Unit 4. Morphosyntactic change

4.2 From synthetic to analytic

In section 4.1 we have studied the collapse of the inflectional system of English, which moved from a synthetic, inflectional language to an almost completely analytic language.

The simplification in nominal morphology is seen in the loss of grammatical gender and the loss of case endings. The only grammatical category which is still marked in the noun in PDE is that of number (sg. / pl.).

The simplification in verb morphology is also drastic: number and person have been largely lost (3sg present indicative is the only remnant) and the same holds for mood distinctions.

However, simplification in languages is counterbalanced by elaboration:

> simplification in one part of the grammar may result in elaboration or increased complexity in another part of that grammar. (Rydén 1979: 16)

Languages typically fluctuate between simplification and elaboration, and

> The balance between the two opposing tendencies is very important; if only simplification occurred, there would presumably be reduction in the available distinctions; but distinctions (as well as similarities) are basic to human communication. If only elaborations occurred, the language might become so complex that it would fall outside the domain of possible language as we know it. (Traugott 1972: 14).

The loss of inflectional endings and the subsequent reduction in the morphological system of English brings about important changes at the syntactic level, with the implementation of analytic devices. These devices sometimes co-exist with remnants of synthetic means of expression. E.g. *John Smith's friends* vs. *friends of John Smith*.

4.2.1. Compensating for the loss of nominal morphology

Already in OE times there was syncretism (that is, distinct forms fall together) between nominative (the case of the subject) and accusative (the case of the object) forms in nouns. Case was still marked in the determiners though. Once determiners become invariable or only marked for number in the Middle English period, the only way to distinguish between the subject and the object was by means of word order.

Se cyning$_{NOM}$ sende þæm biscope$_{DAT}$ þone ærendraca$_{ACC}$. þæm biscope$_{DAT}$ sende se cyning$_{NOM}$ þone ærendraca$_{ACC}$. þone ærendraca$_{ACC}$ sende se cyning$_{NOM}$ þæm biscope$_{DAT}$. Se cyning sende þone ærendraca to þæm biscope. The king sent the messenger to the bishop.

The indirect object was marked in Old English by the dative case or by a prepositional phrase with *to* (followed by the dative). When case endings were lost in the Middle English period, the indirect object came to be signalled by word order or by the preposition *to*.

Se ærendraca sealde þæt ærende þæm biscope. Se ærendraca sealde þæt ærende to þæm biscope. The messenger gave the bishop the message. The messenger gave the message to the bishop.

In Old English adverbials could be realized by case-marked NP or by means of PPs (+ case marking). In Present-day English they typically require a preposition.

He nolde beon cyning & his agenum willan he com to rode. He did not want to be king, and of his own free will he came to the cross.

Even though word order in Old English was more flexible than in Present-day English, it was not completely free. Main clauses typically show V2 (finite verb in second position), while subordinate clauses commonly have V-final. However, V-final is not grammaticalized as a marker of subordination as in other Germanic languages.

He **hæfde** an swiþe ænlic wif. 'He had a most excellent wife' Ða **clypode** se apostal þone uðwitan Graton him to. 'Then the apostle called the wise man Graton to him' þa se Hælend acenned **wæs**, þa **comon** þry tungelwitegan to Hierusalem. 'When the Saviour was born, then three astrologers came to Jerusalem'

The shift to the almost pure SVO order found in Present-day English took place in Middle English times. The change was closely related to the loss of inflections: when inflections were lost, word order becomes functional. However, Middle English still allowed for some variation in word order.

4.2.2. Compensating for the loss of verb morphology

The verb in Old English had a two-tense inflectional system, present vs. preterite, and three moods, indicative vs. subjunctive vs. imperative (though mood distinctions were already rather reduced by the end of the period). In addition, it also marked person and number.

However, Old English lacked a synthetic future, a perfect and passive forms as those found in Latin. The simplicity of the system meant that the few distinctions available at this early stage had to be used to express a number of different temporal, aspectual and modal relationships.

OE		**PDE**	
ic singe	⇒	I sing	simple present
present		I am singing	pres. progressive
		I will sing	future
		I will have sung	perfect future
ic sang	⇒	I sang	simple past
preterit		I was singing	past progressive
		I have sung	present perfect
		I had sung	past perfect

Over time an elaborate network of temporal, modal and aspectual systems was built up by means of auxiliaries (i.e. analytic) rather than by inflections (i.e. synthetic). This was a gradual process, which is still undergoing changes nowadays.

Old English witnesses the beginnings of the development of these periphrastic constructions in the systems of tense, aspect and modality, but it is difficult to decide how far verbs such as *habban* 'have', *beon* 'be', *willan* 'will' or **sculan* 'shall' were auxiliaries at this early stage. However, although all these periphrases were still peripheral and relatively infrequent, the foundations of their future roles had already been laid.

The use of these periphrastic constructions increased dramatically in the Middle English period, especially those expressing the perfect, the future and those involving the so-called modal auxiliaries; the progressive form also became more frequent towards the end of the period; Middle English also marked the beginning of the development of the auxiliary *do*, although its greatest growth took place in Early Modern English times. In other words, by the end of the Middle English period, a great increase in the complexity of the verb group had been achieved and most of the new periphrastic patterns were well established, though much less frequently used than today.

The different periphrases emerged by a process of grammaticalization, that is, the process whereby a lexical item is recruited to convey grammatical relations while its semantic meaning is weakened.

Origin of the most common periphrases:

- **Perfect periphrasis with *have***: the verb have originally meant 'possess' and was found in complex transitive constructions of the type *Ic hæfde þo**ne** man gebunden**ne*** ('I had the man bound') > *I have bound the man*. Originally the *have*-perfect was only used with transitive verbs, while verbs intransitive verbs used the auxiliary *be* as in *we **ben entred** into shippes bord* (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*) or *the King himself **is rode** to view their battle* (Shakespeare, *Henry V*)

  Over time have spread to intransitive verbs while the *be*-perfect became obsolete with verbs of motion in the 19th century (except with *go* and *come*). Relics of the be-perfect are found with the verb *go* (e.g. *when I arrived, she was already gone*).

- **Progressive periphrasis**: this periphrasis is formed with the verb *to be* + present participle. It was already found in Old English, but its meaning was not always aspectual, as it could vary with simple forms.

ða ða se apostol þas lare **sprecende wæs**
then when the apostle this teaching explaining was
'then when the apostle was explaining this teaching…'

Europe hio onginð of Danai þære ie, seo **is irnende** of norþdæle and seo ea
Europe she begins from Don that river that is running from north and the river

Danai **irnð** þonan suðryhte on westhealfe Alexandres herga.
Don runs thence south into western-part Alexander's kingdom
'Europe begins at the river Don, which runs from the North and the river Don runs thence due South into the Western part of Alexander's kingdom'

  Although the combination *be* + present participle can already be found in Old English times, the progressive proper developed in late Middle English and can only be regarded as a grammaticalized aspectual indicator in the English verbal system by 1700. Over time the progressive increases in frequency and specializes in its aspectual function. At the beginning it was only found in the present and preterite, over time, it acquires further forms (the last one to appear, the progressive passive, which developed in Late Modern English).

- **Modal periphrases**: periphrases with modal verbs came to be used to express all the notions originally conveyed by the subjunctive (possibility, probability, obligation, etc.). Modals originate in the class of Old English preterite-present verbs, and even though they were somewhat special (some of them were defective; they did not show an inflection in the 3rd person singular present indicative), they behaved mostly like 'normal' lexical verbs. They had lexical meaning (e.g. *shall* 'owe'; *can* 'know how to'; *may* 'have strength', *will* 'want to') and some of them could take NPs and *that*-clauses as complements. Over time they lost their lexical meaning, their non-finite forms, and their ability to take complements other than the bare infinitive.

Old English:
Tobecume þin rice. **Gewurþe** ðin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.

Middle English:
Thy kingdom **come** to, **be** thy will done in erthe as in heuene

Early Modern English:
Thy kingdom **come**. Thy will **be** done, in earth as it is in heaven.

Present-day English:
May your kingdom **come**, **may** your will **be** done on earth as it is in heaven.

- **Periphrases for future time reference**: *shall* / *will* / *be going to* + infinitive. The two periphrases with modals started to be used to refer to the future in the Middle English period. *Shall* originally meant 'owe' (obligation); *will* meant 'want to' (volition), but over time they came to have a pure predictive meaning. The periphrasis *be going to* + infinitive emerged in the late Middle English period and originated in a purposive construction: *I am going* (moving) *in order to* + infinitive. Verbs of obligation, volition and movement are common cross-linguistic sources for future time expressions. In Old English future time was conveyed by means of the present tense (cf. PDE *The train leaves at 11:00*).

- The only periphrasis which was completely established in the Old English period was the **passive periphrasis**. As we have seen, the Old English verb only keeps a remnant of the previous passive conjugation in the forms *hātte/hātton* 'is/was are/were called'. The passive periphrasis was formed by means of the verbs *beon* 'to be' or *weorþan* 'become' + past participle. In the Middle English period the verb *weorþan* became obsolete. In addition to the loss of *weorþan*, the only change from Old English to Early Modern English concerns the preposition used to mark the agent (OE: *þurh, fram, mid*; ME: *through, from, of, with, by*; EModE: *by, of, with*; PDE: *by*). In Late Modern English (19th century) a new passive periphrasis emerged: this is the *get*-passive (e.g. *The glass got broken*). Both passive constructions originate in a predicative construction with an adjectival participle.

- The **dummy auxiliary *do*** ('*do*-support'): In questions, negative statements and emphatic affirmatives, Present-day English requires the insertion of the empty verb *do* if no other auxiliary is present. This was not the case in Old and Middle English. Auxiliary *do* first appears in the late Middle English period and was restricted to the Southern and West Midlands dialects (contact areas with Celtic languages). Its use spread in Early Modern English, even though it was not obligatory. In Early Modern English it could occur in non-emphatic affirmative statements. From there it spread to questions, negative statements and emphatic sentences. Its modern distribution is found over the course of the 17th century. The loss of *do* in non-emphatic affirmative statements may have been dictated by prescriptivist grammarians in the 18th century.

References

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