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Review: Historical Linguistics; Syntax: Ferraresi & Goldbach (2008)

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Message 1: Principles of Syntactic Reconstruction

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Subject: Principles of Syntactic Reconstruction



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EDITORS: Gisella Ferraresi & Maria Goldbach

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INTRODUCTION

This volume collects eight contributions that discuss the possibility of syntactic reconstruction, that is, tracing back by comparative analysis features of the syntax of an undocumented ancestor of extant daughter languages.

Syntactic reconstruction raises numerous important methodological issues which directly impinge on the way language change is described and understood. The debate concerning the feasibility of this line of inquiry has been revived, particularly in the past few years, with more diachronic research from formal syntactic and typological perspectives.

Ferraresi and Goldbach have brought together scholars approaching syntactic reconstruction from different theoretical perspectives, and drawing data from various language families. The resulting collection mirrors the challenges and uncertainties in the ongoing debate. Essays range from extremely skeptical to

moderately optimistic about the possibility of syntactic reconstruction, and consensus is reached on a few methodological points. The volume, with such heterogeneity, marks a milestone and will be of interest to historical linguists and those interested in models of linguistic variation.

DESCRIPTION

The volume opens with a foreword by Giuseppe Longobardi, stressing epistemological motivations for discussing syntactic reconstruction. He acknowledges that syntactic reconstruction would help emancipate historical syntax from its somehow ancillary status with respect to traditional historical linguistics and theoretical syntax. He describes the conceptual turns triggered by the development of the biolinguistic framework and the Principles & Parameters model of variation. Parameters, offering a universal finite set of discrete entities, are argued to represent suitable entities for comparison and reconstruction, differently from patterns or constructions, less abstract notions which may result from different parameter settings in different languages. If parametric values could be shown to be significantly persistent in time, they could represent suitable entities not only for comparison, but also for establishing genealogical kinship. Importantly, according to Longobardi retrieving phylogenetic relations and reconstructing protolanguages are not necessarily connected: it is possible to define probabilistically a statistically sufficient number of similarities which may hint to language kinship, without having to decide which similarities must be considered features of the protolanguage.

Like other contributors, Longobardi considers a restrictive theory of possible changes a prerequisite for syntactic reconstruction. He describes Inertia, first proposed by Keenan (1994), as 'the potentially most restrictive framework for a theory of grammatical change' (p. XV). Inertia is compared to the Neogrammarian principle of 'Ausnahmslosigkeit' (absence of exceptions) in sound change in being superficially defied by many disturbing factors, which can however be reconciled with the original, restrictive hypothesis by supplementary considerations, like borrowing, analogy, and competing 'laws' in phonology.

Ferraresi and Goldbach's 'Syntactic reconstruction: Methods and new insights' briefly reviews each chapter. It also surveys the main directions in syntactic reconstruction and tries to set priorities for future research. The editors argue that historical-comparative linguistics and (especially generative) diachronic syntax are still often two separate lines of inquiry, the latter not sharing some classic concerns of the former, such as the identification of genealogical relations and the reconstruction of protolanguages. Reconciling diachronic syntax with the Comparative Method is given great weight and is argued to motivate the discussion in the volume.

Ferraresi and Goldbach present the founding principles of the Comparative Method and the conditions for its successful application to internal and comparative reconstruction. They discuss some of its general shortcomings, such as the fact that it can prove the relatedness but not the non-relatedness of languages, and the difficulty of transposing the method, which has achieved outstanding results in reconstructing the phonology and to a lesser extent the morphology of protolanguages, to syntax. The most significant obstacle in applying the Comparative Method to syntax is the nature of the entities to be compared (comparanda), i.e. the difficulty of establishing precise correspondence sets such as the arbitrary sound-meaning pairings on which the Comparative Method is based in phonological reconstruction.

A further key difference with respect to the Comparative Method's traditional domain of inquiry is the fact that syntactic features alone have never represented a proof of kinship. That is, if syntactic reconstruction is to be undertaken, the relatedness of languages under observation must be proven independently, i.e. by applying the Comparative Method to the phonological component.

Ferraresi and Goldbach stress that any sound proposal for syntactic reconstruction must be couched within a coherent theoretical model of syntax and

of syntactic change. In this respect, they understand the Principles & Parameters model as central to understanding linguistic variation and investigating linguistic change, thanks in particular to the potential of parameters to subsume numerous structural differences under single, discrete points of variation. A clear understanding of the correlation among different superficial properties would allow for reconstruction, e.g. in cases where only a subset of supposedly connected properties were represented in historical documents.

In 'How much syntactic reconstruction is possible?', Acrisio Pires and Sarah G. Thomason reach the conclusion that reconstruction in syntax, while worth pursuing, is bound to yield less successful and reliable results than in phonology, especially given our current understanding of syntactic change.

Pires and Thomason claim that reconstruction should be explicitly concerned with the retrieval of parametric values (formal features of lexical items) and the restitution of models of mental grammars, not with descriptive generalizations about surface patterns. Nonetheless, they allow for reconstruction of surface forms in the parent language using surface patterns as comparanda (as e.g. with basic word order in the Uralic family), with the proviso that more than one grammar might be compatible with this kind of result.

Constraints on syntactic variation and change are discussed and argued to substantially overlap, with no specific restrictions applying to syntactic change (such as the Inertia principle). Contrary to Inertial theories, they also assume syntactic features to be directly influenced by processes of change. They discuss the notion of regularity in phonological and syntactic change: the fundamental difference between the two would be the blindness to all considerations of meaning and the minimal and easily detectable role of analogical processes in phonological change.

Pires and Thomason argue for moderate skepticism, showing how different interpretations are possible for the same scenario (e.g. animacy in Slavic, the Romance future) depending on certain basically arbitrary decisions, and they evaluate the usefulness of notions such as markedness and naturalness. They conclude that, in spite of limitations, some interesting and useful hypotheses of reconstruction are possible, especially for phenomena where syntactic variation overtly correlates with morphophonological distinctions.

In 'Reconstruction in syntax. Reconstruction of patterns', Alice Harris offers a survey of the advantages of the notion of 'pattern', which she has been defending most notably since Harris and Campbell (1995), in the study of syntactic change and syntactic reconstruction. A pattern is here defined as 'a repeated form that is paired with a consistent function or distribution' (p. 86). According to Harris, only patterns can be used in successful syntactic reconstruction, because patterns are the only entities actually represented in the data.

Patterns can be compared using sentences where all the lexical material can be proved to be cognate, but also when none of the lexical material is shared. Thus, for instance, it is possible to compare yes/no questions in a group of languages already independently known to be related (Kartvelian in Harris' example). Harris argues that in this case a common construction can be reconstructed for Proto-Kartvelian, and that, with the help of phonological comparison, even a specific functional element, the question particle *-a, can be attributed to the ancestor.

Other examples are case marking patterns (core uses of ergative, absolutive, dative) in the Lezgian languages, which would allow for both comparative and internal reconstruction; issues in case distribution (exceptional marking for the subjects of certain unergative verbs) in Kartvelian, which show the importance of studying relics -- such as lexically conditioned exceptions -- and dialectal data; gender-class agreement in Lezgian languages, which, by the combination of crosslinguistic comparison and the analysis of fossilized relics, suggests the reconstruction of a morphosyntactic pattern: the languages

in the family which do not productively use gender-class agreement markers on the verb do show morphological relics of this system (the invariant marker -b-), which allow for its reconstruction in the protolanguage.

Harris' perspective on the feasibility of syntactic reconstruction is, therefore, very positive. She attributes the strong skepticism encountered in the field to two main factors: the fact that most scholars have been working on Indo-European, encountering special problems due to the time depth of separation within the family, and the almost exclusive focus on word-order phenomena, which might be more difficult to reconstruct due to the high number of factors involved. She concludes by singling out, as particularly favorable environments for reconstruction, complex constructions where syntax is mirrored by morphology and phonological correspondence strengthens the comparison.

Ferdinand von Mengden's 'Reconstructing complex structures. A typological perspective' insightfully discusses the import for syntactic reconstruction of two lines of research, the study of implicational universals and grammaticalization theory. Both share the goal of discovering directional constraints to syntactic change by capitalizing on crosslinguistic regularities.

Von Mengden sets apart genetic classification and reconstruction as two different tasks. He discusses the limits of the Comparative Method when applied to syntax, which he attributes to two reasons: the nature of the compared entities -- complex structures resulting from the recursive combination of segments, i.e. syntagmatic relations, unlike the paradigmatic relations investigated in the reconstruction of phonemic inventories --, and their sensitivity to contact-induced change.

The diachronic application of implicational universals, on the other hand, would allow one to inferentially establish historical connections between syntactic features. Von Mengden criticizes past attempts in this direction for focusing too much on the supposed 'strive towards consistency' in language history, falsified by the widespread typological inconsistencies witnessed by all attested languages. He favors an approach that follows Hawkins' (1983) discussion of syntactic reconstruction, where typological consistency, reformulated as 'Cross-Categorical Harmony', is not considered sufficient for predicting change. Hawkins uses implicational universals to deduce diachronic statements on the typological plausibility of a reconstructed grammatical system and the relative chronology of innovations. Thus, for example, implicational word-order universals would predict that in a language characterized by noun-possessive and noun-adjective orders, like 'Late Common Germanic' (Hawkins 1983: 265), among the co-existing noun-genitive and genitive-noun orders, the latter must represent an older relic.

Studies on grammaticalization can help reconstruct grammatical systems, by finding in the attested morphology traces of previous complex analytic structures. Von Mengden discusses the risk of an extreme interpretation of grammaticalization theory, according to which every attested morpheme would be traced back to an analytic construction in the protolanguage, running in so doing against the commonly assumed Uniformitarian Principle. He also claims that a wider empirical coverage is needed to reach serious conclusions on crosslinguistic pathways. He concludes that, although any attempt to reconstruction will plausibly remain a hypothesis not subject to falsification, investigations on protolanguages may contribute to a better understanding of syntactic change.

Rosemarie Luehr presents, in 'Competitive Indo-European syntax', her conclusions on the feasibility of syntactic reconstruction, drawn from a wide comparative study conducted by combining the classic Comparative Method with the insights of formal syntax. In Luehr's opinion, syntactic reconstruction cannot be more than a 'Wahrscheinlichkeitsschaetzung' (Dressler 1971), a probability estimation which depends on a number of factors. It can help, nonetheless, to better understand language history, by determining the least common denominator among functionally equivalent alternatives in the daughter languages.

Luehr compares the different strategies for expressing sentential object clauses in Hittite, Vedic, Iranian, Greek, Latin, and Germanic (Old Saxon). She starts from the observation that the frequency of subordinate clauses introduced by a complementizer parallel to English 'that' in modern Indo-European languages clashes with the remarkable rarity of such a construction in older Indo-European varieties. In the languages under analysis, other functionally correspondent constructions ('that-clause competitors') are employed, arranged according to their degree of inflection (which I interpret as the number of functional categories involved): abstract deverbal nouns, infinitival constructions, structures with participles or predicative adjectives, and quotative constructions. Of these competitors, the only pattern common to all the languages investigated, and thus a potential candidate for reconstruction in a protolanguage, is the construction involving a participle or a predicative adjective, analyzed as a bare verb clause. Another construction common to all the languages examined is the explicative clause, i.e. an adjoined attributive clause introduced by a relative element and linked to a (nominal or pronominal) reference in the main clause. Luehr traces back to this construction the origin of the more modern 'that-clause', by means of a reanalysis process triggered in particular semantic contexts and followed by a pragmatic change responsible for the dropping of the reference element.

In 'Principles of syntactic reconstruction and morphology as paleosyntax' Irene Balles shows, by means of a case study from Indo-European, the pros and cons of the application to syntax of the Comparative Method and grammaticalization theory.

Starting from the observed unidirectionality from analytic to synthetic involved in grammaticalization, and capitalizing on Givon's (1971) proposal to treat 'today's morphology' as 'yesterday's syntax', she analyzes some secondary Indo-European synthetic verbal formations (Germanic dental preterite, Latin and Slavic imperfect) to see whether it is possible to trace them back to an analytic origin, as constructions formed from a nominal predicative element + copula, similar to what would be represented, according to her analysis, by the Old Indic *cvi*-construction. She concludes her analysis by casting serious doubts on the possibility of drawing such a parallel and, therefore, performing such a reconstruction, but she remains convinced of the fact that a substantially improved theory of change and an enriched empirical database could make this sort of enterprise more successful.

Claire Bower's 'Syntactic change and syntactic borrowing in generative grammar' deals with the role of language contact and syntactic borrowing and discusses strategies for recognizing borrowed constructions. The author criticizes the generative approach for being exceedingly 'synchronic', treating diachronic syntax simply as a branch of comparative syntax and accomplishing a phenetic rather than phylogenetic comparison. She attributes this lack of attention to the temporal dimension to the I-language approach, which would entail the assumption that 'there is no real continuity in grammar' (p. 190). Neglecting the E (external)-language dimension also leads to disregarding the role of language contact, which is instead argued to have pervasive effects on syntactic systems, and which represents an important factor in phonological reconstruction.

Bower discusses the desiderata of a theory of historical syntax, among which the understanding of the dynamics of change within communities and a typology of changes, explaining also differing change rates and relative stability of systems, are particularly relevant. She then discusses the role of borrowing in Inertial theories of syntax (borrowing with or without lexical transfer, the relative order of categorial reanalysis and structural shift), the nature of syntactic traits involved in borrowing, the conditions for the occurrence of borrowings in syntax, and the methods to single them out in research. The criteria are shown to be parallel to those traditionally adopted in phonological comparison and reconstruction: irregular correspondences (language-internal exceptions), 'exotic' constructions representing counterexamples to typological principles, features associated with borrowed lexical items, areal convergence, rapid shift.

EVALUATION

Let us now turn to some general issues, which are repeatedly dealt with from different theoretical perspectives across various essays.

A. I-LANGUAGE AND CHANGE

It has been often remarked -- and criticism on this line is one important point in Bower's paper -- that an I-language perspective on language change renders questions about linguistic genealogy and long-range relations among languages devoid of significance. If the only meaningful relation is the one established between the grammar(s) providing the primary data for acquisition and the new resulting grammar, then how can we find in this framework a place for notions such as the development of French from Latin?

Longobardi defends the ability of an I-language approach to capture historical relations, by capitalizing on the recursiveness of derivation, which renders the vague concept of E-language dispensable: besides the relation of immediate derivation (diachronic contiguity) holding between two I-languages, also relations between non-immediately contiguous I-languages are historically significant, when interpreted as recursive diachronic contiguity. The shift to I-language in generative historical syntax (Lightfoot 1979) had two main motivations: one was to comply with the insights of generative theories of syntax, which stressed the vagueness and the consequent scientific inapplicability of the traditional notion of 'language' (E-language), and the necessity to focus on a better definable object, the individual linguistic competence; the other, tightly connected reason was the criticism of long-range, teleological theories of language change, particularly influential in studies on syntactic reconstruction in the 1970s. Working on I-languages from a historical perspective requires a greater degree of idealization with respect to synchronic work. In fact, I can compare the language of Cicero and the language of Augustine for historical purposes without the actual possibility of demonstrating the chain of direct derivations taking from one I-grammar to the other. Any description and explanation of syntactic change using I-language requires additional evaluation of the wider sociolinguistic dimension. Nonetheless, it seems that the methodological advantages of focusing on a clearly defined object and task (describing the structure and transmission of mental grammars) are worthwhile.

B. COMPARANDA IN SYNTAX

The Comparative Method requires comparanda to share precise correspondences in form and meaning. How are these correspondences to be sought in syntactic data? Contributions discuss two approaches: one relies on parameters, and the other on patterns. The main criticism addressed to patterns is that they are shallow and often misleading, since e.g. corresponding linear orders in different languages might well result from completely different grammars (in this sense, the parallel Harris, p. 86, draws between her notion of pattern and Jackendoff's 1994 use of the term seems misplaced). Thus, in von Mengden's phrasing (p. 104), the use of patterns for syntactic reconstruction 'entails the risk of comparing analogues, whereas the Comparative Method requires the comparison of homologues'.

On the other hand, controversy arises also on the status of parameters: here, the possible advantage of abstractness in explaining co-variation of surface constructions is undermined by the paucity of such parameters thoroughly and convincingly argued for in the literature and, more in general, by the still insufficient amount of empirical evidence to substantiate the parametric research program (cf. Newmeyer 2005).

The parametric approach's validity will have to be further defended by empirical studies and research on the format of parametric variation (e.g. Baker 2001, Roberts and Roussou 2003, Gianollo, Guardiano and Longobardi 2008), including the investigation of possible schemata and the extent of implicational embedding, whose importance for diachronic investigation is particularly stressed by von Mengden. Clearly, despite such shortcomings, the application of parametric models to diachronic research is very promising for the field of syntactic reconstruction, for it potentially combines a principled and

fine-grained analysis of syntactic phenomena with an ambition to typological exhaustiveness.

C. KINSHIP AND RECONSTRUCTION

The classic Comparative Method, to date the only successful method for (phonological and morphological) reconstruction, is based on two fundamental characteristics (cf. Rankin 2003): the safety of comparanda and the regularity of sound change. With respect to the first point, the possibility of comparison itself, and of genealogical grouping -- eventually and optionally followed by reconstruction --, is guaranteed by the arbitrariness of the sound-meaning pairing, by virtue of which exact correspondences in form and meaning represent agreements beyond chance.

Since the same kind of arbitrariness is not found in syntactic data, the status of syntactic features as meaningful comparanda for genealogical purposes is a matter for discussion. (These papers disagree with respect to an optimistic attempt by Gianollo, Guardiano, and Longobardi 2004 -- now superseded by Longobardi and Guardiano 2009.) Several contributions point out the difficulty in distinguishing shared inheritance from areal diffusion or from typological correspondence with no genealogical import in syntactic data. But the general view represented by those positive about the feasibility of syntactic reconstruction is that the task is approachable even if syntactic data cannot disclose genealogical relations. That is, syntactic reconstruction would be possible on languages whose kinship is proved by means of other methods (basically, the Comparative Method applied to phonology). The following question arises: if -- as commonly assumed -- success in genealogical grouping does not necessarily entail reconstruction of a protolanguage, can we say, on the other hand, that reconstruction can be performed on data which are assumed not to carry a signal of genealogical relatedness? The answer proposed by several papers is only indirect: syntactic reconstruction is deemed to be more feasible when there is a close correspondence between syntactic features and their morphological exponents, i.e. elements which can be captured with the Comparative Method. This can also be connected to Hale's (1998: 15f.) observation that much of the difference in progress between our understanding of phonological and syntactic change has to do with the fact that functional heads are frequently phonologically null.

D. THEORIES OF SYNTACTIC CHANGE

Every paper in the collection points out that a theory of syntactic change is necessary to frame an analysis of reconstruction. In fact, regular sound change is the foundation of the Comparative Method (together with the safety of comparanda, as discussed). In the same way, the discovery of constraints on possible syntactic changes is the prerequisite for any successful attempt to syntactic reconstruction.

Ferraresi and Goldbach and von Mengden discuss implicational universals, which have been controversially interpreted by Lehmann (1974) and Vennemann (1974) as directing the evolution of languages towards typological consistency, but which can also be seen, as in Hawkins (1983), as a way to assess the logical/chronological order of changes. Another domain considered promising in most of the papers is grammaticalization, interpreted as a unidirectional and grammar-simplifying process in cases of ambiguity of analysis, as in Roberts and Roussou (2003).

Pires and Thomason forcefully argue that no constraints should be posited for syntactic change apart from those imposed on variation by the language faculty. If it is true that no constraint or hypothesis on change should be formulated that does not conform with the attested typological range of variation, it is also clear that we have to look for independent restrictions on the way grammars are transmitted, in order to explain why we do observe that change (even in syntax) is not random, and the amount of syntactic change witnessed in the history of languages is incomparable, as far as we can judge, to the range of a priori permitted variation. The notion of naturalness, which Pires and Thomason

discuss as a tentative hypothesis to be independently motivated, could be better understood by further pursuing, within a restrictive framework, research on markedness, cross-categorial harmony, drift, and least effort principles (see Roberts 2007 for an insightful perspective on these topics). A general research program addressing constraints on syntactic change has been proposed by Inertial theories, which I shortly comment below.

E. INERTIAL MODELS OF SYNTAX AND LANGUAGE CONTACT

Ideally, according to the original formulation of Inertia in Keenan (1994), no change should result apart from change caused by decay (essentially, phonological erosion) or by outside forces, i.e. interference (intrinsic to the heterogeneity of primary corpora). Now, it is immediately clear, in view of the actual historical data, that this formulation is only valid as a petition of principle, to set the direction for a restrictive theory of change. Even if absolute Inertia cannot be maintained, as Longobardi acknowledges here and in his (2001) paper, still the core insight of the hypothesis is that primitive changes from the inside are to be kept to a minimum in diachronic explanation. Thus, Longobardi (2001) relativizes Inertia to narrow syntax, and assumes an entirely deterministic mechanism of acquisition, missing convergence with the source I-language only in case of interference or of changes in other modules, i.e. at the interfaces with phonology and semantics.

Inertial hypotheses do not necessarily entail, as in the critical interpretation of Pires and Thomason (p. 47), that 'syntactic change (i.e., innovation) resulting from interference should in principle have significantly different structural properties from syntactic change that does not result from interference'. The dichotomy between change due to interference and change due to language-internal interface pressures only concerns the primitive cause of change, the 'actuation' problem; change is implicitly assumed to be parametric in both cases (since this is the only format of variation assumed by the theory). It is certainly matter for future research to investigate whether change by interference can in fact be shown to display peculiar characteristics with respect to the nature of the categories involved or its transmission within communities. What is sure is that, to date, we have no comprehensive evaluation of the role of language contact on syntax. Proper syntactic 'borrowing', in this respect, seems to offer quite a limited perspective: indirect influence on frequency of native constructions through language contact may be even more significant.

Importantly, scholars embracing some form of the Inertial hypothesis do not exclude language contact from their theory of change, as some criticism by Bowerman (p. 202) may lead one to think; on the contrary, interference is considered the most obvious primitive cause for change. What Inertia says, in fact, is that there is only one other source of syntactic change, namely change at the interfaces. It is true that research inspired by the Inertial hypothesis shifts its focus from the study of interference to the study of change at the interface, in order to provide empirical support to the main claim that narrow syntax is in itself inert. The result is that language contact may figure as a marginal topic in some generative diachronic literature. However, there is a body of generative research couched in a variationist framework (see Kroch 2001 and Pintzuk 2003 for surveys) that, starting from similar basic assumptions about (absence of) endogenous change, has been successful in explaining syntactic change by focusing on sociolinguistic dynamics within heterogeneous communities.

CONCLUSION

The volume comes out almost ten years after the workshop on syntactic reconstruction (held in Konstanz in 1999 on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Sprachwissenschaft), which gave rise to a lively debate, hosted by the Journal of Linguistics, between David Lightfoot (Lightfoot 2002a and b) and Alice Harris and Lyle Campbell (Campbell and Harris 2002). In the meanwhile, the explicit confrontation and dialogue between the various mainstreams in diachronic research has improved, also thanks to initiatives like the presented one coordinated by Ferraresi and Goldbach.

Hopefully, future research will substantially widen the empirical base for the discussion of theoretical and methodological stances that are still irreconcilable.

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