

Reconstructing the Proto-Indo-European noun phrase

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In the endeavour of reconstructing prehistoric languages, syntax has received much less attention than phonology, morphology and the lexicon, and the noun phrase less attention than the clause. While there are good reasons for this, this presentation aims to contribute to redressing the imbalance. It discusses syntactic evidence from seven languages, in a generative framework, in order to attempt the cogent reconstruction of the syntax of the noun phrase in one particular well-known proto-language, Proto-Indo-European.

Specifically, it looks at the possible presence of obligatory functional items that make up the syntactic backbone of the nominal domain. This is a view of nominal syntax that has its roots in the DP hypothesis of Abney (1987). Such a generative understanding of syntax has also been well utilised previously for the task of syntactic reconstruction by Walkden (2014). The first step in this specific project is to examine the syntactic behaviour of seven documented early Indo-European languages in order to identify something of their underlying structure. The languages in question are Latin, Ancient Greek, Vedic Sanskrit, Old Church Slavonic, Old English, Old Norse and Old Irish. These have been chosen because they all ultimately descend from Proto-Indo-European, and because of their antiquity, on the assumption that older members of a language family preserve more of the parent grammar. The method is to analyse all the component constituents of the noun phrase in these languages one by one, reviewing the word-order and morphological behaviour of nouns, adjectives, genitives, numerals, determiners and quantifiers, all to propose a single underlying syntactic structure for each language from which the observed word order of the constituents arises. This results in seven syntactic structures for seven early Indo-European languages, which offer us the necessary substance for comparison on which the reconstruction of a proto-language depends.

Considered altogether, the evidence allows us to propose a Proto-Indo-European grammar with a multi-layered DP structure at the top of the noun phrase, in the manner of the Rizgian Split CP for the clause (Rizzi, 1997). This 'Split DP' has at least two component parts. There is even some evidence that the two served different functions, one associated with agreement and definiteness, the other with discourse information, although this precise set-up did not survive unchanged in all the subsequent branches of Indo-European. Finally, the presentation will

comment on the conspicuous similarities between the resulting reconstruction and existing proposals for the Proto-Indo-European clause, since this is of relevance for the longstanding idea that the noun phrase and the clause in attested 'living' languages share certain syntactic properties (cf. Szabolcsi 1981, 1987).

My presentation will show how this major exercise in language reconstruction combines the insights of two distinct fields (generative analysis and traditional philology) to help syntactic reconstruction catch up with the phonological and the lexical. Its conclusions, namely the proposal of specific functional categories in Proto-Indo-European, are a new contribution to the field, which in turn has consequences for the study of Indo-European syntax in general.

References

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