meanings, <u>expressed by phrases, clauses and sentences</u>.

Simple sentence; contains adjective phrases (underlined)

S V $C_{(DO)}$
Dialectical linguistics /views /language <u>in all its complexity, interconnectedness, development, and change</u>.

Simple sentence; contains an adverb of manner phrase (How does it view language?)