

# Syntactic Change

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## Abstrac

Syntactic change is a type of natural language variation that refers to changes in the grammar of a language. This change can be caused or facilitated both by Socio-cultural factors and by language-internal factors.

A particular feature of Ancient Greek is the continuity in the field of Grammar throughout the centuries, comparing with most European languages. Two types of syntactic change are analyzed: (1) the grammaticalization as a process that transforms independent linguistic units into grammatical ones or less grammatical into more grammatical ones (*allá, án, plén, as*); and (2) the changes that involve the structure of the whole clause (the shift from free word order to verb-initial word order and the replacement of the infinitive by a subordinate clause 'to' + verb).

## Text

Syntactic change is a type of natural language variation that languages experience over the centuries. Languages change in all levels (phonetic, morphologic, semantic ...): syntactic change refers to changes in the grammar of a language.

Syntactic change can be caused or facilitated by two factors: (1) Socio-cultural factors, such as failures of learning in the course of language transmission, both when native speakers of a language learn it in an imperfect way, or in situations of contact with another speech community, when the speakers fail to acquire some features of the second language and, for example, borrow them from its native language; (2) language-internal factors dealing with the regularity and equilibrium of the languages, such as analogy or tendency towards the simplification or elimination of exceptions; or dealing with the need to avoid vagueness of meaning or ambiguity; or with changes in other levels of a language, like in the meaning of the words or in the phonological and morphological structure. These causes may work separately, simultaneously or successively and, until now, scholars have not yet discovered general rules that explain why these causes provoke changes in some languages and not in others, and why these changes expand on some occasions and not on others.

A particular feature of Ancient Greek is the continuity in the field of Grammar throughout the centuries, comparing with the usual evolution of most European languages. This continuity is also displayed in the Hellenistic period and later on, in spite of its geographical expansion over new immense areas and its use as international language. The syntactic changes than Ancient Greek underwent can be organized in two types: grammaticalization (1) and changes dealing with the structure of the clauses (2).

1. One type of syntactic change is the grammaticalization (grammatization, grammaticization) as a process that transforms independent linguistic units into

grammatical ones or less grammatical into more grammatical ones. The study of this process show how an independent linguistic unit, usually a content word (nouns, adjectives, verbs, some adverbs), changes in grammatical function and becomes a grammatical word whose function is to signal grammatical relationships between the different elements within an utterance. This process of a word moving out of its syntactic category or its grammatical function is usually a slowly development of several stages, a stepped continuum (a cline), involving always syntactic, semantic, morphological or phonological elements. As a result of these process some (morpho)syntactic categories of a language and thus the grammar of a language change. There are some mechanisms that are often linked to grammaticalization, as desemanticization or semantic bleaching (the loss of semantic content): see 1.1, 1.3 and 1.3; decategorialization or morphological reduction, when the linguistic unit loses morphological or syntactic features characteristic of its initial category: see 1.1, 1.3 and 1.4; phonological reduction or phonetic erosion when the linguistic unit loses phonetic substance (syllables, stress, ...): see 1.4; and obligatorification when the linguistic unit becomes obligatory: see 1.2.

1.1. *allá* lost its adjectival status and became a particle, thus changing its syntactic identity. *allá* has a clear etymology as the neuter plural of *állos*, so that it was a content word, a noun, having a primary meaning of ‘the other things’. From this status it evolved, with a change of accent, into a particle, the function with which it appears already in the first Greek texts.

1.2. The presence of the particle *án* becomes obligatory from Homer to Attic in some constructions, e.g., the potential optative may be used in Homer with (Hom. *Il.* 5.311) or without *án* or *ke(n)* (Hom. *Il.* 9.515) for unreal events in both present and past time, but Standard Attic expresses these counterfactuals with secondary tenses of indicative always associated with *án*.

1.3. *plén* changed from preposition to conjunction. When *plén* first appears, it is a preposition with genitive, meaning ‘except’ (Hom. *Od.* 8.207), a construction also found in different authors from the archaic period. However, the following constructions are also found: (1) from Pythermus (VI BCE), *plén* appears followed by the same case as that on which the exception is established, this being a common construction in the Classical period (Soph. *Phil.* 100); (2) from the Classical period onwards, *plén* can be followed by an infinitive (Aesch. *Eum.* 125 Sommerstein); (3) or by a clause with a finite verb (Xen. *Cyr.* 4.2.28). In addition, in this latter usage, *plén* can appear combined with other words, like *hóti* or *hóson* (*hósa, kathóson*). When it functions as a clause introducer, *plén* has changed its syntactic status and became a conjunction. As such, it is not only exceptive, but on some occasions it can be interpreted as adversative (see the above mentioned Xen. *Cyr.* 4.2.28). This adversative use (with *plén* alone or combined with *hóti* or *hóson*) is usual from the Classical period onwards and extends to later Greek (Lk 23.28), so that in the Imperial period it can be combined with *allá* to express an adversative relationship (Hld. 7.26.6).

1.4. The Ancient Greek verb *áphes* changes into the Modern Greek particle *as*. The second person singular of the imperative of *aphíēmi* (*áphes*), a verb with different constructions and meanings in Ancient Greek (it can be accompanied by an accusative, meaning ‘to let, leave, discharge’; by an accusative and an infinitive, meaning ‘to allow, to permit’; by a simple infinitive, meaning ‘to abandon, to stop’ or by an accusative and a genitive, meaning ‘to acquit’), can appear, from the Koine period onwards, followed by subjunctive forms of other verbs and without any subordinative conjunction marking its syntactical dependence from the imperative (Matthew 27.49, *hoi dè loipoi élegon: áphes idémen ei érkhetai Elías sósōn autón*, ‘The others said: *Let us see* if Elijah will come to save him’). In this construction (impossible in Classical Greek where a subordinate clause or an infinitive would have been required),

*áphes* has lost its verbal meaning and expresses, together with *ídōmen*, a request for agreement on the part of the listener.

This change was influenced by two others taking place in the same period on different levels of the language. On the one hand, some phonetic changes, such as the abolition in vowel length, leading to merger *o* and *ō* (both phonetically [o]), and the monophthongization of diphthongs (*ei*, *ē* and *ēi* ει, η, η were phonetically [i]). As a result of these changes, the distinction between indicative and subjunctive was lost, so that the latter was unmarked in some contexts. On the other hand, the general trend of the replacement of synthetic verbal forms by periphrases resulted in the subjunctive being replaced by particle + verb.

All these syntactic and morphophonetic changes, together with a reduction in the phonetic structure of the word (from *áphes* to *as*), produced the existence of a new particle which is documented from the 7<sup>nd</sup> c. (Amherst Papyrus 2.153, dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>nd</sup> c.: *Ás lábōsin hoi onelátai mían artábēn krithēs hupèr hekástou gaïdaríou* 'Let the donkey-drivers receive one *artaba* of barley for each donkey'. By that time, the original meaning of permission of *áphes* had evolved into a suggestion marker.

2. Another type of syntactic change involves the structure of the whole clause. This change can involve all the clauses (2.1), or only some of them (2.2).

2.1. Shift from free word order to verb-initial word order. In Ancient Greek, the syntactic relationship was expressed by the system of cases and by the phenomenon of agreement. As a result, Ancient Greek does not have strict rules for the placement of the most important constituents of a clause, the predicate, the subject and the object, quite unlike the situation in a language without a case system. On the other

hand, some words usually occur in a fixed position, like prepositive words (such as conjunctions, negations, articles or relative pronouns), which occupy the first position in their syntactic unit (sentences, clauses, noun phrases), or postpositive words (such as some indefinite adverbs and pronouns or some particles), which occur in second position (Wackernagel's law). This relative freedom was a structural characteristic of Classical Greek, so that placing words or phrases in a concrete point in the sentence served no syntactic function, but just pragmatic or stylistic ones.

The shift of this pattern has been connected with clitic pronouns. These, like other clitic elements, were normally placed after the first constituent of a clause (Wackernagel's law), and were sometimes left at a distance from the corresponding verb (Hdt. 6.63.2, *en dé hoi khrónōi elássonī ... hē gunē hautē tíktei*, 'and in a shorter period of time ... that wife bore *him* a child'). To avoid the difficulties of comprehension due to this distance, sometimes these pronouns were placed immediately after the verb (Dem. Or. 54.11, *puretoì dè parētoì dè parēkoloúthoun moi sunecheîs*, 'And constant fevers hounded *me*').

In the Hellenistic period the tension between the two described placement-trends of clitics began to be solved by placing the verb before the clitic pronouns, which remained situated in the second place of the clause, so that the verb ended up in the first position (Verb + clitic + Subject + Object), or near to the initial position whenever a clausal constituent acting as a focus, a piece of background information or a sentential operator (expressing negation, interrogation, or modality) was preposed to the clause (Focus/Complementizer/Operator + clitic + Verb). The trend to this new word order predominating in the Hellenistic period over verb-final structures (which were inherited from IE) was maintained throughout spoken Medieval Greek and can even be found in some modern dialects (Cypriot). However, save in the case of

imperatives and gerunds (which appear to occupy the initial position), the order clitic-Verb has now been generalized in Standard Medieval Greek.

2.2. Replacement of the infinitive by a subordinate clause ('to' + verb). The complexity of subordination patterns in Classical Greek suffered from the Hellenistic period a considerable reduction in the use of infinitival and participial constructions in favor of structures with finite verbs (indicatives and subjunctives). The classical use of the accusative + infinitive to complement verbs of 'thought' and 'belief', or impersonal modals, or control verbs of 'waiting' and 'expecting', was replaced by clauses with *hóti* + an indicative in the first case, and with *hína* or *hópōs* + subjunctive in the second and third, provided that the subjects of main and subordinate clauses were different. Sometimes the new and the old forms were used side by side, as a stylistic variation: *Novum Testamentum*, 1 Ep. Cor. 14.5, *thélō dè pántas humâs laleîn glóssais mâllon dè hína prophēteúēte*, 'I want that all of you speak in tongues rather than you prophecy'. The rest of infinitives, which didn't possess their own clear subject, continued being used throughout antiquity and into the Byzantine period, but in the later Middle Ages these infinitives were also eliminated in favor of finite constructions with *hína* (later *na*) in the core Greek speaking areas, persisting only in the eastern and western peripheries.

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