

# The Underpinnings of Meaning Change

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Morphemes are, at their most basic, pairings of a set of speech sounds and some meaning. Though these correspondences appear to be stable, many *functional/grammatical* morphemes, such as the marker for the Simple Present in English, do change their meanings over time. What once could signal that an event was occurring when the speaker was talking (e.g., *I dance* = ‘I am dancing’), can now only mean that an event occurs habitually (e.g., *I dance* = ‘I dance’).

One of the most interesting and robust empirical observations in the research on these topics is that some patterns of change, such as the aforementioned, are systematic and follow constrained trajectorial paths that repeat cyclically. Why does this systematicity arise? What are the linguistic, cognitive, and communicative forces that cause these changes to happen? How are these forces reflected in the way that speakers use specific linguistic constructions when they interact?

The goal of this course is to discuss possible explanations for these observations, using as empirical phenomena a well-attested body of systematic changes in the associations between linguistic forms and their functional meanings. The conditions are currently ripe to integrate and consolidate a set of innovative literature that has been accumulating at the intersections of previously disconnected traditions of linguistic research: formal semantics/pragmatics, grammaticalization theory, psycholinguistics, information theory, and language variation. The course will specifically explore two hypotheses: (a) that the constrained and trajectorial nature of semantic change derives from properties of the human cognitive system, and (b) that the actuation and implementation of particular, language-specific instances of such changes are rooted in the dynamics of rational communication.