V.P.Kolyada, T.I. Dombrovan

ON ONE MECHANISM OF SYNTACTIC CHANGE

It is evident that any language changes as the centuries pass. It concerns not only its phonetic system or its vocabulary. The same principle applies to the grammatical system of a language, including its syntax, too. Old English was an inflected language, the relation among words in a sentence being reflected with the help of terminations. That's why the order of words in a sentence was not so important, as it is nowadays, and it was possible to change a sentence like

"Ohthere s...de his hlaforde Aelfrede cyninge a...t. . ."

(Ohthere said (to) his lord Alfred (the) king that. . .)

into

"his hlaforde Aelfrede cyninge s...de Ohthere a...t. . ."

without change of the meaning, because the word terminations unmistakably revealed the subject and the object of the sentence. To express relationships, Modern English employs a more rigid word order and many more structure words, such as prepositions and auxiliaries, than did Old English.

In Old English the title of a person, as a rule, followed the name (AElfred cyning); now the order is reversed (King Edward, Doctor Watson). Take the West Saxon version of the Lord's Prayer, from Matthew 6 of the King James Version of

the Bible, and one will find "F...der ǎre" at the beginning instead of "Our Father".

In Old English multiple negations were but a common thing, they served to emphasize the negativity of an utterance. In Modern English one negation is customary.

"No construction is everlastingly stable, no cherished rule remains unbroken. . . Go back a century or so and the rules are radically different even if on the surface they appear to be the same" (Burchfield, 158).

So, what are the internal factors that influence the syntactic change in a language? Is it possible to single out the principles and mechanisms of syntactic change? The aim of this article is to share our point of view on the problem, which (i.e. the point) follows, with some reservations in a few aspects, A.C. Harris and L. Campbell.

It is assumed that one of the mechanisms of syntactic change is the reinterpretation (reanalysis) of grammatical relations within a syntactic pattern, which doesn't involve any obligatory modification of its surface structure and is determined by the ambiguous meaning (or ways of interpretation) of the given syntactic pattern (See, e.g. Harris, A.C. and Campbell, L.1995, Lightfoot 1979).

Thus, the reinterpretation of the grammatical relations in the Old English chain 'Noun-Verb-Adjective' must have resulted in coming into existence of passive constructions in Middle English. In the Old English period adjectives agreed in gender, number, and case with the nouns (pronouns) they modified, as in:

hie wordon gebrohte

"They were (in the state of being) brought" (cited in Harrus & Campbell, p.398).

The "-e" on 'gebrohte' signals that it is adjective agreeing with the subject 'hie'. But the sentences with masculine gender adjectives of strong declension (that had zero ending in the Nominative Case Singular Number) like in

he w...s besett

"He was (in the state of being) surrounded" (cited ibid.) could be analysed in two ways: 1) as a Subject (he) – Verb (w...s) – Adjective (besset) chain, or 2) Subject (he) – Auxiliary Verb (w...s) – Verb (besset).

The ambiguity could be observed in Modern English as well in the sentences, such as

The gate was shut (and rusty),

The gate was shut (by someone).

The jacket was worn (and dirty),

The jacket was worn (by Grandpa).

Most grammarians agree that the construction be + –ed represents in today's speech two homonymous forms, namely the combination of the copula "be" with a participial adjective or a passive-voice verb-form. This, as we may assume, is the result of the reinterpretation of the structure in question. In Old English such combinations originally expressed the state of the subject caused by an action performed on it (as is seen from the examples above). But this kind of structure underwent some shift of functions: in many cases the speaker's attention was shifted from the state of the subject to the action which caused the state. In order words the combination in question was no longer a predicate expressing the state or quality of the subject (a compound nominal predicate). Later on an originally independent word with independent meaning (wesan/bëon) develops into an auxiliary word and becomes a gram-

matical marker. This kind of process can be accompanied by a concurrent weakening of both the meaning and the form of the word, though it is not at all obligatory.

A telling example of the change from a word to a grammatical marker is a shift in the meaning of the word "Will". The English "will" originally meant "want" (willan). The modal meaning of volition gradually developed into the meaning of the future: an action a person wishes to perform doesn't actually take place as yet, but may take place in the future. The shift in the meaning results in the semantic "bleaching" of the word "will", the latter being grammaticalized as a future marker. Initially the surface structure was not altered considerably, but its grammatical status changed.

As can be seen from the above analysis, in reinterpretation the new structure may co-exist with the old one, but it also can replace the latter due to the affection of surface grammatical relations. Let's consider a few more examples.

In Old English there were some types of so-called "impersonal" sentences not found in Modern English, in which a rule of inversion made initial subject indirect objects, e.g.

Nū ainca mē ("Now I think")

which corresponded to "me thinks now". It is very close to the Ukrainian "Мені здається". Similarly, Him relomp ("Йому вдалося").

This rule, apparently always optional, began to apply less frequently. Due to the weakening and eventual loss of case inflections in nouns, the effects of the rule, when it did apply, became less apparent, and the construction was changed: the surface object (mē, him) was reinterpreted as surface (and underlying) subject and began to be used in the Nominative Case

– I, he; thus the "impersonal" construction became "personal". In other words, as a result of restructuring , one construction ousted another.

In "Beowulf" (line 639) one may find a similar example, characteristic of the Old English period, where the underlying subject acts like the surface object, and the surface subject is expressed by the underlying object, as in:

aam wife aa word wel licodon

The.DAT. woman.DAT those.NOM. words.Nom. well liked (pl.)

that is very close to the Ukrainian "Жінці дуже сподобалися ті слова" or to the Russian "Женщине очень понравились те слова".

Like in the Ukrainian or Russian translations of the sentence, the agent of the action was expressed by the form of the Dative Case, whereas the verb agreed in number with the theme. In Middle English this structure began to co-exist with and later on was ousted by the different structure in which the agent of the action began to be expressed by the form of the Nominative Case, and the verb agreed with the agent, not the theme, as in:

The woman liked those words well.

Very often, as a result of reinterpretation, two words which at an early period didn't form a definite construction, at a later period do constitute a kind of set combination. This, we presume, was the way the continuous forms originated in English.

The forms of the continuous aspect first appeared in Middle English, but fully developed only in Late Modern English. Like in a wide variety Indo-European languages, both ancient

and modern, the "be" + present participle combination is found in English of all periods, e.g.

OE he is singende (literally, "він є співаючий").

In Middle English this combination got confused with the verbal noun construction of the type

He is on singing (i.e. he is engaged in singing),

which also co-existed with "He is a-singing", and later developed into "He is singing" (Він саме співає). Thus, in English this free-word combination has been reinterpreted as a construction with the participle losing its adjectival sense and the verb "be" losing it stative meaning and came to be used as a regular means of expressing an action in progress at a given moment.

As one can see, syntactic change is possible (and evident) when some surface construction implies two or more different interpretations, and the grammar changes to include interpretations that were not formerly found. In other words, it is avoidance of surface ambiguity that is the cause of the reinterpretation (or restructuring) as an internal mechanism of linguistic change, which can introduce a new structure into a language.

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