

# Heines Shakespeare: A Study On Contexts

On the persistence of ambiguous linguistic contexts over time:  
Implications for corpus research on micro-changes

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## Abstract

*Most instances of grammaticalization have been shown to arise in restrictive contexts (cf. Bybee et al. 1994). The persistence (Hopper 1991) of linguistic contexts raises theoretical and methodological issues for historical corpus research. What is the appropriate unit of linguistic context? How long do contexts remain relevant in the history of specific constructions? In quantitative work should "bridging contexts" (Heine 2002) and "critical contexts" (Dieswald 2002), that enable grammaticalization be counted after grammaticalization has set in? I argue that ambiguous contexts (v-texts broadly defined to include prior and following discourse), if attested, should be counted (contra Eckardt 2006), because they persist as part of the ecology of a newly grammaticalizing construction and should therefore be considered an integral component of diachronic corpus research. Data discussed involve the development of motion-with-impulse BE going to V into an auxiliary of the future as evidenced by the Early Modern English part of Helsinki Corpus, and by the first fifty years of Proceedings of the Old Bailey.*

## 1. Introduction

Contexts for grammaticalization have been the topic of several papers in recent years (e.g. Dieswald 2002, 2006; Heine 2002; Himmelmann 2004; Traugott, forthcoming). In this paper I focus on ambiguous contexts that 'persist', i.e. originally enabling ambiguous contexts that continue to be used after grammaticalization has set in, and some of the implications of such contexts for corpus work.

It has been suggested that once grammaticalization has taken place the status of enabling contexts has changed since they either do not continue to exist (Dieswald 2002, 2006) or, if they do continue to exist, they no longer enable change, and therefore should not be counted (Eckardt 2006). My main argument will be that if ambiguous contexts occur and persist, as is often the case, they should be counted since they are an essential part of the ecology of the generalization and further development of the new grammatical construction.<sup>1</sup>

'Grammaticalization' is understood here as the development of grammatical markers such as markers of tense, aspect, modality, and mood, case, connectives, and Topic/Focus markers. The definition is a functional one seeking to answer the question "How do expressions change with respect to morphosyntactic function" (Kiparsky, forthcoming; Traugott 2010), as opposed to a formal one that seeks to

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