

(Non)finiteness and Finiteness Shifts

Proposal for a workshop at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica

Europaea (SLE 2026), to be held in Osnabrück, 26–29 August 2026.

Convenors

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Meeting URL: <https://societaslinguistica.eu/sle2026/>

Linguistic Field(s): General Linguistics; Historical Linguistics; Morphology; Syntax; Text/Corpus Linguistics

Submission Deadline: 09-Nov-2025

The notion of finiteness involves a grouping of verb forms into two classes, finite versus nonfinite (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1999: 147). The term itself goes back to the Latin *finitus*, the perfective participle of the verb *finio*, ‘finish, limit’ (Nikolaeva 2007: 1), illustrating the traditional view that finite verb forms are ‘limited’ by categories such as person, number, tense or mood, etc., while nonfinite verb forms (e.g., infinitive, participles, gerunds) are not marked for these categories. The categories ‘limiting’ the nonfinite forms are not defined in terms of any individual universal morphological property but rather in terms of a cluster of properties (Cristofaro 2007, Bisang 2007). The formal distinction is mirrored by the functional one, so that only finite verb forms can be the (only) predicate of independent sentences, while the nonfinite verb forms are reserved for other syntactic functions, like attributes or adverbials (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1999: 147), and occur exclusively or predominantly in dependent contexts.

With regard to their morphology, ‘prototypical’ nonfinite verb forms vary quite a lot: some of them have a reduced set of verbal features, as compared to finite verb forms, and thus can be defined negatively; others have in addition acquired certain morphological features which are typical for other, nonverbal words. The traditional approaches to finiteness are rooted in the study of Indo-European languages, where finiteness is correlated with morphological distinctions and functional restrictions (the inability to be the only predicate of the independent clause). Through studies of non-Indo-European languages it has been observed that the purely inflectional approach to finiteness does not have a universal application. In a number of languages the relevant categories do not correlate and the forms classified as nonfinite may lack some categories but not others (Nikolaeva 2007: 1) or can be used as the only predicate of a main clause (Kalinina 2001d). Thus, cross-linguistically, the notion of finiteness has proven to be elusive and not necessarily universal (Bisang 2007: 116).

The relationship between finite and nonfinite verb forms can also be studied diachronically. There are nonfinite forms which have become nominalized or adjectivized to such an extent that they share a number of functions as well as the declension (where available) with nouns or

adjectives, essentially exhibiting a full categorial shift. On the other hand, we find deverbal nouns, such as the English gerund, originally a verbal noun (in Old English ending in -ung), which began to develop verbal properties in the Late Old English / Early Middle English (de Groot 2007). The verbal gerund is thus the result of diachronic verbalization of the nominal gerund, which existed long before its verbal counterpart (Tajima 1985: 111–113; Fischer 1992: 252, Fonteyn 2019).

We invite submissions dealing with finiteness shifts in a diachronic perspective, in particular including but not restricted to work focussing on:

- the direction of such shifts (does the form in question become more or less finite overtime); which types of shifts occur more frequently?
- the possibility to establish the degree of finiteness of a non-finite form in diachronic research: what tools can be used (such as establishing the external and internal syntax)
- the factors influencing finiteness shifts
- grammaticalisation patterns influencing finiteness and/or infiniteness marking
- the diachronic typology of finiteness/infiniteness marking

We welcome work applying different types of qualitative and quantitative methodology, as well as papers with a focus on theoretical argumentation.

We invite abstracts for 20-minute presentations (+ 10-minute discussion).

Please send anonymised abstracts of max. 300 words in PDF or Word format to Dominika Skrzypek and Eystein Dahl (astrapie@amu.edu.pl)

Call deadline: 9 November 2025

References:

- Bisang, W. 2007. Categories that make finiteness: discreteness from a functional perspective and some of its repercussions. In: Nikolaeva, I., 115-137.
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