

Abstract: Future tense in Old and Modern Icelandic

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Future tense is a category that is expressed in various ways crosslinguistically. While classical languages like Latin or Greek can express future actions synthetically, the Germanic languages are known for only having periphrastic futures or simply using present tense to refer to the future (cf. Harbert 2007: 297). The phase model of grammaticalization of future tenses developed by Bybee et al. (1991, 1994) describes how grammaticalization always proceeds in predetermined paths (“source determination”) and how the different phases of these paths are characterized. For periphrastic futures, which are supposed to grammaticalize into synthetic futures sooner or later, the factors that can determine these paths are the semantics of the auxiliary verb that is used to form the periphrasis as well as the other parts of the periphrasis like prepositions (cf. Bybee et al. 1994: 268).

In the case of Icelandic, there is only one study that deals with how future was expressed in Old Icelandic (cf. Morris 1964). No comprehensive studies exist that examine the way the expression of future has changed over the years. All grammars of Old and Modern Icelandic list various periphrases like *munu* + INF or *skulu* + INF that all express future in some way, but they all have their own connotations. In the case of *skulu* for example, some sort of obligation to perform a certain action is implied, so one would expect it to be used primarily with the first or second person. When periphrases are also used with the third person or even in impersonal sentences or with inanimate agents, one can assume that they have already advanced quite far on the path of grammaticalization postulated by Bybee et al.

It is often claimed that Icelandic practically has not changed in the past thousand years. However, if one takes a detailed look at the language in use, one can find a number of differences between Old and Modern Icelandic. I conducted a corpus study of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* on one hand and a corpus of emails from universities from MÍM (*Mörkuð íslensk málheild* ‘Tagged Icelandic Corpus’ provided by the Árni Magnússon Institute) on the other hand. The study focused on the periphrases *munu* + INF, *skulu* + INF, *ætla að* + INF und *koma til með að* + INF, which are all used to express future in Modern Icelandic. The first two are present in Old and Modern Icelandic and thus can be compared in terms of how they are used. The second two are rather new periphrases that show how futures can develop from expressions of intention or movement towards a goal. The corpus studies show that the model provided by Bybee et al. can only help discover tendencies in the development of futures, but not all futures fit into their phase model of grammaticalization.

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