

'Wherever you are and whatever you do, language makes a difference!'

— The Five-Minute Linguist

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Where does grammar
come from?

Joan Bybee

*Does grammar change? What is grammar anyway?
Do all languages have it?*

All languages have grammar, by which we mean those little function words (*the, a, will, some*) or prefixes and endings that signal meanings such as past, present and future. Grammar also includes the way we arrange words so effortlessly yet consistently in our native language; for instance, the fact that we say 'the dog is sleeping on the couch' rather than 'is dog ingsleep couch the on'. Although most of us are aware of words changing, we tend to think of grammar as more stable. But in fact, grammar is also constantly in flux.

The Language Police always deplore the loss of grammar—for instance, that we don't know when to use *whom* any more—but it's barely noticed that languages also develop *new* grammar. And yet they do! All the time.

For example, English has some old ways to indicate future tense by using *will* and *shall*. But these days American English speakers and younger Britons hardly use the word *shall* at all. A new way to mark future has evolved in the last few centuries from the expression *be going to* plus a verb. So when we say 'it's going to rain', we mean it purely as a prediction about a future event—it doesn't mean that something or someone is going anywhere at all.

In Shakespeare's time, on the other hand, if you used *going to*, it always meant literally that someone was going from one place to another for some purpose.

How did this change happen? It is a process that linguists call 'grammaticalization', through which a word or sequence of words like *be going to* may acquire a change of meaning and take on a grammatical function. Such changes happen very gradually, over long periods of time, and several things usually happen at once.

The change of meaning often starts when inferences get associated with certain phrases. For instance, if I say 'I'm going to visit my sister' I am telling you both where I am going and what my intentions are. After a while, the intention meaning becomes even more important than the movement meaning. From the intention meaning in turn you can make an inference about what will happen in the future. So eventually, we can use *be going to* to indicate future.

Humans are very interested in other people's intentions, so expressions of intent are a more important piece of information than expressions about movement in space. So when *be going to* began to be used for intention it was used more often. When phrases are used a lot they begin to lose some of their impact, and the original meaning seems to get bleached away. They also tend to be said faster, and pronunciation erodes: so when *going to* came into constant use as a main way to express the future, it started to turn into 'gonna'—a new bit of grammar. Not everybody has yet recognized 'gonna' as a future tense marker, but that is clearly the function it is serving, especially in spoken language. In another hundred years it will no doubt be firmly entrenched in our grammar books—until another way to express future develops.

Grammaticalization happens over and over, and in all languages. In fact, many languages use a phrase with a verb such as 'go' to signal the future. You can see it in Spanish, French, the African languages Margi, Krongo, Mano and Bari, the Native American languages Cocama and Zuni, the Pacific language Atchin, and many more. One of the reasons languages are similar is that they develop over time in very similar ways.

And it is not just markers of future time that develop this way, but all kinds of grammatical markers. For instance, it is common for the indefinite article *a/an* (as in 'a dog') to develop from the word for 'one'. In English, you can still hear the 'n' of 'one' in the 'an' of 'an apple'. Also, in Spanish, French, German and other European languages, the relation between the word for 'one' and the indefinite article 'a' or 'an' is quite clear. Spanish *un/una*, French *un/une* and German *ein/eine* all mean both 'one' and 'a/an'.

Or think about prepositions, those little words like *at*, *over*, *with*, *above* or *through* that link up with a noun to talk about when, where or how something was accomplished ('at ten o'clock', 'over the bridge', 'with daring speed'). They too are what we think of as part of 'grammar' and have undergone changes in their meaning and use. Our words *before* and *behind*, for example, are composed of an old preposition *be-* and the noun *fore* meaning 'front' and *hind* meaning 'the back part of a body'. While these prepositions started out with meanings having to do with space ('before the castle', 'behind the ramparts'), they are now also used for time ('before noon', 'I'm running behind schedule').

There are many features of grammar whose origins we don't know, but because the process of grammaticalization is so common, it's safe to assume that all words and parts of words that have a grammatical function came from other words.

And that helps us explain how the very first language got grammar. The earliest language was no doubt fairly 'telegraphic' in nature, a collection of individual words, supplemented with gestures to convey meaning. But soon after human beings could use words as symbols and join two words together, they surely used some combinations very frequently. With the making of inferences and inevitable changes in pronunciation, the development of grammar was put in motion. And that was a great thing, because—despite its bad reputation among those who struggled with it in school—it is the existence of grammar that makes fluent, connected speech possible.

About the author

Joan Bybee (Ph.D., UCLA) is Distinguished Emerita Professor of Linguistics at the University of New Mexico. At the University of New Mexico she has served as Associate Dean and Department Chair. In 2004 she served as President of the Linguistic Society of America. Professor Bybee is considered a leader in the study of the way language use impacts language structure. She has authored books and articles on phonology, morphology, language typology and language change. Her book *The Evolution of Grammar* (1994) uses a database of seventy-six languages to study the way in which languages spontaneously develop new grammatical structures.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

Other chapters discussing grammar include 14 (universal grammar), 16 (animal communication), 25 (language deprivation), and 52 (Native American languages). Chapters 8 (language change) and 10 (pidgins and creoles) discuss how grammar changes over time.

Elsewhere

Deutscher, Guy. *The Unfolding of Language* (Henry Holt and Company, 2005). A lively popular introduction to linguistics from the point of view of language change.

Hopper, Paul, and Elizabeth Traugott. *Grammaticalization* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). A textbook for linguistics students about grammaticalization.