

## **Degrammaticalization: Evidence from the Milyatin and Siya Gospels**

### ***Introduction***

This paper will examine several original manuscripts that show evidence of the degrammaticalization, defined and explored briefly below, of certain aspects of conditional mood morphology. We will first cover the prerequisite theoretical background needed to give a diachronic grammatical account as how the changes came about, as well as a brief literature review. We will mostly focus on the Milyatin and Siya Gospels, though we will draw support from additional sources where necessary, both liturgical and legal.

Grammaticalization is the change of a lexical item to a grammatical one, and a grammatical item to a more abstract grammatical one, originally coined by Meillet in 1912 (Kuryłowicz 1975), accompanied by its phonological and semantic weakening (Heine & Reh 1984). A tighter dictionary definition would be something like “the process of language change by which a word or morpheme is reduced to more of a grammeme than a lexeme, for example the reduction of a content word representing an object or action (a noun or verb) to a clitic”<sup>1</sup>.

Within syntactic theory, the reasons for this one-way universal tendency are threefold: firstly, languages have a head preference principle (change of XP to X<sup>0</sup>) in that they rather merge externally than internally (van Gelderen 2004); secondly, there is a strong tendency for upwards reanalysis, meaning that grammaticalization is a change “up the tree” (Roberts & Roussou 2003); and thirdly,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/grammaticalization>

there's an economy principle at play, dubbed Late Merge – Merge costs less than Move since Move implies Merge, and if one does Merge, better to do it as late and high in the structure as possible (van Gelderen 2008). These theoretical motivations are empirically backed by data from a large range of languages.

There is thus a “cline of grammaticality” that goes as follows: content item (semantically and lexically strongest, most concrete) > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional affix (>  $\emptyset$ ) (semantically and lexically weakest, most grammatical, most abstract)<sup>2</sup>. Degrammaticalization is the process in reverse, where a morpheme or grammeme is strengthened to become a content word (oftentimes without reaching it), or otherwise have more lexical content. Hence, degrammaticalization cases are those where some linguistic unit, usually a morpheme, goes up the cline of grammaticality. The most-cited example comes from the strengthening of the Old English genitive case marker *-es*, which eventually became a phrasal clitic *-’s*, as in *the man I live with’s girlfriend* (Lowe 2016). Such a construction would have only been possible in Old English through periphrasis or by stringing multiple nouns of the DP in the genitive case, as we see in Modern German and Icelandic.

### ***Brief literature review***

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was assumed that grammaticalization was unidirectional and irreversible (Lehmann 1982, Heine et al. 1991, Hopper & Traugott 1993, Haspelmath 1999, Kuteva 2001, etc.). However, it was slowly realized that the apparent unidirectionality of grammaticalization was only a statistical tendency (though a very strong one) and not an absolute one, hence some

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<sup>2</sup> This cline of grammaticality can also be further broken down into different hierarchy scales, such as functional, semantic, and formal, all of which have been variously used by the literature (Kiparsky 2005: 3–4).

researchers started to find evidence that it was reversible (Greenberg 1991, Campbell 1991, Ramat 1992, Haspelmath 2004, Traugott 2001, Norde 2009).

The diachronic development of Slavic languages have provided valuable insight, given the relative abundance of degrammaticalization phenomena (though the ratio of grammaticalization to degrammaticalization phenomena will always be skewed toward the former). In the past fifteen years, much has been written about the development of the Bulgarian definite article, where the ‘short-form’ or ‘oblique’ masculine *-a /ə/*, was reanalysed and recycled from an earlier genitive-accusative case ending (Mladenova 2009), though note that there are multiple accounts as to how this may have happened, many of which predate the modern understanding of degrammaticalization (Columbus (1977), Galton (1967), Georgiev (1955), Mayer (1988), Stölting (1970)). South Slavic languages have also experienced the creation of an independent noun meaning ‘thing’ (Willis 2007), *нешто*, from the OCS indefinite pronoun ‘something’ *нѣчто*, pre-Modern Russian *нѣчто*. Spoken colloquial Czech is also undergoing degrammaticalization of the negative form of *musí-t* (formerly strictly a modal ‘must’), which has come to mean ‘to dislike’, as in *Já vlastně podobně seriál-y celkově ne-musí-m* ‘these TV series, I actually don’t like them at all’ (Hansen 2016:268).

Another well-studied instance of degrammaticalization is the unstressed ‘weak’ pronouns in Old Russian which became stressed full pronouns (Zaliznjak 2004) as the erstwhile well-established pronominal clitic system in Old East Slavic was beginning to disappear. A similar phenomenon occurred in 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> century Old Polish (Jung & Migdalski 2021) and is perhaps occurring anew in Modern Macedonian (Bošković 2001: 254–264), in which the weak pronouns are gaining new scrambling possibilities (thus they are losing their clitic status).

Outside of Slavonic languages, we have other examples of debonding, a subtype of degrammaticalization, wherein a shift in status from bound to free morpheme occurs, hence a counterdirectional shift on the cline of grammaticality (Willis 2017), such as the English and Mainland Scandinavian infinitive markers, which are no longer necessarily proclitic to the verb (Fitzmaurice 2000) as *to intelligently but concisely articulate* and *att djärvt gå* ('to boldly go', Swedish); the Estonian question particle *es* and emphatic particle *ep* both going from bound morpheme to free morpheme (Campbell 1991); and the Saami abessive case suffix *-taga*, which later became a clitic *-taga*, and finally a free postposition *taga* meaning 'without' (Kiparsky 2012).

### ***The situation in OCS and subsequent developments***

Old Church Slavonic (OCS) had a fully inflected conditional mood of the verb *бѣти* 'to be'. The dual forms have been reconstructed.

Num.	Per.	OCS	Old Russian (1300 onwards Novgorod birchbark)	Old Ukrainian (1300)	Old Slovak (1400)	Modern Slovak (counterexample)
sing.	1.	бимь / бихь	быхь	бы / быхь	bych	by som
	2.	би	бы еси / бы	бы еси / бы	by	by si
	3.	би	бы / бь	бы	by	by
dual	1.	*бивѣ	-	-	-	-
	2.	*биста	-	-	-	-
	3.	*бисте	-	-	-	-
pl.	1.	бимь / бихомь	unattested	быхомь / быхмо	bychme	by sme
	2.	*бите / бисте	бы есте	бы / бы есте	byste	by ste
	3.	бж / биша	unattested	бы	by	by

Table 1 – Cross-linguistic comparison of cognate forms with the Slavonic branch.

The forms in the table above were used in the conditional-optative, which is a modal formation derived from the I-participle used in conjunction with the conditional forms of *бѣти* (Krause &

Slocum 2003). For example *мошти* (*могъ, можеш*) ‘be able’ yields *могли бимъ* ‘we would be able’; *быти* gives *быль, бимъ* ‘I would be, I would like to be’. The conditional tended to be used in counterfactual statements, as in *аште сѧ би не родилъ* ‘if he had not been born’ (Matthew 26:24 Marianus Codex, compare with Modern Russian *если бы он не родился*).

This conditional construction was also be used in purpose clauses, such as *слоугы оубо моѧ подвисалгы сѧ биша да не прѣданъ бимъ иудѣомъ* ‘then my servants would fight, that I not be handed over to the Jews’ (John 18:36 Marianus Codex) In the last clause, *бимъ* is found with the past passive participle *прѣданъ*, rather than a past active 1-participle, as we typically see in *аште не би быль съ зьлодѣи не бимъ прѣдали его тебѣ* (John 18:30, Marianus Codex). In clauses of a similar construction with the *да* particle, the conditional typically stood alone indicating a desire: *яроу да бы обрѣль лютѣша*<sup>3</sup> ‘oh, if he had found more cruel people!’ Perhaps a relic of a previously popular construction, we see more rarely a null form of *быти*, leaving only the participle: *яша и не [бж / биша] събрали събора* ‘if they had not been able to bring together the council’ (Lamanskii 1864).

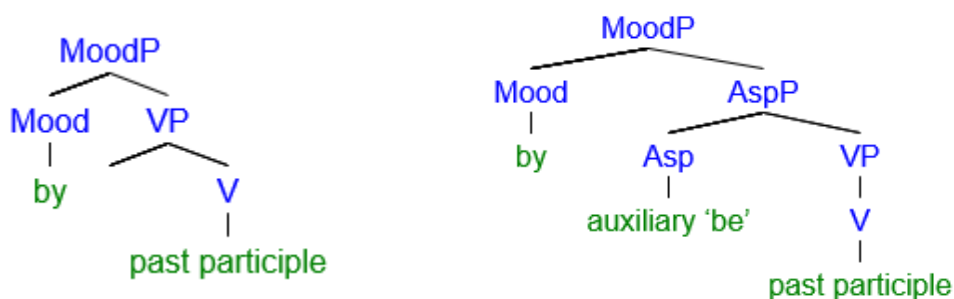
The expected second person plural form is *\*бите* (compare Proto-Slavic *\*byste*), although the attested forms are generated by analogy with the aorist, with a stronger tendency for this to be done in the plural number, such as in *аште ма бисте вѣдѣли и отца моего бисте вѣдѣли* (John 8:19 Marianus Codex). There was often confusion with the aorist in general, as sometimes the following forms were employed in a conditional role: singular *быхъ, бы, бы*; dual *быховѣ, быста, бысте*; and plural *быхомъ, бысте, быша*. We find a parallel for this kind of substitution (substituting an irrealis mood for a past indicative) in colloquial Modern English, where we often find constructions such as *if he were stronger* with the past indicative or simple past *if he was stronger*.

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3 See [https://histdict.uni-sofia.bg/dictionary/show/d\\_01998](https://histdict.uni-sofia.bg/dictionary/show/d_01998).

In Slovak, the story takes a different turn – Slovak is the only modern standard Slavic language to use a conditional particle and a past tense containing the auxiliary ‘be’ together in its current formation of the conditional (Willis 2008). Like in the Eastern Slavic languages, there is evidence of reanalysis of the conditional forms, but unlike what we see in the latter, the least inflected third person singular *by* perhaps serving as the basis (Krajčovič 1988:144, Stanisláv 1967:451), the formerly inflected forms became reanalyzed as the ‘be’ auxiliary. Note that Slovak, like many non-Slavic Western European languages, allows the use of auxiliary ‘be’ in its perfect tenses, which is likely another reason why the reanalysis (and subsequent degrammaticalization) that occurred in Eastern Slavic languages could not go through this route. Willis (2008) argues against morphological analogy, given that for it to have been analogical, Slovak would have needed some way to produce *by som* from *bych* based on verbal morphology that could produce a *-som* desinence, which it lacks.

During the course of Old Russian, the conditional continued to be formed with the l-participle as shown in the first simplified tree diagram below, and the so-called complex future II fell out of use by the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Pen’kova 2014, 2018). Though starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (or perhaps earlier according to Issatschenko 1983:355-356), with the disappearance of the aorist and forms of the subjunctive mood ceasing to be conjugated, and the reanalysis of the obsolete verbal inflection now being treated as an auxiliary (second tree diagram), we slowly see the degrammaticalizing process take place until we see the particle *бы* come to its modern form (Karbonovskaya 2006:19).



Soviet-era Russian sources have sometimes proposed that there was a transitional period wherein there were two co-existing бы entities – one a particle, and one as a conjugable verb (Bulakhovsky 1953), and that this unstable dual system would have also been found in along with the forms from which the subjunctive and the analytical forms of the future tense, which were usually used in the meaning of the conditional mood (with and without conditional conjunctions).

Modern diachronic syntacticians have posited that Old Russian underwent a loss of TP (Migdalski 2018), on account of second-position clitics (so-called “2P clitics”, as opposed to verb-adjacent clitics like in OCS). Due to this, pronominal clitics could not raise and adjoin to T<sup>0</sup> as heads but remained as phrases in argument positions (Migdalski & Jung 2015), hence they turned themselves into weak pronouns (thus going from a very deficient clitic with no morphology and no free distribution to gaining some limited movement). These clitics in Old Russian became increasingly unstable and they gradually disappeared entirely from written materials by the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Jung & Migdalski 2021). This loss of TP simultaneously caused a shift in how the grammar treated auxiliaries – hence the shift of the pronominal auxiliary from a verbal head to a subject pronoun. As an example, we can see in Pskov’s Judicial Charter, an Old Russian legal code written some time between 1397 and 1467, that the 1<sup>st</sup> person auxiliary form behaves like a nominative subject pronoun, а того ж **есми** не **знаю**, у кого купиль (Anonymous, 1984). Further syntactic investigation is required to know to what extent the loss of TP was a factor that caused a reanalysis and subsequent degrammaticalization of the conditional element.

## Textual evidence

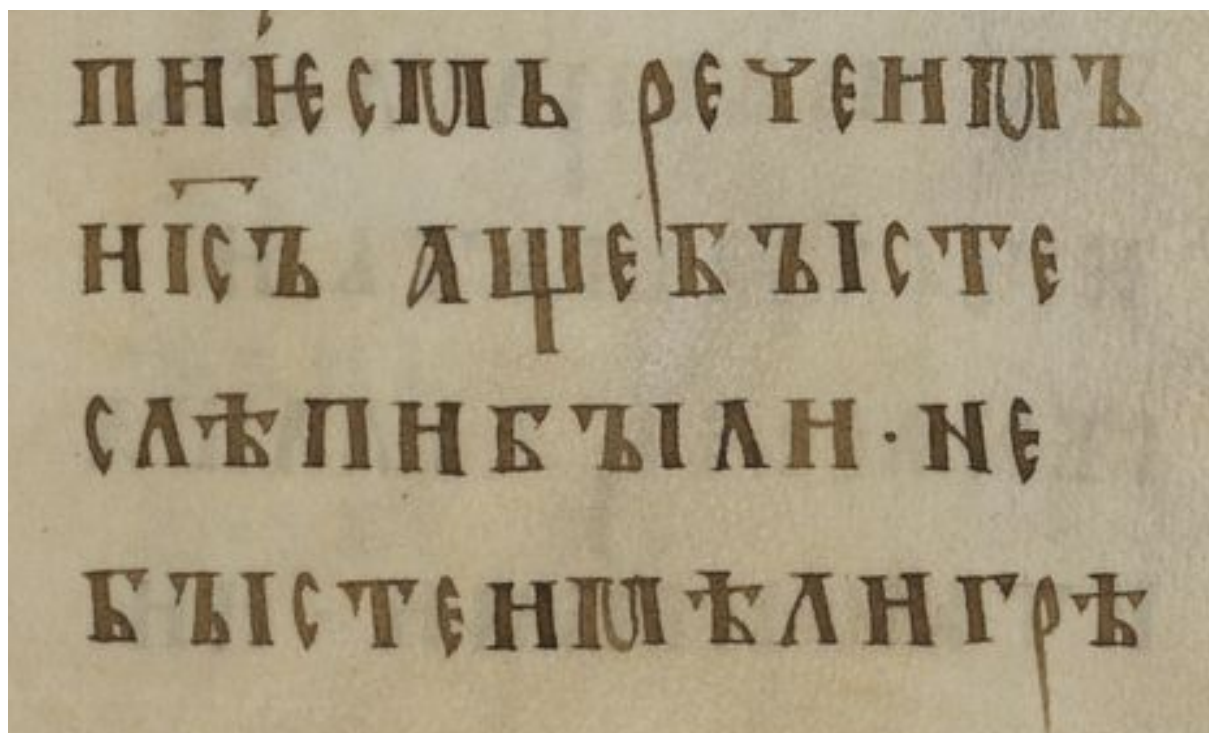


Figure 1 – Ostromir Gospel, folio 35<sup>4</sup>.

We can start with a familiar biblical passage, John 9:41, in which most recensions contain one conditional and some two (the King James Version, for example, only uses a single conditional<sup>5</sup>). The Ostromir Gospel, Folio 35, from the year 1056 or 1057, contains two conditionals which are still treated the same way as older OCS texts (except for the spelling **бyste** instead of the expected **бисте** as in the Marianus Codex, folio 356, may be interpreted as a weakening vowel): **рече имъ Иисусъ. аще бyste слѣпи были. не бyste имѣли грѣха.** Compared to the Marianus and Suprasliensis codices, the Ostromir Gospel contains more East Slavonic features, and this was before the archaizing period of the later centuries (Lunt 1987:157) which deliberately reintroduced features already lost, thus creating a starker diglossic situation.

4 Source: [http://expositions.nlr.ru/ex\\_manus/Ostromir\\_Gospel/Project/page\\_Manuscripts.php?izo=B42EB88E-8BD8-44A1-9754-EF88B39E7CAC](http://expositions.nlr.ru/ex_manus/Ostromir_Gospel/Project/page_Manuscripts.php?izo=B42EB88E-8BD8-44A1-9754-EF88B39E7CAC)

5 “Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.”



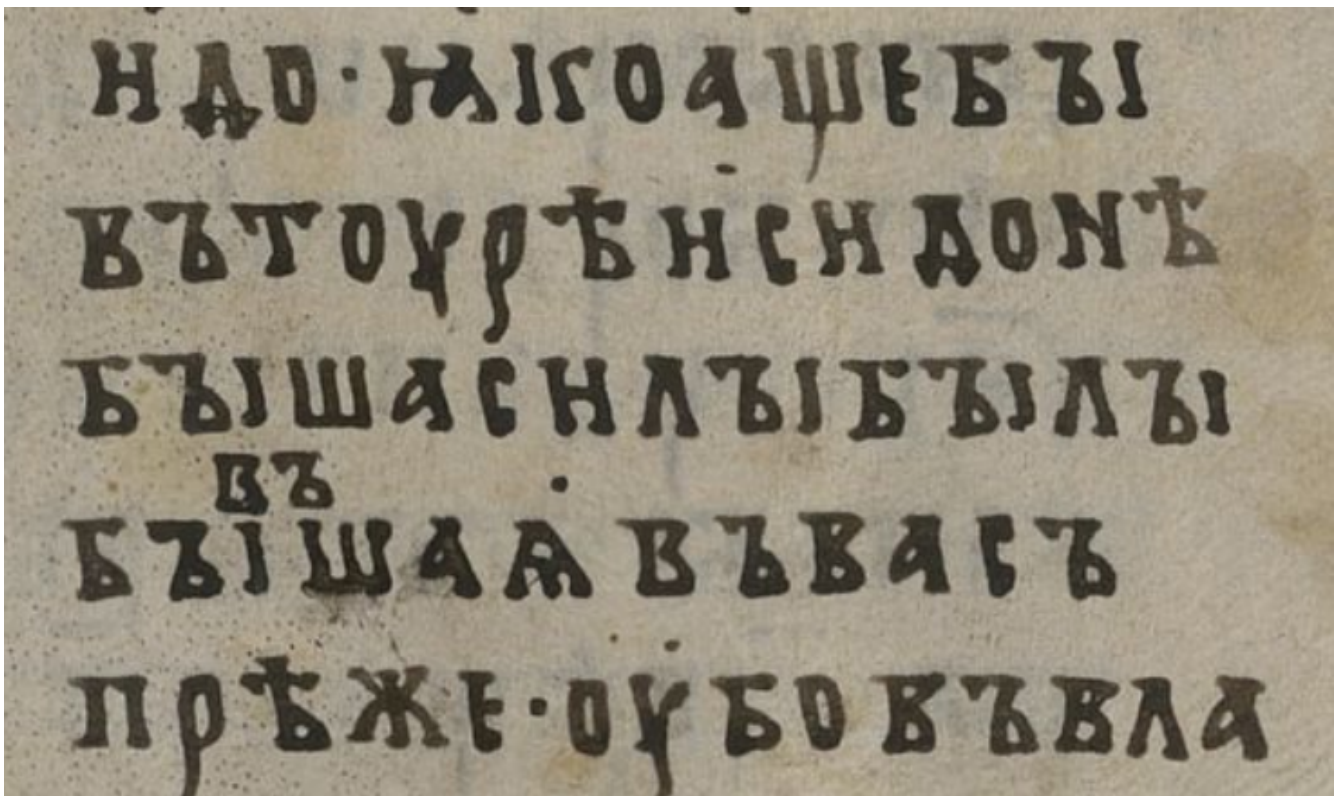


Figure 2 – Milyatin Gospel, folio 22b.

According to Sobolevsky (1907), the earliest written evidence of the old conditional system breaking down is found in the Milyatin Gospel<sup>6</sup> dating from 1215: *аще бы въ Тоурѣ и Сидонѣ быша силы былы* (Matthew 11:21, folio 22b, shown in Figure 2). However, I have thoroughly examined a digitized version of the manuscript and found many instances of correct agreement in the third person singular (to be expected since it is the least marked), and even correct agreement in the plural, as seen in Figure 3, *аще быхомъ были въ дни оцѣ нашихъ* (Matthew 23:30), which means that the two monks who wrote the manuscript must have been juggling at least two different contemporaneous grammatical patterns, with the non-agreement pattern being the colloquial and innovative one. The main scribe, a monk named Domka, was more experienced and wrote handsomely, with the letters

<sup>6</sup> Very little information exists in English – a digitized version exists in a Hungarian doctoral thesis, and a digitized version of the folios exists, provided by the electronic catalogue of the Электронная библиотека рукописей funded by the National Library of Russia, <http://nlr.ru/manuscripts/RA1527/elektronnyiy-katalog?prm=18557E87-7A11-4581-BEC5-3542A30E7087>

being even, without inclination, and without squishing words at the end of the lines, whereas the second monk's writing has considerably more corrections, is less even, and sometimes the corrected letters are inscribed above the line by Domka's hand (Mol'kov 2015), which can be seen in the penultimate line of Figure 2.

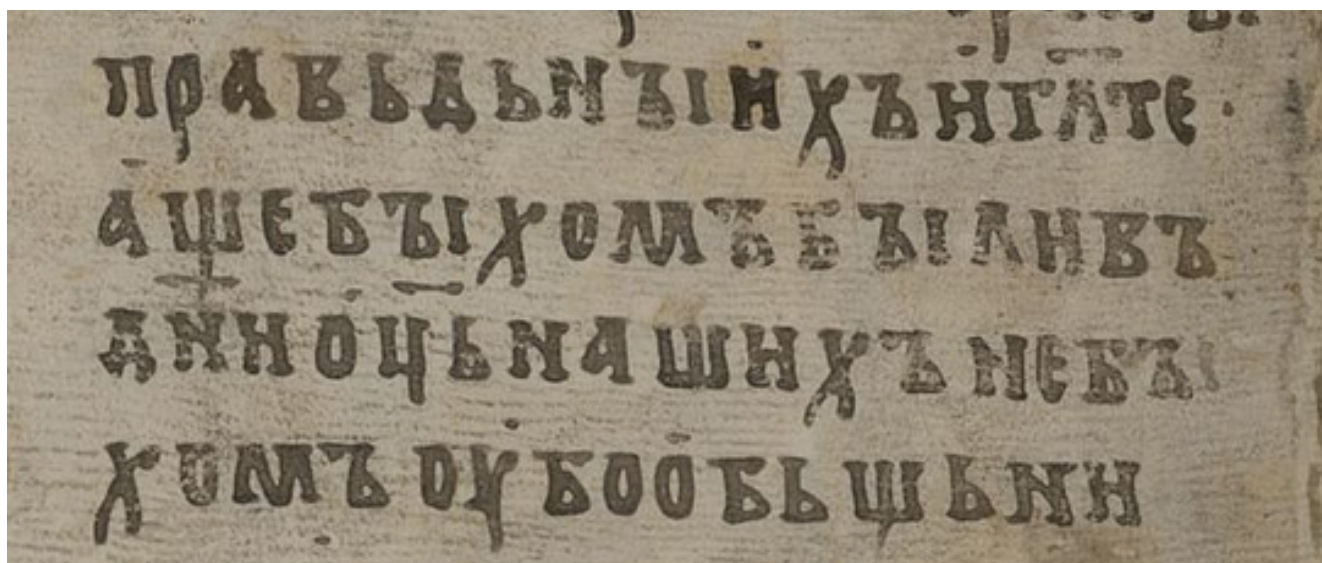


Figure 3 - Milyatin Gospel, folio 159c.

We now turn to the Siya Gospel, sometimes spelled Siysk or Siyskiy Gospel in English dates to 1339 (Stolyarova & Koroleva 2015), which got its name from the Siya Monastery of St. Antonius in Kholmogory (founded in 1520) where this particular manuscript ended up being stored. This Aprakos-type manuscript was intended for worship, albeit the manuscript itself contains more than five-hundred colorful illustrations on roughly 970 sheets. This manuscript does not appear to be fully digitized – though there is a partial digitization effort on social media<sup>7</sup>. Here we see a mix of agreement (see Figure 4 for a negative conditional) – according to Sobolevskiy (1907), folio 20 (no digitized version exist), which covers the same John 9.41 verse as before, contains a lack of agreement – **аще бы слепи были.**

<sup>7</sup> [https://vk.com/album-8523990\\_108928801](https://vk.com/album-8523990_108928801), which covers only 201 folios.

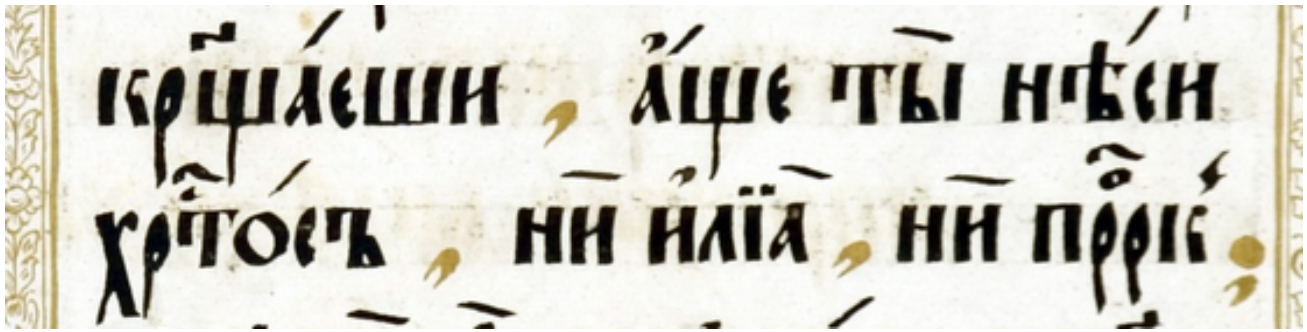


Figure 4 – Siya Gospel, folio 76b.

In the Siya Gospel, we still occasionally see a standalone *аще* particle to convey the conditional (though morphologically, the scribes used the present indicative tense), as in (John 12:47) *и аще кто оуслышитъ глаголы моѡ, и не вѣрѣет* ‘...and if anyone hears my words, and believe not...’.

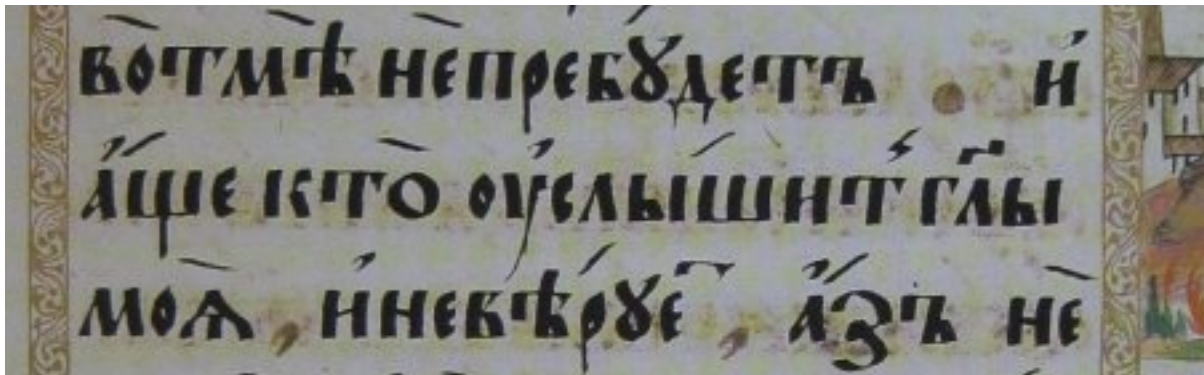


Figure 5 – Siya Gospel, folio 146.

This degrammaticalization process continues even more convincingly throughout the second half of the fourteenth century, represented by sentences (1) and (2), and the early fifteenth century example (3) from the Novgorod birch bark documents. Here, we see non-inflecting *by* with various spellings, along with the introduction of the auxiliary, thus completing the replacement of the older synthetic formation. Note the reversed position of the conditional particle in (3).

(1) ...что **бы** **юсь** осподине оуналь **юго**  
 that COND be.PRES.2SG lord take-away.PP.SG he.GEN  
 ‘You would take him away, lord...’ (Zaliznjak, 2004:143)

(2) ...чо **би** **есте** поухали во городо  
 that COND be.PRES.2PL go.PP.PL to city  
 ‘You would go into the city’ (Zaliznjak, 2004:143)

(3) нарадилъ **еси** **би** его  
 prepare.PP.SG be.PRES.2SG COND it.GEN  
 ‘You would arrange it.’ (Zaliznjak, 2004:641)

However, this situation was bound to be unstable, given that in Old East Slavonic, the auxiliary was increasingly omitted, especially outside the third person, from the twelfth century onwards (Kiparsky 1967: 226–7, Nørgård-Sørensen 1997: 4–5), and it was soon lost entirely by the end of the Old Russian period, and the past participle was reanalyzed as a simple past tense, as it is in the modern East Slavonic languages (Willis 2008). In the Pskov Chronicles, we see yet another variant of the *by* particle – this time, attached to the *a* (‘that’) complementizer, which appears to lose its conditional value (dated to 1486) and in a priestly text from the middle of the sixteenth century in sentence (5), we see a somewhat large nominal phrase embedded inside a *by... byli* construction.

(4) И много биша чоломъ псковичи **абы** мстили  
 and much ask.PAST.3PL Pskovians that-COND avenge.PP.PL  
 поганымъ Нѣмцомъ крове христьянскыя  
 heathen Germans blood Christian  
 ‘And the Pskovians asked many times for them to take revenge on the heathen Germans for Christian blood.’ (Nasonov 2017:61)

(5) Аще **бы** плотяне руце и нозе **были**, то подобаше бы им  
 If COND fleshy hand.PL and noses would.PP.PL, then befitting COND them  
 пригвождатся, но понеже плот(и)ю пригвоздися Христос бог наш  
 nailed but because flesh nail down Christ God our  
 ‘If there were fleshly hands and noses, then they would be nailed like them, but Christ our God  
 should not be nailed to the flesh.’ (cited in Kazakov 2020:225)

### *Conclusion*

The changes that we have described herein using manuscript evidence constitute a crosslinguistically rare instance of degrammaticalization. At least so far as the Eastern Slavic languages are concerned, forms of the conditional underwent a shift from an inflectional affix to a clitic/phrasal affix. This evolution can thus be said to be counterdirectional in our aforementioned cline of grammaticality in the sense that it results in the assignment of an inflectional affix (person-number and case suffix) to a less grammatical category where it is assigned greater morphosyntactic freedom. Another way of describing it would be to say that material from an obsolescent subsystem survived and was reinterpreted (Willis 2010), adapting to fit the properties of other members of the category to which it was reassigned.

However, as is to be expected when dealing with diachronic evidence of a diglossic nature, the changes occurred slowly, with numerous though sometimes short-lived variants along the way, and it took at least a few centuries for the newer colloquial forms to creep into the liturgical language.

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