Neither by methaphor nor really by metonymy: the Shortcomings of these Concepts as Explanatory of Language Change Processes

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Cognitive semantics has made an extensive use of the concepts of metaphor and metonymy to explain meaning structure, meaning change and, in general, phenomena of language change. Among these, grammaticalization has been the subject of many studies, which is in part due to the fact that the phenomena involved are not yet perfectly understood at the moment. As the development of grammaticalization studies roughly coincided in time with an interest in cognitive linguistics, it is not astonishing to find that concepts central to cognitive linguistics have found their way into explanations of grammaticalization.

Take metaphor, to start with, and the role it has played in explaining the grammaticalization process leading to the expression of future tense by means of *be going to*. The question that is to be answered is how it came about that the full verb *go*, used to express movement of an agent away from a place, comes to be used to express near future, i.e., acquires the status of a tense auxiliary. The following sentences illustrate the two uses:

(1) Jack is going to school.
(2) A war is going to come.

It seems plausible at first sight to interpret this evolution in terms of metaphor, and this has indeed been suggested by Eve Sweetser, as well

as by Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer.[1] The last three authors offer a series of arguments that purport to show that the second use comes from the first by metaphorical transfer. The basic idea is that the transfer is from the more concrete domain of space to the more abstract domain of time. And the image schema behind the transfer is that of a movement away from the speaker which is projected onto a time line that is ordered from deictic present to deictic future. In short, physical movement is supposed to conceptualize futurity, according to the conceptual metaphor "Time is Space".

However, it didn't take long for this analysis to be called into question. Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer, in the very same book where they put forward the metaphorical hypothesis, point to certain flaws in it, and undertake corrections by appealing to metonymy. The authors rightly saw that the transition from the motion use of *going to* to its futurity use was no simple and sudden conceptual jump, but that the change had been conditioned and mediated by the use of *going to* in certain contexts. Let's consider, e.g., the following examples (taken from Heine *et al.*, 1991, 70):

(3) Are you going to the library?
(4) No, I am going to eat.

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1 See Sweetser (1988, 390-393), Heine / Claudi / Hünnemeyer (1991, 46-47). Hopper and Traugott (1993, 83) interpret Bybee and Pagliuca (1987) as adhering to the metaphorization hypothesis, but this interpretation is probably hasty: the word "metaphor" doesn't play a role in Bybee's and Pagliuca's text, whose main concern is the question of the possible lexical sources of future morphemes and the similarity, across languages, of the paths leading from these sources to the expression of the future. In Bybee/Pagliuca/Perkins (1991) the main concern is also the question of the existence of "universal pathways for the development of futures from different lexical sources"(Bybee et al., 1991, 47), and the authors do not really go into the problem of the exact semantics-pragmatics of this grammaticalization process. More recently, in Bybee/Perkins/Pagliuca (1994), they do go into this problem, under the chapter heading "Mechanisms of Semantic Change", but they consider the *be going to* grammaticalization to be an instance of what they call "generalization", and stress that "while it is certainly the case (...) that the same image schema structure for spatial 'be going to' is preserved in temporal 'be going to', it does not follow that metaphorical extension is the operative mechanism of change" (Bybee et al., 1994, 292).

The sentence *I am going to eat* can be interpreted in the literal motion sense, as it can be an answer to the question about whether one is physically going to the library. But the sentence *I am going to eat* deviates from the normal case, in that it leaves out reference to the destination of the motion, and instead refers to the action to be carried at this destination. We thus already have here, at the surface level, the basic formal traits that are present in the *be going to* future construction (namely, a form of *be going*, followed by *to*, followed by an infinitive) and, semantically, we also already have the idea of futurity, in that the motion sense of *going* allows, indeed requires, the inference that the action referred to by the infinitive will take place at a time later than the one referred to by *going*.

Heine *et al.* (1991) rightly consider that it is contexts of this type that are responsible for the rise of the *be going to* future. They say that the transition from the motion sense of *be going* to its futurity sense involves the use of *be going* in a series of intermediate contexts, of which the sentence *I am going to eat* would be one element. This continuous chain, they say, has a metonymic structure, because in sentences situated in the middle of the chain the expressions of motion and of futurity are recoverable from the same context, i.e., they are somehow contiguous in that context, and metonymy is precisely defined in terms of contiguity.

Although these authors concede that this chain of contexts has a metonymic structure, they still maintain the idea that metaphor plays a part in this grammaticalization process, which would thus have a dual nature: metonymy would account for the continuous aspect of the process, i.e., for the small, intermediate steps, while metaphor would account for the discrete aspect, i.e., for the transfer from the spatial to the non-spatial domain.[2]

However, it is hard to see what evidence would justify the appeal to metaphor in this case. I think that what we have here is only an illusion of metaphor, which comes to our minds when we put side by side a sentence like *John is going to school* and a sentence like *A war is going to come*. However, the historical facts are that what took place was a long

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2 For a more detailed description and discussion of the whole process, see Heine / Claudi / Hünnemeyer (1991, 70-73).

evolution by small intermediate steps, that have led from the *be going to* of motion to the *be-going to* of futurity. These steps are generally conceived of as metonymic in character, and - what is more important - they seem to provide an exhaustive explanation of all the facts of the change, so that it really is difficult to see where metaphor might come in.

Let us turn now to an explanation in terms of metonymy: the one by Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott (1993). They clearly stress what we have said above, namely, that it is the consideration of the item *go* out of contexts of use that is responsible for the idea of a metaphor of space taking part in the grammaticalization of *go* into an auxiliary, because, out of context, the spatial properties of *go* come more easily to mind; however, they say, it was not the item *go* that grammaticalized but the phrase *be going to*, and this only in very particular contexts (Hopper/Traugott, 1993, 81). This argument (that contexts have to be considered in this grammaticalization process) speaks definitively against the metaphor hypothesis. The metonymy hypothesis, however, can still be held, according to Hopper and Traugott. It is their opinion that, if we pay due attention to the importance of these contexts, it will become clear that this grammaticalization is metonymic in nature.

In what follows, we will have a close look at the evolution of *be going to*, in order to be able to evaluate the metonymy hypothesis. But before that, some words are in order about the concept of metonymy. Metonymy, in its central sense, is to be found when we, for instance, use the word *hands* meaning "workers". This is the traditional sense metonymy has in the literature. What characterizes this central metonymy is that a word which conventionally refers to an object X is used to refer to another object Y, which is contiguous to X in the extralinguistic world.[3] This definition needs some qualifications: (1) metonymy begins life in a speech

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3 The use of the concept of metonymy in linguistics and literary studies has such a long history that it would be preposterous to want to refer to "the" fundamental and authoritative source for the concept. Nevertheless, we may mention the expositions in Anttila (1989) and Ullmann (1962) as paradigmatic. Taylor (1995, 122) captures the basic and general feature of metonymy when he says that "traditional rhetoric defines metonymy as a figure of speech whereby the name of one entity e^1 is used to refer to another entity e^2 which is contiguous to e^1."

act token involving some kind of conversational implicature, whereby the speaker utters the word for X and intends to be understood as having meant Y; (2) then, in many future instances of communication, there will be reinforcement of the conversational implicature through a trend in use: frequent use of the word "X" for object Y leads to reinforcement of expectations, on the part of hearers, that they will find the same implicature, and a tendency, on the part of speakers, to use the word to convey invariably the same implicature, because they believe they will thus be more easily understood; (3) finally, the inevitable outcome of the reinforcement process will be the conventionalizing of the conversational implicature, i.e., speakers will understand the word "X" to conventionally mean Y; when this point is attained, the word may be said to have two meanings. (In the case of the word *hand*, it will come to mean both "hand" and "worker").

Let us now explore the evolution of *be going to*, in order to see whether metonymy is at work in this case.

We will begin with the contexts that Traugott and Hopper rightly recognized as the only relevant for the change. These are the ones where we have *be going* as a verb of motion, followed by the particle *to* signaling purpose (not direction!), followed in turn by an infinitive clause, as in the sentence

(5) I'm going [to eat.]
(= I'm going [*in order to* eat.])

The syntactic bracketing of (5) is thus *I'm going [to eat.]*.

How did this construction evolve to express futurity? To explain this semantic change is to explain how sentence (5), which has a motion reading, i.e.

I'm going   [to   eat   ]
<MOTION> [<PURPOSE> <FUTURE (inferred)>]

has evolved into another sentence of the same form, which has a future reading, i.e.

I'm going to [eat]
<FUTURE>

(i) To begin with[4], it is important to notice that, in the motion reading, the notion of FUTURE is already present, as an inferred feature: while the verb *go* indicates the subject's action, the infinitive clause after purposive *to* indicates the goal of his action; as goals are generally conceived to lie later in time than the actions that lead to them, the event expressed in the infinitive clause is inferred to happen at a time in the future from the action referred to by *going*.

The inferred feature of <FUTURE>, through its constancy and frequency in conversation, became conventional. But how exactly? The most plausible answer is that the fading away of the features <PURPOSE> and <MOTION> brought about the conventionalizing of <FUTURE>.

(ii) As for the feature of <PURPOSE>, we may assume that semantic variation at the speakers' level has led, in the course of time, to the use of the *be going* of motion with non-intentional verbs, such as in the following sentences:

(6) I'm going *to hear what the judge has to say*
(7) I'm going *to fall into a trap*
(8) I'm going *to be defeated*
(9) I'm going *to lose my soul*

This development is not metonymic in kind. These sentences simply show that, although the prototypical construction may have been *I'm going +to + 'Verb of Action'*, speakers might slightly deviate from the prototype and use a verb situated in the continuum that leads from verbs of action to verbs of event and of state.

As for the particle *to*, it also underwent a change. We said it had begun by being a subordinator of purpose but, once the verb following it is no longer an action verb, there is a collateral tendency for the particle not to express purpose. Notice that, from sentences (6) to (9), only in (6) does the particle express purpose. I.e., sentence

(6) I'm going to hear what the judge has to say
    <MOTION> [<PURPOSE> <FUTURE (inferred)>]

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4 The account that follows of the grammaticalization of *be going to* agrees, in its general traits, with the one given in Hopper/Traugott (1993,82-83), but some points have undergone elaboration.

means: "I'm going *with the purpose of* hearing what the judge has to say". But in the other three sentences, there is the implication that the event that will take place after going is not something willed by the agent, or that it is something the agent cannot avoid, although it is not willed by him. For instance, only improbably was sentence (9) ever uttered to mean "I'm going *with the purpose of* losing my soul". Assuming that the normal case is that one doesn't want to lose one's soul, it is more plausible to suppose that the speaker meant by the sentence that his going would have the unwilled result of his losing his soul. I.e., more often than not, the sentence would be uttered to mean: "I'm going *and the result of my going is that* I will lose my soul". The same considerations apply to the other two sentences. The particle *to* would therefore express result:

(9) I'm going to lose my soul
<MOTION> [<RESULT> <FUTURE(inferred)>]

This development has been facilitated by the ambiguity of the particle *to*, which - besides conveying purpose - can also convey result, as in

(10) He has only to speak a sentence ...*to* be known for an illiterate.
(J. Ruskin, *NSOED*, s.v. *to*, p.3324,c.2)

(iii) As for the fading away of the feature <MOTION> present in *be going*, we may say that - coincident with the demotion of the particle *to* from expression of purpose to expression of result - we find an erosion of agenthood and intentionality from the subject of *be going*. This might be explained by looking at what happens in sentences like

(11) He's going to be brought before justice[5]

In this sentence, the subject of *be brought* is portrayed as being neither an agent nor intentional, and consequently the subject of *be going* also loses in agenthood and intentionality, so that *he's going* is here interpreted conversationally to mean: *someone is going and will bring him.*

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5 This example is based on the one in Hopper / Traugott (1993, 83).

Here, *he´s going* doesn't really convey that the subject moves, but that the subject is moved. This passivization of *be going* is an important step away from the prototype of motion and, in time, speakers will come to use the *be going* construction with no implication of motion.

The decreasing frequency with which the feature of intentionality will be observed to show up in the infinitive clause, will thus be correlated with an increasing possibility of finding a non-agentive or non-intentional subject of *be going* in the main clause. What we have here is therefore a drift away from the prototype of an agentive or intentional subject of *be going*.

And, again, no metonymy seems to be involved here. The process can be explained as one that begins with variation along analogy chains, where new analogical uses tend to become established in the language dependending on how strong speakers' expectations are that they will be found in communication.

In sentences like (11), *going* will gradually cease to be looked upon as a verb of action, and so the feature <MOTION> will be demoted, until it will no longer be felt to be present. As the feature <PURPOSE> had also lost importance, the presence of the form *be going* will inevitably be left to play the only role it can still play: that of signaling futurity. I.e., at a certain moment, sentences like (11) will be interpreted as displaying exclusively the feature <FUTURE>.

Notice that, once we get to this point, it will be logically impossible to consider <FUTURE> as inferrable from <MOTION>, since <MOTION> is absent from the sentence, which goes to show that, by then, <FUTURE> will have been conventionalized as part of the meaning of *be going*:

> (11) He's going to be brought before justice
>   <FUTURE>

But this explanation of how <MOTION> has faded away is still incomplete. Attention should be drawn to another fact: the communicative importance of the infinitive clause and how it has affected the devaluation of *be going*. In fact, there were many sentences where *be going* might involve motion, but where it was clear that the information focus was on the infinitive clause. So, by saying

(12) I'm going to *see a doctor*

the speaker's focus is on *to see a doctor*, it being irrelevant in many contexts whether this objective is to be reached by the subject's moving or not. With the focus of information on the infinitive clause, speakers will tend to use *be going* in contexts where the feature <MOTION> might theoretically be present, but where it is not really meant by the speaker, such as e.g.

(13) I'm going to *write a letter*

The tendency to stress the information in the infinitive clause leads to a devaluation of the information conveyable by *be going* and, particularly, the feature <MOTION> will come to be felt as discardable, i.e., in the long run *be going* will cease to carry <MOTION> as a conventional, semantic, feature.

In the end of the process, sentences will be found in which no implication of motion is even possible, such as:

(14) I'm going to stand here
(15) I'm going to be here

By then, the only function left for *be going* to fulfil will be to express futurity, and - accordingly - futurity will become a conventional, semantic feature of *be going*.

(iv) In a last move away from motion, agenthood and purpose, *be going* comes to be used with non-animate subjects, as in:

(16) War is going to come
(17) Something is going to happen

When we get to this point, the semantic change is complete, there being only a few words that have to be said about rebracketing.

(v) Rebracketing is the consequence of two conjoined facts: the fact that *be going* has come to express futurity, together with the fact that, in the contexts where it has, the particle *to* has become neither indicative of direction, nor of purpose, nor even of result - it has become semantically empty, so to speak. These facts motivate the syntactical reanalysis of the

particle as being part of the *be going* future construction, and so rebracketing takes place:

(18) I'm going to [eat.]
    <FUTURE>

The most clear proof of the autonomy of the *be going* future construction is that it recently underwent shortening as a further step in grammaticalization: *going to* became *gonna*:

(19) I'm gonna eat.

And this is where we are today in the grammaticalization of *be going*.

Let us ask now whether this development away from motion we've just described might be considered metonymic in nature. At first sight, maybe it could. We start with a *be going* that conveys both motion and futurity (although in different ways, conventionally and inferentially) and end up with a *be going* that conveys only future (conventionally). We might say that it all began with a speaker uttering the *be going* of motion plus futurity and thereby intending his or her hearer to understand that he had meant only futurity. This would be something like a metonymic use of *be going,* introduced by an implicature of the gricean kind. Only, there is a problem with this scenario, and this is that no speaker is to be found that ever had such intentions. Speakers simply didn't decide to use the motion *be going* in the futurity sense.

On the contrary, as I have tried to show in this exposition, what we have here is a gradual, complex, piece-meal process, which we might try to summarize in six basic steps: (1) there exists variation at the speakers' level; (2) variation allows drifts away from prototypes (drifts away from action verbs, from purpose, from agenthood and intentionality, all these leading to a drift away from motion); (3) these drifts will favour certain contextual meaning features (be they conventional or inferred) and will disregard others, for reasons that may vary, but will always have to do with communicative intentions (e.g., in the present case, the communicative intention to stress the information contained in the infinitive clause has led to a disregard of the information conveyed by *be going*);

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(4) hearers' expectations about the communicative intentions of speakers will also play a role in favouring certain features and disregarding others; (5) semantic features that tend to be disregarded will be deconventionalized, and may eventually disappear; (6) inferred features that tend to be favoured, or at least kept, will be conventionalized, and so become semantic features.

In an explanation along these points, it is not clear at which moment metonymy should make its appearance. And it seems unquestionable that metonymy in the central sense is not at work in this grammaticalization, as two difficulties seem unsurmountable. One is - as we've already seen - that of finding a speech act token uttered with the metonymic intention (so to speak) of using motion *be going* to convey futurity. The other difficulty - which has also been commented on above - is to name two plausible candidates for the two contiguous objects referred to in standard definitions of metonymy.[6]

How can then the metonymy hypothesis be rescued? Elizabeth Traugott and Ekkehard König (1991) suggest a way out. These authors also admit that no external contiguous objects seem to be involved in this process of grammaticalization, but they try to save the idea that metonymy plays a role in it by, as they say, "extending the notion of metonymy". And this extension would be

> from traditional concrete and overt contexts to cognitive and covert contexts, specifically the pragmatic contexts of conversational and conventional inference. The contiguity involved is based in the discourse world. The 'indexing' involved is the pointing to relevance that conversational inferences about stereotypical situations entail.

> (Traugott/König, 1991, 211)

When applied to the case of *be going*, this extended notion of metonymy means, e.g., that the feature of futurity, having begun life as a conversational inference from contexts using the *be going* of motion, has been - due to its frequent use in stereotypical situations - "pointed to rele-

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6 See note 3.

vance", so that it eventually ends up as a conventional, and therefore semantic, feature of *be going*.

Before we decide whether this is a justifiable way of extending the concept of metonymy, there is a question that must be asked, and that is what is meant, in Traugott's and König's definition, by the expression "pointing to relevance". Although they do not say who does this pointing to relevance, there can be no other candidate but the speaker. Traugott and König thus seem to be saying that, by using the *be going to* construction in certain contexts, speakers point to the relevance of futurity in those cases, or somehow make clear by implicature that futurity is the important feature, and that neither motion nor purpose play a role. However, if our analysis is correct, this is not exactly how things happened. Futurity did not become a semantic feature because speakers pointed to it, but its semanticization was to a great extent the unintended negative consequence of the gradual loss of communicative importance of the features of motion and purpose. In fact, speakers did not really intend to promote futurity, but instead intended to reach certain communicative goals, such as calling attention to the contents of the infinitive clause; and this unintentionally led to an increasing use of *be going to* in contexts where motion and/or purpose played little or no role; which, in turn, unintentionally brought about the semanticization of futurity.[7]

We can conclude then that if this whole process has been mostly indirect and negative, there is one reason less to call it metonymic.[8] However, maybe all that Traugott and König want to stress by keeping the notion of metonymy in these cases is the fact that the process begins with a number of features which are co-existent but of different status, as

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7 We may say that this process is a good example of what Rudi Keller has called the effect of the "invisible hand" in language change: individual speech acts that were not intended, at the time of their occurrence, to have a certain effect, give rise nevertheless - by a cumulative process - to the unintended creation of that effect. On the "invisible hand" theory of language change, see Keller (1994).

8 The term "metonymy" is also avoided by other authors when it comes to explain the *be going to* future, probably because of their awareness of the difference between a metonymic process of change and the particular features involved in the change of *be going to*: Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994), as we have already seen (note 1, above), subsume this change under what they dub "generalization".

some are semantic and another inferrable, and that there is a transfer of status, in so far as the semantic ones become inferrable or disappear, while the originally inferrable one becomes semantic. And if this is so, i. e., if we allow co-existence to take the place of contiguity and give a criterial importance to the notion of transfer, then it will be possible to keep on speaking of metonymy in these cases, although we should always bear in mind the crucial genetic differences that separate this development from central metonymy.[9]

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9 Even in the field of pure lexical changes (e.g., changes leading to polysemy or homonymy), cases can be found which have been traditionally described as "changes by metonymy" but which upon analysis can be seen to differ significantly from central metonymic changes. I have argued elsewhere that the famous example of the change of Fr. grève to mean "strike" is one such case. On this question, see Lima (1995, 210-212).

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