

GRADUALNESS IN SYNTAX

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Abstract

This article investigates the concept of gradualness in syntax, emphasizing that syntactic change takes place gradually instead of abruptly. It highlights how grammaticalization, reanalysis, and the emergence of functional categories illustrate the evolution of grammar. The research emphasizes the expected trajectories and shared phases that characterize syntactic change by examining historical transitions such as the move from Old English's adaptable word order to Modern English's established SVO format, alongside cross-linguistic data from German and Creole languages. Graduality ultimately uncovers syntax as a flexible, evolving system that offers perspectives on language learning and historical linguistics.

Key words

Gradualness in syntax, Syntactic change, Grammaticalization, Functional categories, Reanalysis, Word order evolution, Historical linguistics, Language acquisition

ПОСТЕПЕННОСТЬ В СИНТАКСИСЕ

Аннотация:

В статье рассматривается принцип постепенности в синтаксисе, согласно которому синтаксические изменения происходят не резко, а через последовательные небольшие шаги. Особое внимание уделяется процессам грамматикализации, переосмыслению структур и формированию новых функциональных категорий, что демонстрирует эволюционный характер грамматики. На примере исторического развития английского языка – от свободного порядка слов в древнеанглийском до фиксированного SVO в современном английском – а также данных из немецкого и креольских языков, показаны предсказуемые пути и наложение старых и новых форм. В итоге постепенность раскрывает синтаксис как динамическую адаптивную

систему, что имеет значение как для исторической лингвистики, так и для усвоения языка.

Ключевые слова

Постепенность в синтаксисе, Синтаксические изменения, Грамматикализация, Функциональные категории, Переосмысление, Эволюция порядка слов, Историческая лингвистика, Усвоение языка

Introduction: The "gradual phenomenon at the syntactic level" in linguistics describes how syntactic change in languages typically occurs gradually rather than suddenly, frequently through processes like grammaticalization, reanalysis, and extension. It emphasises how syntax changes gradually, with both new and old forms coexisting before one eventually takes the lead. Gradualness in syntax pertains to the concept that syntactic evolution and grammaticalization usually take place incrementally, through minor reanalyses and shifts, instead of sudden changes. It emphasizes how languages develop gradually, frequently through small alterations in word arrangement, functional types, or grammatical indicators.

Gradual syntactic evolution: Language frameworks typically do not transform suddenly; rather, they progress through minor, incremental changes.

Grammaticalization: Lexical elements (such as pronouns or verbs) gradually evolve into grammatical indicators (for instance, clitics, agreement markers).

Functional categories: The emergence of new categories (such as auxiliaries or determiners) frequently occurs slowly, altering sentence structure.

Directionality: Change usually progresses in a single direction (e.g., from lexical to grammatical), emphasizing the gradual aspect of syntax development.

Syntactic change: Sentence structure, or syntax, changes gradually rather than suddenly when languages change throughout time.

Grammaticalization: Lexical words, such as verbs or pronouns, gradually transform into grammatical markers, such as agreement markers and clitics.

Reanalysis: New syntactic patterns result from speakers reinterpreting structures. Word by word or construction by construction, this method frequently expands.

Variation: Old and new forms coexist during transition, sometimes associated with formal vs informal registers.

Instances of Syntactic Gradual Change

Pronouns → Clitics → Agreement markers: This traditional route demonstrates grammaticalization step-by-step.

Word-by-word spread: New syntactic rules frequently start with a limited number of words before progressively expanding.

Formal versus informal usage: While newer forms predominate in ordinary speech, older forms may still be used in formal settings.

Key Features

Feature	Explanation
Gradualness	Change occurs step by step, not overnight.
Unidirectionality	Often moves in one direction (e.g., lexical → grammatical).
Micro-changes	Small adjustments accumulate into larger structural shifts.
Coexistence	Old and new forms overlap for a time.

The development of current languages from earlier forms is explained by historical linguistics. The notion that syntactic change is usually sudden is contested by theoretical linguistics, which contends that it is frequently a continuum.

To put it briefly, the gradual phenomenon at the syntactic level explains how syntax changes gradually rather than abruptly through grammaticalization, reanalysis, and variation.

Examples in English

Modal verbs:

Full verbs like *willan*, which means "to want," and *sculan*, which means "to owe/should," were used in Old English. They eventually changed over generations to become auxiliary verbs (would, shall, should) for modality and tense. □ Grammaticalization is demonstrated via lexical → auxiliary → functional marker.

Negation was frequently used before verbs in Middle English (*ne seye* = "not say"). *Ne* vanished after *not* took over as dominating. Both kinds coexisted for centuries, and the transition was slow.

Do-support

Saw you him? is an example of an Old English question. *were* typical. *Do* (*Did you see him?*) was added gradually and propagated word by word until it was required in Modern English.

Examples in Uzbek

Supplementary verbs:

Words like *yotmoq*, which means "to lie," and *turmoq*, which means "to stand," eventually evolved into aspectual auxiliaries (*o'qib turibdi* = "is reading").

This demonstrates the gradual transformation of whole verbs into grammatical markers.

Markers for cases:

Certain postpositions, such as *uchun* = "for," are progressively resembling case markers, exhibiting the same steady grammatical growth.

Word order:

Although Uzbek is traditionally SOV (Subject-Object-Verb), SVO patterns are becoming more prevalent in informal speech, particularly due to Russian influence. This change occurs gradually and depends on the situation.

At the syntactic level, the gradual phenomena means:

- Change is gradual rather than abrupt.
- For a very long time, old and new forms coexist.
- Evolution is driven by processes like as variation, reanalysis, and grammaticalization.

One of the most popular ways syntax progressively changes is through grammaticalization. The route frequently appears like this:

The complete meaning of the lexical verb → is "to want, to stand."

Another verb (will read, is standing) is supported by the auxiliary verb →.

Clitic → reduced form that depends on phonology ('ll, 've).

Eventually, the affix → turns into a bound morpheme that directly indicates tense or aspect (-s, -ed).

For instance, in English, *willan* (meaning "to want") → *will* (auxiliary) → 'll (clitic) → future tense sign In Uzbek, for instance, *turmoq* (meaning "to stand") → *turibdi* (progressive auxiliary) → aspectual marker.

Word Order Change in Uzbek

The SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) sequence is customary in Uzbek:

Men kitobni o'qidim means "I read the book."

However, SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) is becoming more prevalent in everyday speech due to Russian influence:

Men o'qidim kitobni means "I read the book."

Variation: Depending on the situation, both SOV and SVO coexist.

Register: SVO emerges in informal speaking, while SOV predominates in formal writing.

Influence: Speaking Russian, an SVO language, speeds up the change.

Generational shift: SVO is more easily adopted by younger speakers, demonstrating the gradual expansion.

Comparison Table

Phenomenon	English Example	Uzbek Example
Grammaticalization	<i>willan</i> → <i>will</i> → 'll	<i>turmoq</i> → <i>turibdi</i>
Word Order Change	Old English flexible → Modern English SVO	Traditional SOV → emerging SVO
Negation Shift	<i>ne</i> → <i>not</i>	<i>emas</i> vs. colloquial <i>yo'q</i>

Syntax changes gradually rather than all at once.

Grammaticalization demonstrates how verbs become markers.

Word order shift demonstrates how usage pressure and interaction alter structure. The coexistence of old and new grammatical structures during a transitional phase, influenced by social usage patterns, dialectal variations, and cognitive limitations, is referred to as variation in syntactic change. It demonstrates the uneven distribution of syntactic change among groups, registers, and constructions.

Fundamental Ideas of Syntactic Change Variation

Actualisation is the process of gradually mapping a new syntactic structure in many contexts. Spanish oblique relative clauses moving toward definite article agreement, for instance, demonstrate how change gradually permeates different kinds.

Dialectal variation: The rates at which various dialects acquire changes vary. For example, in phrasal verbs, New Zealand English might be similar to Australian English, while in dative forms, it might be similar to UK English.

Register variation: While informal speech includes more recent structures, formal writing frequently maintains older ones.

Cognitive constraints: The speed at which changes propagate is influenced by the accessibility of antecedents or the ease of processing.

Conclusion: Syntax graduality highlights the evolutionary rather than revolutionary nature of syntactic change. Languages change through regular grammaticalization processes, overlapping old and new forms, and progressive reanalyses. This viewpoint emphasises that grammar is a dynamic system that is influenced by minute changes throughout time, reflecting both language learning and historical evolution.

To put it succinctly, gradualness demonstrates how syntax changes like a living thing, gradually adjusting, layering, and perfecting its structures as opposed to suddenly taking on new forms.

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