

The Grammaticalisation of “Be Going To”

STEPHEN J. DISNEY

Abstract

This paper examines the development of BE *going to* + infinitive and its present day (PDE) uses, a classic example of a grammaticalised verb of motion taking on a future meaning. This is a common and well documented cross-linguistic development (Bybee et al. 1994, Croft 2000, Heine & Kuteva 2002). The paper briefly traces the history of the construction, from Old English to the 19th century. The precise difference between the uses is not clear cut and I describe here a semantic continuum with a fuzzy boundary between the different senses. This is illustrated using examples taken from various sources, including the Helsinki corpus, Shakespeare and Dickens. The history of the construction as it changes to an intention use, e.g. (1), is well described. The current paper summarises this research, with some original discussion to highlight some of the issues involved.

- (1) I *am going to take* a course in syntax.

The construction exists in PDE in all its older forms, but has developed a new use where it contrasts with *will* based on whether or not the existence of evidence can be inferred for a future prediction. This ‘evidential’ use is arguably the difference between (2a) and (2b):

- (2)
- a. It *is going to be* a beautiful day tomorrow.
 - b. It *will be* a beautiful day tomorrow.

A speaker is likely to use (2a) when they have clear evidence for the fact, like a red sky at sunset, and (2b) when they are expressing a belief or opinion that is not based on evidence but merely on opinion. This evidential function is not described as such in the theoretical work to date, although EFL teaching materials often describe the distinction when teaching ‘prediction’ type future reference. The current paper concludes by tracking the semantic path of change that has led to this development.



ISSN 2041-1057

© 2009 by the author

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/linguistics/research/workingpapers/index.htm>