Syntactic Reconstruction

Is syntactic reconstruction possible?

In his 2002 article, David Lightfoot argues that syntax is a chaotic system without any rules to govern it, making reconstruction of prehistorical syntax impossible. He argues this because, in his opinion:

1. Syntactic change is not regular in the way sound-change is, but inherently chaotic.
2. Syntactic change happens because of radical reanalysis of structure during language acquisition. If this is the only way for this change to happen, the earlier structure cannot be possible to unearth, or the child would do so.
3. There is no way to use the comparative method of syntax, as correspondence sets would be difficult to form.

1. Is syntactic change regular (rule-governed and non-random)?

Comparing material from living dialects or from two different stages of one language indicates that there is regularity in syntactic change (Harris and Campbell 1995:326).

In the Nak’ra-Laxamula subdialect of Svan (a Caucasian language), subject case markers are used differently in specific cases. Variation in subject case making in Nak’ra-Laxamula only happens when:

− The finite verb is in the tense-aspect category referred to as “Series II”
− The verb belongs to the morphological Class 3

Furthermore, the nominative case is used with the verb form without the suffix -ε, while the narrative case (a case used in ergative formations) is used with verb forms with the suffix -ε.

The shift from nominative case to narrative case in this case happens in a specific environment, showing that there is regularity in syntactic change.

2. Is radical reanalysis the only means by which syntax changes?

Lightfoot argues that syntactic change through radical reanalysis is instantaneous. However, scholars such as Jean Atchison and Suzanne Romaine have argued that the material Lightfoot bases his
theory on, such as the origin of the English modals, are gradual in much the same way as a sound change spreading by lexical diffusion (see McMahon 1994:119-129).

Furthermore, this argument against syntactic reconstruction only holds up if reanalysis during a child's language acquisition is the time syntax changes. This is widely thought not to be the case.

3. How do we make correspondence sets for syntax?

In phonetic reconstruction, identifying correspondence sets to them analyse is straightforward:

Latin *ped-* : Greek *pod-* : Sanskrit *pad-* : English *foot*

Doing the same with syntax can seem a challenge.

Campbell and Harris 1995 and 2002 identifies syntactic patterns as a good alternative. The following sentences, given in the Kartvelian languages Mingrelian and Laz means “Zaza drowns Nodar”:

Mingrelian | zaza | oškviduans | nodar-s
---|---|---|---
| Žaza,NOM | he.drown.him | Nodar-DAT |

Laz | zaza-k | oškviduaps | nodari
---|---|---|---
| Žaza,NAR | he.drown.him | Nodar,Nom |

The sentences themselves do not have to be cognate, but the structure should be. For languages no longer spoken, texts that are often translated can be useful. The following examples (from Matthew 5.21), rendered as “Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time” in King James’ Bible, are from the original Greek and the Gothic translation:

Greek | hekoúsatē | hoti | errethē
---|---|---|---
heard[AOR]-you | CONJ | is-said[AOR.PASS].it |
taís | arkhaios | DEEPROM.DAT. ancestors.DAT |

Gothic | hausieduþ | þatei | qiþan
---|---|---|---
heard-[PRET]-you | CONJ | say.[PAST.PART.NOM.S.] |
þaim | airizam | DEM.PRON.DAT ancestors.DAT |

However, translated material has to be used with caution. Is Gothic *þaim airizam* in the dative because this is the case usually used in this context, or is it because the original Greek is dative?
What can we reconstruct?

Clackson 2007:159 identifies some prerequisites for reconstructing syntax:

- Early attested languages must provide sufficient evidence, and developments within branches or languages must have been excluded by previous comparative work.
- The attested forms of the construction in question must share one or more of: morphology, lexical particles, word-order agreement.
- Patterns in the daughter languages must be possible to explain through some recognised process of syntactic change (whether cross-linguistically or internally).

Without these being fulfilled, our reconstruction will not come far.

Some caveats

Sometimes several possible reconstructions present themselves, and it is difficult to ascertain which is most plausible. Clackson 2007:160-162 describe four possible reconstructions of an interrogative sentence, which are not mutually exclusive.

Typological indications are useful in reconstruction, especially when determining directionality of changes, but typology can also restrict our thinking. In terms of word-order, many of the early IE languages have very flexible word-order. Therefore, PIE may have something similar and may not necessarily fit into OV/VO patterns.

Syntax is not a finite system like that of phonetics. The reconstruction of syntax must be approached on its own terms, not on the terms of phonetic reconstruction.

Reconstruction has a tendency to flatten time-depth. If we talk about PIE shifting from SOV to SVO, what point are we talking about? The last point to which we can reconstruct may well be different for different aspects of the language.

Reading

Campbell, Lyle and Alice Harris (2002), “Syntactic reconstruction and demythologizing ‘Myths and the prehistory of grammars’” in Journal of Linguistics 38, pp. 599-618


Harris, Alice and Lyle Campbell (1995), Historical syntax in cross-linguistic perspective, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press


Miller, D. G. (1975), “Indo-European: VSO, SOV, SVO, or all three?” in Lingua 37, pp. 31-52