

Phonetic erosion and grammaticalisation in English dialects

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In his discussion of the relationship between phonological change and grammaticalisation, Heine (1993) writes that: “Once a lexeme is conventionalized as a grammatical marker, it tends to undergo erosion; that is, the phonological substance is likely to be reduced in some way and to become more dependent on surrounding phonetic material” .

Under this scenario, phonetic erosion is a consequence of grammaticalisation. This interpretation of the sequence of events has been repeated often in the literature, for example in Heine & Narrog (2010), where erosion is said to be the fourth and final step in a series of grammaticalisation processes. Hopper & Traugott (1993) also discuss the “special phonological changes” which occur in the case of elements which have been or are being grammaticalised. As Seinhorst (2014) says, “erosion generally presents itself after the grammaticalizing item rises in frequency. This can be readily explained in a functionalist framework: *a rise in frequency makes an item more predictable, and allows for a more economical phonetic form*”. While not opposing this perspective, I here examine the possibility that the reverse process may also take place. I do this using data concerning the historical development of conjunctions out of other items such as nouns, verbs and adverbs in the traditional dialects of East Anglia. The data that I present can be interpreted as suggesting that phonetic erosion may be an initiating factor in grammaticalisation rather than a consequence.