

Chapter 36. Grammatical change

Willem B. Hollmann

36.1 Preliminaries

Grammatical change is an extremely interesting area but does presuppose some knowledge of grammar. For this reason, if you do not have this knowledge yet, this chapter will work best if you have first familiarised yourself with the terminology discussed in the chapters on grammar, i.e. especially chapters and 5–8.

Chapters on grammatical change in traditional textbooks on the history of English or historical linguistics by and large focus on change in morphology (the structure of words) and/or syntax (the structure of phrases and clauses). Some of the most important changes in the history of English can indeed be described in more or less purely structural terms, i.e. without considering meaning very much.

Sentences (1–2), below, illustrate object-verb (or OV) constituent order,¹ which was quite frequent in Old English but became less and less common during Middle English, until it was completely lost in the sixteenth century.

- (1) Gregorius [hine _{object}] [afligde _{verb}]. (*Homilies of Ælfric* 22.624)
Gregory him put-to-flight
'Gregory made him flee'
- (2) Ne sceal he [naht unaliefedes _{object}] [don _{verb}]. (*Pastoral Care* 10.61.14)
not shall he nothing unlawful do
'He will do nothing unlawful'

Example (2) shows that we must be careful when discussing OV order in Old and Middle English: the finite verb (here: *sceal*) actually often occurred before the object, taking up the second position in the clause (the initial position here being occupied by the negator *ne*). Thus, it is often only the lexical verb (here: *don*) that follows the object. Indeed, the writer of example (1), the monk Ælfric, who lived around the turn of the first millennium, would almost certainly have positioned the object after the verb *afligde* if instead of the pronoun *hine* it had been a full noun phrase such as *the man* in OE. This would then have yielded something like (3), below:

- (3) Gregorius [afligde _{verb}] [þone guman _{object}]
Gregorius put-to-flight the man
'Gregorius made the man flee.'

We shall discuss the loss of OV order in more detail in section 2.1, where we will show, in particular, how it is related to a change in the English morphological system — which, in its turn, was partly brought about by a change in stress (which happened before the start of the Old English period). The point here is that these interrelated changes are all of a structural (phonetic, morphological, and syntactic) nature.

In the last few decades, however, there has been a significant move in the study of grammatical change in English and other languages towards looking at developments that also involve meaning (i.e. semantics-pragmatics). Most of these studies rely on and/or contribute to what has become known as **grammaticalisation theory** — named after the phenomenon of **grammaticalisation**, which may be defined as the development of grammatical constructions out of more lexical expressions. The reverse (i.e. grammatical constructions developing into more lexical expressions) does not, or hardly ever, appear to happen.

From a scientific point of view, this **unidirectionality** renders grammaticalisation extremely interesting, as it allows us to make certain predictions as to what changes are likely to happen, and what changes would be unexpected. Some examples of grammaticalisation were introduced in chapter 35, on semantic change, e.g. the future tense constructions based on *BE going to* and on *will*. Examples (4a–b) illustrate these constructions, while (5a–b) show how the verbs were used before the future tense uses became available. (Example 5b is taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for the verb *will*, and dates from c.1205.) These uses are more lexical than grammatical in the sense that their meanings, motion and desire, are more concrete than future tense. Note also that in many languages future tense marking is part of verbal morphology (e.g. Spanish *como* ‘I eat/am eating’, *comeré* ‘I will eat’). Motion and desire, on the other hand, do not develop into inflections on verbs quite so regularly (though it is not impossible).

- (4a) It’s going to rain tomorrow.
- (4b) It will rain tomorrow.
- (5a) I am going to London.
- (5b) Wenne þu wult more suluer, sæche hit at me suluen.
‘When you want more silver, say it to me’.

In the case of *BE going to* the older (motion) construction still co-exists today with the newer, more grammatical use; in the case of *will* the original (volitional) use is now almost obsolete — **almost** because while examples such as (5b) are no longer acceptable, if you ask someone if they **will** marry you, you’re not asking them to make a prediction about the future but whether they **want** to marry you. In other words, when lexical expressions develop into grammatical constructions, the older meanings may but need not continue to exist. If they gradually die out, there are often some remnants that persist for quite some time. (In an important (1991) article on grammaticalisation, the American linguist Paul Hopper calls this the **principle of persistence**. Hopper and others have identified several other principles, or typical characteristics, of grammaticalisation, some of which we will see below.)

The point of giving these examples here is that they clearly illustrate that grammatical change is often not just about linguistic structure, but frequently also involves changes in meaning. In addition to grammatical structure and meaning grammaticalisation typically involves a **third** level, namely phonetics. Consider for

instance that it is possible to say (6a), where *going* and *to* have been phonetically reduced and fused into a single form, but not (6b):

- (6a) It's gonna rain tomorrow.
- (6b) *I'm gonna London tomorrow.

This phonetic reduction — labelled **attrition** by the German historical linguist Christian Lehmann (1985) — illustrates a second characteristic of processes of grammaticalisation.

Many historical linguists working on grammaticalisation have suggested that there is also reduction on the level of meaning in that the richer more lexical meanings (in the case of the future tense constructions at hand, motion and desire) are stripped off, while more grammatical meanings (here: future tense) come to the fore. In a study published in 1912, the French linguist Antoine Meillet, generally considered to be the founding father of grammaticalisation studies, called this *affaiblissement* ('weakening') but it is nowadays more commonly known as **semantic bleaching**. Having already mentioned persistence and attrition, we now have semantic bleaching as the third property of grammaticalisation. We return to grammaticalisation in section 3.

36.2 Structural changes in the history of English

36.2.1 Changes in constituent order and changes in (pro)nouns

In section 1 we saw that one of the major structural changes in the history of English was the disappearance of OV order. The 'new' constituent order was VO, where 'new' is in scare quotes because it was already common in Old English as well (especially in main clauses with subjects in the initial position; remember that the reason why (1) is an exception is that the object is a pronoun; (2) displays OV order because instead of the subject we find the negator in the initial position).

In some historical descriptions OE constituent order is characterised as SOV. This is a considerable oversimplification in two respects. First, the position of subjects depended heavily on whether or not the sentence started with an adverb (such as *þa* 'then', *forþon*, 'therefore', or *nævere* 'never'). In clauses with such an initial adverb, we tend to find the subject later in the sentence (as in (7a–b)), unless it is a pronoun, in which case it usually **is** found before the verb and the object (see (7c)).

- (7a) Forþon [afligde_{verb}] [Gregorius_{subject}] [þone guman_{object}].
- (7b) Forþon [afligde_{verb}] [þone guman_{object}] [Gregorius_{subject}].
'Therefore Gregorius made the man flee.'
- (7c) Forþon [he_{subject}] [afligde_{verb}] [þone guman_{object}].
'Therefore he made the man flee.'

There is a remnant in Present-day English of this effect of sentence-initial adverbials: if they have what we may describe as some kind of negative meaning (*never*, *no sooner*, etc.) the (finite) verb is also found in the second position, while the subject comes later:

- (8a) Never had Gregory seen so much rain.

(8b) No sooner did he see the rain than he decided to leave London.

Note that in PDE, contrary to OE, it no longer matters whether the subject is a full NP (e.g. *Gregory*) or a pronoun (e.g. *he*).

The second reason why it is misguided to characterise the normal constituent order of OE as SOV is that the degree of variation is so high that it may not make sense to talk about OE in terms of having one single basic constituent order. In this connection, we must make it clear whether we are referring to main clauses, subordinate clauses or coordinate clauses (see chapter 8). In addition, when discussing the position of the verb in OE (and to a lesser extent ME), it is important to distinguish between finite and non-finite verb forms (see for instance the discussion of example (2), above). We will not go into the differences in any great detail here, but thorough discussions of the OE facts may be found in Mitchell (1985) and Traugott (1992); for the ME situation see especially Fischer (1992). Denison (1993) conveniently summarises much of the literature for both periods.

Advances box 1: The structure of OE and ME and Chomsky's view of language

We saw in the main text that it may not be possible to characterise OE as having a single basic constituent order. A lot of research on OE and ME in the so-called Generative tradition (named after Chomsky's theory of language, known as Generative Grammar) does try to argue that there is a basic order. Fischer et al. (2000) offer an excellent overview of this work. It is important to note that Fischer et al. explicitly avoid the basic mistake of typifying OE as SOV (see 2000:49 and *passim*). Instead, they attempt to weigh up the evidence in favour of basic OV or VO order.

This is not the place to discuss all the pros and cons of these two suggestions in detail. What is important to note here is that Generative historical linguistics makes the assumption that speakers, as they acquire their language, have a kind of switch (a PARAMETER, in Chomsky's terms) in their minds which they set to either OV or VO, the setting depending on the language they hear around them. To Generative scholars who assume that the basic order in OE is OV, examples with VO order like (3) would clearly be a problem. They approach this kind of problem by suggesting that in producing a sentence like (3) speakers would start with OV order but then (for some reason) shift the position of one of the constituents such that the object ends up in the 'exceptional' position. Similarly, if the basic constituent order is supposed to be VO, then examples like (1–2) are said to be the result of the speaker moving the verb into the second position.

We will not be adopting the Chomskian idea of a necessarily fixed constituent order — one of the reasons being that the evidence for the idea that constituents are moved around in sentence production is not overwhelming. In other words, speakers may have a variety of orders available straight 'off the shelf', so to speak. Also, even if we allowed for the movement of constituents, the presence of a basic order in a language would seem to make sense only if that basic order is at least (considerably) more frequent than other orders. For PDE this can be shown quite easily: almost every sentence is SVO. The rare exceptions include cases such as *Peas I like*, where the object occurs sentence-initially, usually to emphasize it for some reason or other. For OE it is harder but not impossible to establish a basic order that reflects speakers' statistical preferences (in this case, the so-called verb-second order, see the discussion above). For many other languages in the world, however, it is. In those languages, different word orders are constantly used to suit speakers' communicative purposes of drawing more or less attention to certain parts of the sentence, much like in the English example [*Peas* _{object}] [*I* _{subject}] [*like* _{verb}] (following for instance a sentence like *I hate sprouts*).

Chomsky and his followers have established their theory of grammar by working mainly on (Present-day) English. One suspects that there is a link between the idea that languages have a single basic order on the one hand, and the fact that almost all data these scholars have looked at is from a language where word order indeed happens to be relatively fixed, on the other.

Having discussed some basic facts of constituent order from Old through Present-day English, we now move on to asking the question as to why these changes should have happened. Specifically, we will discuss the gradual shift, from OE (or actually the Germanic ancestral languages of OE) to PDE, of a relatively free constituent order to a much more rigid (SVO) one. First we will show that the increasing rigidity in word order was caused to a large extent by a change in

inflectional morphology. Then we will push the question back even further, and reveal how, in its turn, this morphological change had come about.

We have already seen some examples of constituent order variation in OE. Sentences (7a-b) showed that in OE it was possible for the subject to precede or follow the object. In PDE the latter order (*Forþon [afligde_{verb}] [þone guman_{object}] [Gregorius_{subject}]*, ‘Therefore Gregorius made the man flee’) is clearly unacceptable (with the exception of special cases such as *Peas I like*, as discussed in the Advances Box, above): we need to mention *Gregory* before we can mention *the man*. We can admittedly switch the order around, but we then get a very different interpretation:

- (8a) Gregory made the man flee.
 (8b) The man made Gregory flee.

The question arises as to how OE speakers could hear sentence (7b) and still decide that Gregory made the man flee rather than vice versa. The answer lies in the endings of the nouns in question (as well as the determiners and adjectives they may occur with). Thus, if an OE speaker heard the form *_one guman* s/he knew that this was the direct object of the clause, that is, roughly speaking, the person undergoing the action carried out by the subject rather than the person carrying out the action themselves. In order to get the reverse interpretation, as in (8b), the form used would be *se guma*. To show what would happen if an adjective entered the picture as well, the subject form of ‘the good man’ would be *se goda guma*, and the direct object form, *_one godan guman*.

The subject form is often called the **nominative** case; the (direct) object form, **accusative**. There were two additional case forms: the **dative** (used for indirect objects) and the **genitive** (used to signal a possessor). In OE the dative and genitive singular of *guma* were the same as the accusative, i.e. *guman*. In PDE the genitive is still available (see e.g. *the man’s name*), but common nouns do not distinguish between nominative, accusative, and dative. This information is captured in the Illustration box 1, below, which also includes pronouns. (Sg = singular; Pl = plural; 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; M = masculine; F = feminine; N = neuter).

Illustration box 1: Simplification of noun and pronoun inflections from OE to PDE

	Old English	Present-day English
nominative Sg	guma	man
accusative Sg	guman	man
dative Sg	guman	man
genitive Sg	guman	man’s
nominative Pl	guman	men
accusative Pl	guman	men
dative Pl	gumum	men
genitive Pl	gumena	men’s

Table 36.1 The word *guma* ‘man’ in Old English vs. *man* in Present-day English

	Nominative	Accusative	Dative	Genitive
--	------------	------------	--------	----------

1Sg	ic	me	me	min
2Sg	þu	þe	þe	þin
3SgM	he	hine	him	his
3SgF	heo	hi(e)	hi(e)re	hi(e)re
3SgN	hit	hit	him	his
1Dual ²	wit	unc	unc	uncer
2Dual	git	inc	inc	incer
1Pl	we	us	us	ure
2Pl	ge	eow	eow	eower
3Pl	hi(e)	hi(e)	him	hira

Table 36.2a The OE pronoun system

	subject	object	possessive
1Sg	I	me	my/mine
2Sg	you	you	your(s)
3SgMasc	he	him	his
3SgFem	she	her	her
3SgNeut	it	it	its
1Pl	we	us	our(s)
2Pl	you	you	your(s)
3Pl	they	them	their(s)

Table 36.2b The PDE pronoun system

The illustration box shows that, interestingly, in personal pronouns the case system is still more intact than in common nouns: in addition to a distinction between nominative and genitive (e.g. *he* vs. *his*) there is also a case form for objects (*him*). Since we now use the same pronoun forms to refer to direct and indirect objects, grammarians tend to label the form *him* the **object** or **objective case** (i.e. instead of accusative or dative). Parallel to this the term **subject(ive) case** is now often preferred to nominative. (By contrast, in languages such as German, where the case system has not collapsed to nearly the same extent as in English, it does still make sense to refer to nominative, accusative, dative and genitive, viz. *er* ‘he’, *ihn* ‘him (direct object)’, *ihm* ‘him (indirect object)’, *sein* ‘his’.)

Not all nouns declined in the same way (we have not discussed the proper noun *Gregorius*); there were a number of different classes, the exact number depending a bit on the way one counts. Moreover, much like German, there were three genders: **masculine**, **feminine**, and **neuter**, each with its own sets of forms. We will not go into the details of the different **declensions** and genders here (but see e.g. Hogg 1992, 2002) — the main point is simply that OE signalled grammatical functions such as subject, direct object, etc. largely by using distinct morphological endings. Over the course of the history of the language these endings gradually disappeared, leading to a situation (in the late Middle English period) when there was so little left that speakers had to rely primarily on a different strategy to do the job: designated positions in the clause (see again the contrast between (8a) and (8b)).

An additional strategy is the use of prepositions — consider for example the use of the preposition *to* to signal indirect object status of *him* in sentence (9), below.

- (9) Gregory gave the book to him.

The OE dative form *him* for the masculine third person singular personal pronoun was different from the accusative form (used for direct objects) *hine* (familiar from example (1), above) so prepositions were not used as much to perform this function.

When studying the history of a language such as English it is easy to fall into the trap of treating the earliest attested stage — in this case OE — as the starting point of developments one is interested in. But OE did not emerge out of the blue, and although we have no direct documentary evidence of its ancestral language, by using evidence from related Germanic languages as well as our knowledge of how languages tend to change over time, we can piece together a fairly good picture of what the **proto-language**³ would have looked like.

The oldest Germanic language for which we have documentary evidence is Gothic. Gothic is in many respects very similar to OE but it retains even more inflectional morphology. The word for ‘man’, also *guma*, for instance had separate forms for the accusative and the dative singular (*guman* and *gumin*, respectively). We may infer that Proto-Germanic, the common ancestor of OE and Gothic (as well as of some other languages such as Old Norse, the language of the Vikings who started to invade the British isles from the eighth century) had a system at least as rich as Gothic, and that in OE we already see the first indications of morphological simplification. Connected with this, we may also assume that constituent order in Proto-Germanic was even freer than it was in OE. In other words, rather than being the starting point of the development towards simplified inflectional morphology and more rigid constituent order, OE should actually be seen as a system that was very much in transition.

Having shown that the development in constituent order was linked with morphological simplification, we now turn to the question as to why the various distinctions that were made in Proto-Germanic and to a large extent still exist in OE came to be lost.

In older handbooks English historical linguists would sometimes argue that the case forms were lost because they were, in a way, redundant. Strang, for instance, suggests for one class of noun forms that in early ME it ‘incorporates a good deal [i.e. of different case inflections] that serves no purpose (...) and (...) is ripe for further development’ (1970:260). The view underlying Strang’s claim is thus that the language made distinctions — such as between nominative and accusative — that speakers could actually perfectly well do without (see also 1970:281); in this case because they could use different positions in the clause to distinguish between subject and object.

This fits in with the notion that the English language has become more and more efficient, a view which goes back to at least the nineteenth century, when under the influence of Darwin’s ideas of evolution some scholars believed that languages evolved into increasingly efficient tools for communication. Nowadays, many historical linguists disagree with this general view, and with Strang’s (and others’) implicit or explicit application of this view to English. By positioning a subject early in the clause and an object later, and by using different case markings for the two, it is certainly true that English speakers signalled the subject-object distinction in two simultaneous ways. But it does not simply follow that one of them is therefore redundant, and inevitably lost over time. There are many languages in which certain functions are marked twice, three or even more times. PDE itself provides many examples. Sentence (10) below illustrates this point in two different ways.

(10) Three boats sank yesterday.

First consider the noun *boats*, which is marked by *-s* for plural number. Strictly speaking this is redundant, as the idea that there was more than one is already indicated by the quantifier *Three*.

Second, while the verb *sank* is marked for past tense (by a vowel change from *sink*), the fact that the event took place in the past is also signalled by *yesterday*. Now would we want to say that plural marking on nouns and past tense marking on verbs is redundant, and that the system 'is ripe for further development'? The resultant, 'more efficient', system would be exemplified by sentence (11), below.

(11) Three boat sink yesterday.

If this might seem an implausible way for speakers to communicate with each other, bear in mind that this is exactly how one expresses oneself in a language such as Mandarin Chinese. Clearly there are many speakers for whom it works absolutely fine! Nonetheless, our current understanding of grammatical change suggests that languages need not go on simplifying their morphology until there is nothing left. Quite the contrary, we know of many cases of languages developing more elaborate morphology rather than simplifying it. For examples we do not need to look any further than English itself.

In standard English there is no longer a distinction between singular and plural *you* (see Table 36.2b above, and compare with 36.2a). In many dialects, however, this distinction has been reintroduced. One especially frequent form of a 2Pl form is *yous* (sometimes spelt *youse*), which we find in e.g. Liverpool, Glasgow, and Irish English.

It is clear, then, that languages do not simply lose morphology over time: they also develop it. (Indeed it would be a logical impossibility to assume that morphology can only be lost: after all, where then, in the evolution of human language, would it have come from in the first place?)

The approach taken here departs significantly from the idea of Strang (and others), that once English had developed alternative strategies to perform the role that in OE and earlier had been fulfilled by inflectional morphology, the remnants of those inflections were redundant and therefore lost. Instead, it seems that we must interpret the historical facts such that as the inflections were getting lost, a more fixed word order (and the use of certain prepositions to signal grammatical function) was gradually developed to compensate for this (i.e. what historical linguists sometimes call a **therapeutic** change).

So if inflectional morphology was not lost because other mechanisms of signalling grammatical functions had become available, then why did it happen? The answer is a complex one, and is still being debated by English historical linguists. Despite certain disagreements that still exist there is some kind of a consensus about at least two factors: the effect of the Viking invasions from around the eighth century, and a stress shift that took place considerably earlier, namely in Proto-Germanic (so early because we can observe the results of this stress shift in a number of related Germanic languages, and it is more likely that the change happened only once, in the ancestral language, than several times, more or less independently, in OE, Gothic, Old Norse, etcetera).

Regarding the effect of Viking invasions, we must remember that Old Norse was very similar to OE. Many words were virtually identical, and so was the

grammar. It would thus have been possible for speakers of the two languages to communicate rather well. And indeed we know that this happened on quite a large scale: archaeological evidence of intermarriage, for instance, suggests that after an initial period of violent raids (in the eighth century), the Viking settlers came to co-exist with the Anglo-Saxons relatively peacefully (although there was again a tumultuous period in the tenth century).

Interestingly, we also have some linguistic evidence for this. The OE word for *they* was *hi* or *hie*; the PDE form is a borrowing from Old Norse — in ME texts we see it slowly spreading from northern and Midland areas (where the Viking settlers had occupied the area often referred to as the Danelaw) to the South. Borrowing in language contact situations is in itself far from uncommon, but the borrowing of a **grammatical** term such as a personal pronoun is not that frequent — if it happens it suggests that the two speech communities are on rather good terms with each other (for borrowing in general, see chapter 34).

When we said above that the grammar of OE and Old Norse were similar, we should add that there were of course differences in some details. Importantly for our discussion, the inflectional endings were often a bit different (see, for example, chapter 31, Advances box 1). Now in a situation where speakers of OE and Old Norse speakers talked to each other, historical linguists think that these different endings would perhaps be pronounced a bit less clearly, in order for communication to be smoother.

Let us now turn to the second, earlier, factor that contributed to the disappearance of the many distinct morphological endings. Simply put, at some stage in the history of Proto-Germanic the endings were often (though not always) stressed. A change then took place which resulted in a stress pattern which was fixed in such a way that the endings were not stressed any longer.⁴ Now if syllables are not stressed, it is much harder for speakers to distinguish between different sounds that may make up those syllables. Consider the word *chocolate*, for instance. The first syllable is stressed, and its vowel is easily recognisable as [ɒɒ]. But the vowels in the remaining, unstressed, part of the word are either not pronounced at all (the second <o> and final <e>) or in the case of <a> as the neutral vowel sound schwa, i.e. [ə] or perhaps [ɪ]. (One of my students once suggested that the spelling should be reformed to *choklit*.) Originally, however, the second <o> would have been pronounced [ɒ] as well, the <a> as [ɑ], and <e> as [ə]. (See also chapter 32, section 3.2, on spelling) Because of the lack of stress, speakers found these three sounds more and more difficult to perceive as such, and increasingly reduced them phonetically or omitted them altogether. The stress shift in Proto-Germanic had similar effects: the endings gradually came to be pronounced less and less distinctly.

This clearly set up a situation in which, centuries later, when the Vikings arrived, speakers of OE and Old Norse would have found it easy to reduce the endings even more — until they disappeared completely (with the exception, in common nouns, of the genitive and plural endings, which we still have in PDE). (Further information on the rise of ‘schwa and stress patterns can be found in chapter 33).

36.2.2 Changes in verbal morphology

As we have seen in section 2.1, the decline of inflections in nouns and pronouns is interesting from the point of view of explaining changes in constituents. The system

of verbal inflections was also much richer in OE than it is in PDE, but because it is less related to major syntactic changes we will only discuss the developments very briefly here. More detailed descriptions are referred to in the list of recommended readings at the end of this chapter.

Just like in PDE, verbs in OE and ME may be divided up roughly into three classes. We traditionally call these the **weak**, **strong** and **irregular** classes. Weak verbs are nowadays most common: they are the ones that take *-ed* endings in the simple past and past participle forms (e.g. *love, loved, loved*). Strong verbs signal past tense by a change in their stressed vowel (e.g. *bind, bound, bound*). Irregular verbs, finally, display all sorts of anomalies, not necessarily just in the way they form their past tense and past participle, but sometime also elsewhere, e.g. in the simple present. The most typical irregular verb in English (and in other languages) is *be*: consider that the past forms *was/were* and the past participle *been* do not look in the least related to for example present tense *is* — which, in its turn, is very different from *am* and *are*.

These three classes are often divided by scholars into certain subclasses, but we will not concern ourselves with these details. The main point, instead, is to show that this is another area of English grammar that has undergone simplification.

It is traditional in language textbooks to present the inflections of the verb *love* and here we see no reason to be different. The illustration box below displays the inflections of the verb in OE, ME, and PDE. Bear in mind that there was considerable dialectal variation in OE and ME; to give one or two variants for each verb form is therefore actually a bit of a simplification. The term **indicative** is used to describe the verb forms that are used in ordinary declarative and interrogative sentences. The **imperative** is used for giving people orders, commands, etc. The **subjunctive**, finally, is used to express various situations that we may describe as somehow ‘unreal’, e.g. because they are a wish or desire. PDE does not have many distinct subjunctive forms left any more, but if (using a somewhat formal register) you tell someone who is always late for their appointments that it is desirable that next time they *be* (instead of *are*) on time, you are using a form that is essentially unchanged from the OE subjunctive.

Illustration box 2: Simplification of verbal morphology from OE to PDE

	OE		ME		PDE	
	Present	Past	Present	Past	Present	Past
Indicative						
1Sg	lufie	lufode	loue	louede	love	loved
2Sg	lufast	lufodest	louest	louedest	love	loved
3Sg	lufað	lufode	loueth	louede	loves	loved
1,2,3Pl	lufiað	lufodon	loue(n)	louede(n)	love	loved
Imperative						
Sg	lufa	-	loue	-	love	
Pl	lufiað	-	loueth	-	love	
Subjunctive						
Sg	lufie	lufode	loue	louede	love	loved
Pl	lufien	lufoden	loue(n)	louede(n)	love	loved
Participle						
	lufiende	gelufod	louying(e)	(y)loued(e)	loving	loved

Table 36.3 The verb *love* in OE, ME, and PDE

It is clear from Table 36.3 that the simplification goes much beyond the disappearance of the distinct subjunctive forms. Some changes are related, once again, to unstressed endings becoming harder to distinguish and eventually disappearing. But another important change (not obvious from the table) is the enormous growth of the class of weak verbs, at the expense of the strong ones. This growth has been so considerable that we nowadays often refer to the former as **regular** verbs.

A full explanation would take us too far afield, but one important factor was the huge influx of French verbs following the Norman Conquest, e.g. *crye(n)* ‘cry’, *obeie(n)* ‘obey’, and *servi(n)* ‘serve’. These verbs fit in most easily in the weak class, as this meant that to make a past tense speakers could leave the verb intact, and just add the relevant past ending, giving e.g. *cryed*, *obeyed*, *served* (see e.g. Brunner 1963:81). As the class of weak verbs was growing, it even started ‘attracting’ verbs that originally did not belong there (see e.g. Strang 1970:276). One example is *help*: while its past tense is nowadays *helped*, it used to be — up until some point in the ME period — *holpen*.

36.3 Recent trends in the study of grammatical change in English: grammaticalisation

36.3.1 From a changing language to changing constructions

Section 2.1 discussed a set of interconnected changes that affected large parts of the grammar of English: inflectional morphology and constituent order. In the light of these developments, the English language has often been characterised as having moved from a **synthetic** type to an **analytic** type. It is true that grammatical function in a clause used to be signalled to a large extent synthetically, that is, by using inflectional morphology, whereas it is now signalled by means of word order and prepositions (i.e. independent grammatical markers) which are associated with more analytic languages. In the development of Latin into Spanish, French, Italian, et cetera, the Romance languages are often said to have undergone a parallel development.

There are however serious problems with the suggestion that languages as a whole undergo such typological shifts, or indeed with the notion that languages can straightforwardly be classified as belonging to either the synthetic or the analytic type. The latter problem we may illustrate with an example from Romance. Consider the contrast in Spanish — supposedly now an analytic language — between *voy a Londres* ‘I’m going to London’ and *vas a Londres* ‘you’re going to London’. The verb forms show that a lot of grammatical information, in this case person, number and tense, is still signalled synthetically, i.e. by different inflections. The morale is that it is dangerous to characterise a language as a whole as belonging to either the analytic or the synthetic type.

In relation to the idea that English has undergone a typological shift from analytic to synthetic, Kytö and Romaine (1997) have shown that in the area of comparison (e.g. *big-bigger-biggest*, *pretty-prettier-prettiest*, *beautiful-more beautiful-most beautiful*) the synthetic method (A-er, A-est) lost ground for a while to

the analytic (sometimes also known as **periphrastic**) strategy (*more A, most A*) — as we would expect if the synthetic>analytic suggestion is correct — but then started gaining territory again.

Advances box 2: More problems for the synthetic-to-analytic claim: developments in causative constructions after Middle English

In the main text we problematised the idea that the English language is becoming more analytic by referring to research on comparison, which suggests that the synthetic method (*A-er, A-est*), rather than being pushed out by the newer analytic/periphrastic strategy (*more A, most A*), is actually ‘fighting back’. Thus in this area English is not obviously becoming more analytic. We can find another example of this in constructions such as *cause, force, get, have* or *make someone/something (to) do something*, e.g. *By giving them too much food, I once caused my parents’ goldfish to die* (a true event, sadly!). These are known as **periphrastic causatives**. They are called causative because they describe acts of someone or something causing something to happen, and they are periphrastic (or analytic) because the cause and effect are described by separate words (here: *cause* and *die*) instead of by a single one. Compare *I killed my parents’ goldfish*, where cause and effect are both described by the single verb *kill*. In relation to the synthetic-to-analytic claim, things are a little complicated, in that the ME developments seem to support the claim, but if we assume that an increasingly analytic language should develop more periphrastic constructions rather than lose them, then later changes contradict it.

Compared to PDE, OE had rather few periphrastic causatives. Two were especially frequent. The first of these is *don* ‘do’, see e.g. *Aswindan þu didest..sæwle his (Vesp. Psalter xxxviii. 12 [OED, do, v., s.v. 22.a])* ‘You made (lit. did) his soul perish’. In PDE *do* can of course no longer be used in this manner. The second common periphrastic causative involved the now obsolete verb *gar*, e.g. *Oft þu geris mi wondis blede (Cursor M. 17160 (Gött.) [OED, gar, v., s.v. 2.b])*, ‘Often you make my wounds bleed’. *Gar* is mainly found in northern texts, which is unsurprising given that it was borrowed from Old Norse. In this language one of its meanings was ‘make (something)’. Its development into a causative verb is thus parallel to *make*, which developed its causative use later (sometime in the twelfth century — for details see Hollmann 2003:111).

In ME we see many of these constructions developing. Some scholars point to French as a possible influence. French had a causative construction consisting of *faire* ‘do, make’ with an infinitive, and the idea is that some time after the Norman Conquest in 1066 this construction would be translated into English and used as a model for other constructions, e.g. periphrastic causative *have* (Baron 1977:86), the first example of which dates from c.1440: *And when Alexander saw that þay walde one na wyse speke wit hym, he hadd a certane of his knyghtes nakne þam & swyme ouer þe water to þe castell (Prose life of Alexander [also, with less context, MED, s.v. haven, v. 10.(a)])*, ‘And when A. saw that they would in no way speak to him, he had one of his knights strip naked and swim over the water to the castle’. However, one should be wary of invoking language contact as a very significant factor too readily, since English itself already had a number of such constructions (including, as we have seen, *do* and *gar*), which may have served as a model.

At any rate, the rapid increase in the number of periphrastic causatives in ME

(for details see Bock 1931:156, Visser 1973:2255ff and Hollmann 2003:109ff) might support the claim that the English language was in transition from a synthetic to an analytic type. But the trouble is that quite a few of them disappeared again later on. The following example from the thirteenth century, for instance, features *give* used causatively, but in the translation we must now resort to a verb such as *make*: *Seinte Marie ... ȝif me deien mid him & arisen* (c1225 *Ancr. R.* (EETS 1952) 17, 4 [Visser 1973:2260]) ‘Saint Mary ... make me dye with him and arise’. Note also that the OE periphrastic causatives *do* and *gar* have both died out. This decrease in the number of periphrastic causatives seems to be at odds with the idea that English as a whole is moving in a more analytic direction.

Contrary to the traditional view, many linguists working on English, Romance and other languages and language families now suggest that it does not make sense to characterise entire languages as falling into the synthetic or analytic categories. Instead we must examine **individual constructions** (or families of related constructions, e.g. the constructions used for comparison, future tense constructions, causative constructions), and we should not expect that over time they will all necessarily develop towards the analytic type (see e.g. Schwegler 1994, Vincent 1997).

The evidence actually suggests that in terms of analysis and synthesis grammatical change is cyclic. The Romance languages, for which we have a long recorded history, show what we mean by this. In Classical Latin the future ‘we will sing’ was expressed synthetically as *cantabimus*. This later became *cantare habemus*, an analytic expression which originally meant something like ‘we have to sing’; ‘have’ verbs often develop into markers of future tense in the languages of the world. In Spanish the normal future tense is *cantaremos* — a contracted and now synthetic form of *cantare habemus*, i.e. a case of attrition, see section 1 above. (To understand this development just try saying *cantare habemos* very fast ten times in a row; you will very likely end up saying something like *cantaremos*). This means that in a sense we are back where we started. But the development does not end there: nowadays more and more speakers use the periphrastic construction *vamos a cantar*, lit. ‘we go to sing’ (‘go’ verbs are another common source of future tense markers across languages, cf. the English *BE going to* + Infinitive future). We cannot be completely sure what will happen in the future, but it would not be surprising if the elements of the current analytic construction somehow fuse again, at which point Romance will have gone full circle towards a synthetic future once more.

Grammaticalisation theory, of which we have discussed some important aspects before in this chapter, fits in with this growing conviction that the object of study in grammatical change is often individual (groups of) constructions, rather than entire languages. But grammaticalisation theory has also partly grown out of a different set of concerns, which we turn to in section 3.2.

36.3.2 Who changes the grammar? Grammaticalisation vs. the child-based theory

In this section we assess the merits of grammaticalisation theory in relation to the very important question of who is responsible for grammatical change. Many non-linguists, including journalists, seek the source of change in grammar in modern technology and

the media. Consider for instance the following statement, which I found while surfing the Internet looking for folk beliefs concerning language change: '[People] use text messaging in everyday life in a very conversational, informal manner. Traditional rules of grammar (...) go straight out of the window when you're typing a quick note using a phone keypad' (<http://www.tomhume.org/archives/000017.html> [accessed 29 February 2008]). However, most journalists and people who post messages on the Internet are not trained linguists, and it is to their (rather different) views that we must turn.⁵

Until recently, the dominant idea in historical linguistics was that grammatical change is possible when children acquire a language and, in the acquisition process, come up with a different set of rules from their parents' generation. The most prominent historical linguist associated with this idea is David Lightfoot, who published a very influential reconstruction of the rise in English of modal verbs (*will, may, can, must*, etc. (see Lightfoot 1979)). He later revised aspects of his theory (see e.g. 1991, 1997, 1999), but the fundamental claim that child language learners are responsible for grammatical change still stands.

Lightfoot's claim is intimately tied up with Chomsky's view of language acquisition, which suggests that acquisition is complete by the end of the so-called critical period (which has not been defined precisely but is supposed to be around the age of thirteen or fourteen). If this is indeed one's view of the acquisition process, it follows that grammatical change must take place in young language learners, since in more mature speakers grammatical knowledge is completely fixed.

Very briefly, Lightfoot's reconstruction of the rise of English modal verbs runs as follows. OE had a set of verbs which would later develop into modals, including *wile* 'wish', *mæg* 'have power', *cann* 'can, know', and *mot* 'can, must'. These verbs — labelled the 'pre-modals' by Lightfoot — were almost identical to ordinary lexical verbs. For example, while PDE modals do not have non-finite forms (such as infinitives), the pre-modals did — all the way into and just beyond the ME period:

- (13) who this book shall **wylle** lerne (Caxton)
'who this book shall will learn'

They could also take nominal direct objects as in example (5b), above, repeated below as (14):

- (14) Wenne þu **wult** more suluer sæche hit at me suluen. (*Lazaramon* 1786)
'When you want more silver, say it to me.'

There was one respect in which the pre-modals were already a little bit different from ordinary lexical verbs: their inability to take an ending in the third person singular present tense, and the unavailability of regular past tenses. Both of these peculiarities can be explained if we consider that the present-tense verbs forms had originally been *past* tenses. (An old-fashioned term for past tense is **preterite**, which is why these verbs are sometimes called **preterite-present** verbs.) In the past tense the third person singular did not have a distinct ending from the first person. Also, because the forms were already etymologically past tenses, different ways of forming the past had to be devised once they started to be used as present tense verb forms. We thus see that while the pre-modals were for the most part pretty normal and

as such part of the category of verbs, they were already a little bit out of line with the rest of the verbs.

Lightfoot suggests that in the early or mid-sixteenth century, child language learners drastically restructured their grammar in such a way that the pre-modals became a truly separate category, the category of modals. He argues that the data show that this happened fairly instantaneously: non-finite forms, the ability to take noun phrase direct objects and other properties associated with normal lexical verbs were lost very rapidly and simultaneously — so much so that Lightfoot uses the term **catastrophic change** in this context.

Aspects of Lightfoot's account of the rise of English modal verbs, and his theory of grammatical change, have been criticized strongly by many scholars (see e.g. Fischer and van der Leek 1981, Plank 1984, Warner 1983; Denison 1993 summarises the discussion).

One of the most serious criticisms is that a close examination of the data shows that far from being catastrophic, the changes actually took place over a long period of time, were not simultaneous, and happened at different points in time for the different verbs involved. Denison (1993) suggests that the future tense meaning of *will* may have already been attested as early as OE, when according to Lightfoot the verb only meant 'wish':

- (15) Gif me seo godcunde geofu in ðære stowe forgifen beon wile..., ic ðær luctlice wunige
'If the divine gift is granted to me in that place..., I will happily remain there'
(Denison 1993:304)

This and other facts suggest that the development of English modals may have taken many centuries. From the point of view of our theory of grammatical change, it is important to note that grammaticalisation theory suggests that change is normally slow and gradual. The data, therefore, are much more in line with this theory than with Lightfoot's suggestion of a drastic restructuring of the grammatical rules in one generation of child language learners.⁶

Another bit of evidence in favour of grammaticalisation theory is the emergence of reduced and fused forms such as those in (16–17), below. Remember that attrition is an important aspect of grammaticalisation. In Lightfoot's theory, by contrast, this is not really accounted for.

- (16) Next time weele haue some prettie Gentle-women with vs to walke. (1591, LYL
Endym. I. iii)
(17) Sister you'l [*Qo.* 2 youle; *Folio* you'le] goe with vs? (1608 SHAKES. *Lear* V. i. 34 (*Qo.* 1))

Grammaticalisation theorists often reject Lightfoot's idea that grammatical change happens in child language acquisition. Croft (2000) offers some outspoken criticism in this relation. He observes that the changes (or errors) that children typically make are of a very different kind from what we tend to see in grammatical change in English and other languages. Furthermore, referring to important work in sociohistorical linguistics on the role of prestige, he points out that children do not normally enjoy the kind of prestige in the speech community that would stimulate other members to copy them. The picture that emerges in the grammaticalisation theory alternative to Lightfoot's child-based theory is one in which adults make the innovations.

Some linguists have suggested that they make these innovations (e.g. using *going to* + Inf. for the future tense where previously speakers used *will*) in order to stand out from the crowd, so to speak, and be noticed by others. Croft (to appear), however, has argued that the innovations are simply slightly different ways of describing some situation. These different verbalisations are produced naturally by all of us, all the time — not just if we want to be noticed. They may subsequently spread to others if the speaker has enough prestige, be it overt or covert; see also chapter 13 on language and social class, and chapter 31). The likelihood, or indeed very possibility, of this scenario obviously depends on a rejection of Chomsky's idea that our grammatical knowledge is essentially fixed after early puberty. In the area of language acquisition there is indeed increasing evidence that the critical period does not end abruptly: while there are certain undeniable changes in the brain's plasticity and so on after childhood, the evolutionary psychologist Michael Tomasello (e.g. 2003) and others have suggested that learning continues our entire lives (see further also chapter 37).

36.4 Concluding remarks

In the course of this chapter we have discovered that the grammar of the English language has undergone many changes over time.

As a descendent from Proto-Germanic, it started out as a language that relied heavily on inflectional morphology to signal grammatical distinctions. As the result of a stress shift, however, the seeds had already been sown, in a manner of speaking, for the collapse of this system. The arrival of the Vikings, and the language contact situation that OE speakers found themselves in as a result, contributed greatly to this collapse. (It is important to realise that the stress shift alone would not necessarily have led to this: compare present-day German, where the system of inflectional morphology is still intact to a relatively high degree.)

The morphological changes impacted on constituent order, and we have seen how with the disappearance of the OV pattern, the order gradually became more rigid. The increased reliance on prepositions has also helped make up for the almost complete loss of inflections. Verbal inflections have also been simplified over the course of time, not only in terms of the number of distinct endings, but also in the sense that the vast majority of verbs now belong to one class, that of regular verbs (formerly known as weak verbs). By way of explanation we pointed to especially the influx of French verbs. These were accommodated into the weak class, which as a result became so large that even originally strong verbs started gravitating towards it.

Section 3 brought us up to speed with more recent developments in the study of English historical syntax (and of grammatical change in general). We problematized the custom of classifying English (or indeed any language) as belonging to the synthetic or analytic type, and the idea that English has undergone a clear shift from synthetic to analytic. In addition we pinpointed some of the flaws in the traditional view that grammatical change is effected by child language learners. The solutions to both problems, we argued, can be found in grammaticalisation theory.

Grammaticalisation theory directs the historical linguist's attention to individual (sets of) constructions, i.e. away from languages as a whole. We showed that by combining grammaticalisation theory with a view of language acquisition in

which learning does not necessarily end at puberty, we can offer a more convincing reconstruction of the rise of English modal verbs than was afforded by Lightfoot's more traditional child-based approach.

While we thus stressed the merits of grammaticalisation theory in relation to the creation (innovation) of new grammatical constructions such as modal verbs, we also admitted that it has nothing to say about their spread (propagation) from one speaker to other members of the speech community. In this connection we must turn to lessons learnt in sociohistorical linguistics, especially concerning the notion of prestige (for the sharp distinction between innovation and propagation see also section 3 in chapter 35, on semantic change).

Recommended readings

The most comprehensive and authoritative treatment of many aspects of grammatical change in the history of English is to be found in the six-volume *Cambridge History of the English Language* (listed as Hogg (1992-2001) in the References section, below). A useful, more compact version of this work is Hogg and Denison (2006). For verbal constructions the best reference is Denison (1993), which combines a very impressive and accurate overview of previous scholarship with novel data and insights. On a more basic level, Hogg (2002), Horobin and Smith (2002) and Nevalainen (2006) provide excellent, concise overviews of Old, Middle and early Modern English, respectively — including grammar. However, given the focus of these volumes on individual periods, the reader should expect description rather than explanation.

More general books on grammatical change are plentiful as well. One of the most stimulating treatments to have appeared recently is Croft (2000). For readers who have a particular interest in grammaticalisation the first port of call should be Hopper and Traugott (2003).

¹ A CONSTITUENT is a word or group of words that functions as a unit on some level of our analysis of a sentence. Other textbooks sometimes use the term WORD ORDER instead of constituent order. We avoid this here because what matters is really the sequence of constituents such as subjects and objects — and constituents of course need not be restricted to one word; see e.g. example (2), where the object *naht unaliefedes* is made up of two words. Yet another synonymous term we sometimes find is ELEMENT ORDER, but the term element is much less well established in the grammatical literature than the term constituent.

² DUAL was a number that we find in some, though not all, Old English texts. It is in between Sg and Pl in that it refers to two people, i.e. 'I and another' (*wit*) or 'you and another' (*git*) — the other person could be the addressee or not. If it seems strange to you that Old English had these pronoun forms, consider that many languages of the world do. Some have even more forms, such as a TRIAL (to refer to three persons) and/or a PAUCAL (to refer to 'a few' persons).

³ By proto-language we mean the ancestral language, of which we have no direct written evidence.

⁴ For more details and the interesting hypothesis that the stress shift may have been due to language contact with the non-Indo-European language Old European, which had initial stress, see Vennemann (1994).

⁵ The reason why I comment on the difference between linguists' and non-linguists' ideas about the causes — and causers — of language change is not to deprecate the non-specialists. If there is any implicit criticism, it is rather directed in the opposite way: we, the historical linguistic community, are clearly not doing enough to inform the public about our findings.

⁶ For a more detailed reconstruction of the rise of the English modals from the perspective of grammaticalisation theory see Hopper and Traugott (2003:55-58) and especially Fischer (2006), who also explicitly compares it with Lightfoot's story (159-209).