Grammaticalization of points in Nicaraguan signing

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Grammaticalization Pathways
(Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Wilcox, 2004; Pfau & Steinbach 2006)

Lexical item
OLD ENGLISH
WILLAN

Grammatical Element
PRESENT DAY ENGLISH
WILL / ‘LL

spoken language
Grammaticalization Pathways
(Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Wilcox, 2004; Pfau & Steinbach 2006)

sign language

OLD LSF

OLD ENGLISH

OLD ENGLISH PRESENT DAY ENGLISH

WILLAN

“to leave”

Lexical item

Grammatical Element

future marker

WILL / ‘LL

spoken language

spoken language
Grammaticalization Pathways
(Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Wilcox, 2004; Pfau & Steinbach 2006)

**sign language**

OLD LSF → LSF

- Conventional Gesture
- Manner
- Non-manuals

Non-Lexical Forms

OLD ENGLISH → PRESENT DAY ENGLISH

WILLAN → WILL / ‘LL

“to leave”

Lexical item

Grammatical Element

spoken language
Grammaticalization Pathways
(Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Wilcox, 2004; Pfau & Steinbach 2006)

sign language

OLD LSF

• Conventional Gesture
• Manner
• Non-manuals

Non-Lexical Forms

OLD ENGLISH

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spoken language

PRESENT DAY ENGLISH

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future marker

Grammatical Element
Grammaticalization Pathways
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Non-Lexical Forms

OLD LSF

sign language

Grammatical Element

future marker

OLD ENGLISH

WILLAN

spoken language

PRESENT DAY ENGLISH

WILL / ‘LL
Nicaraguan children today
Nicaraguan teens today
Nicaraguan adults today
The emergence of the Nicaraguan Deaf community
co-existing cohorts of learners

By comparing signers of different ages today, we can see the course of language emergence.
Homesigner in Nicaragua
The emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language
The emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language
The emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language

Homesign Systems

1970s
first cohort

1980s
second cohort

1990s
third cohort
Method

16 deaf people participated
- 4 Homesigners who don’t know NSL or each other
- 4 signers from Cohort 1 of NSL
- 4 signers from Cohort 2 of NSL
- 4 signers from Cohort 3 of NSL

Each person saw a cartoon of Tweety the bird and Sylvester the cat, and then signed the story to another person

Every point identified and coded
- points to real object (n = 11)
- points to empty space and chest (n = 542)
Method

• 16 deaf people participated
  ➢ 4 Homesigners who don’t know NSL or each other
  ➢ 4 signers from Cohort 1 of NSL
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• Each person saw a cartoon of Tweety the bird and Sylvester the cat, and then signed the story to another person

• Every point identified and coded
  – points to real object (n = 11)
  – points to empty space and chest (n = 542)
concrete  abstract
point to a space on the right

concrete real space on the right

abstract
FORM

concrete  abstract

point to a space on the right  point to a space on the right

real space on the right  story space (e.g., to a character’s right)
FORM

point to a space on the right

real space on the right

story space (e.g., to a character’s right)

story character (not space!)

concrete

abstract
FORM

point to a space on the right

point to a space on the right

point to a space on the right

gesture

real space on the right

story space (e.g., to a character’s right)

story character (not space!)
FORM

point to a **space** on the right

point to a **space** on the right

gesture

**story space**
(e.g., to a character’s right)

**story character**
(not space!)

reliability = 95%
FORM

point to a space on the right

point to a space on the right

gesture

language

story space (e.g., to a character’s right)

story character (not space!)

Locative (place) point

Nominal (noun) point

reliability = 95%
Point that refers to a location
Point that refers to a character
Locative points do not change but nominal points increase

Locative points

Nominal points

p = n.s.

p < .01

(Homesigners)  (Cohort 1)  (Cohort 2)  (Cohort 3)

Nominal points fill subject slots

![Bar chart showing the number of combinations for Verb + Nominal point and Nominal point + Verb for different cohorts.](chart.png)

- **Homesigners Cohort 1 Cohort 2 Cohort 3**
- **Number of combinations**
  - Verb + Nominal point
  - Nominal point + Verb

- **Number of combinations**
  - 0
  - 15
  - 30
  - 60
Emergence of Subject + Verb combinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 1</th>
<th>Cohort 2</th>
<th>Cohort 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal point + Noun</td>
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Proposed grammaticalization path for points
(Pfau & Steinbach 2006)
Proposed grammaticalization path for points
(Pfau & Steinbach 2006)
In Nicaragua, within 30 years, the “simple” point has evolved:

- from gesture that picks out a real object
- to an abstract point at empty air
  - that refers to some non-present referent
  - at some non-present time
  - serving a particular linguistic role in the sentence (such as syntactic subject)
Language emergence follows the path of historical language change and grammaticalization in a shorter time span.

We propose that the same mechanisms underlie both kinds of language change.
Future analyses

• Began with **points** and compared their functions in the grammar
• Next: begin with **characters** and track how signers refer to them throughout the narrative
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