

From abstract to abstract: On the pragmatic strengthening of *gō* in AAE

Simanique Moody
New York University

The process in which lexical items develop grammatical functions involves the “gradual erosion of lexical meaning into abstract grammatical meaning” (Bybee 1985). The well-known English example of this is *going to* > *gonna*, in which the lexical meaning of motion toward a goal evolved into an abstract grammatical marker of future tense. The phonological reduction and fusion of *going to* to *gonna* is characteristic of this change in meaning (Heine and Reh 1984; Hopper and Traugott 1993).

This paper examines the semantic change of a syntactic construction in African American English (AAE) from one abstract grammatical meaning to another: from future tense (*going to/gonna*) to a marker of negative evaluation for completed events (*gō*). In AAE, *going to* and *gonna* mark future tense as in other varieties of American English; however, AAE permits further phonological reduction of *gonna* to *gō*. An example of the first use is given in (1) and an example of the second in (2).

- (1) [future tense/propositional]
That lady gō say they different prices.
‘That lady is going to say they are different prices.’
- (2) [aspect/mood/subjectivity]
That lady gō say they different prices.
That lady +completive say they were different prices
+negative
‘That lady had the nerve to say they were different prices.’

In this paper, I show that the change in *gō* follows the proposed verbal cline of grammaticalization from a main verb to a tense, aspect, mood marker (Traugott 1995). In addition to the main verb use of *go* in AAE, the future tense use of *gō* is available (see (1)) as is the aspectual/mood marker use (see (2)). With respect to semantic change in grammaticalization (Traugott 1989, 1995, 1996), I show that increasing pragmatic strengthening (see (3)) results in the subjectification/negative evaluative use in (2).

One of the middle stages of grammaticalization is characterized by semantic ambiguity of the grammaticalized element (Hopper and Traugott 1993). With respect to *gō*, this characterization is most evident in questions, in which it is not always clear whether the speaker is asking a hypothetical question about a situation that is inconceivable (from the speaker’s point of view) or asking a rhetorical question about a completed event in order to highlight the fact that s/he is displeased about the event (see (3)).

- (3) [pragmatic strengthening]
How that lady gō say they different prices?
i. ‘How is that lady going to say they are different prices?’
ii. ‘How did that lady have the nerve to say they are different prices?’

The data used to support my analysis of *gō* were obtained from sociolinguistic interviews with native AAE speakers. A qualitative analysis of this construction in my data reveals that it functions in at least two ways: (i) to reconstruct a specific event or statement that has occurred before the time of utterance, and (ii) to reveal subjective speaker attitude (always negative) about the event or statement that has been reconstructed.

References

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