Reconstructing Syntax: Construction Grammar and the Comparative Method*

It has been categorically assumed within both synchronic and diachronic linguistics that oblique or non-nominative subjects are a modern phenomenon in the Indo-European languages where they are attested and that they have developed from objects, although the exact nature of this development remains both unexplored and unaccounted for. A more radical view was recently suggested in Eythórsson & Barðdal (2005) where it is argued that subject-like obliques already behaved syntactically as subjects in Old Germanic. This raises the question whether this syntactic peculiarity of these Germanic languages should be regarded as an archaism inherited from Proto-Indo-European or as an (independent) innovation in the Germanic languages. This in turn begs the question of what the typological status of the case marking and alignment system in Proto-Indo-European was, i.e. nominative–accusative, ergative–absolute or stative–active.

The theory of Construction Grammar, where all linguistic units, including syntactic units, are treated as a pairing of form and function, allows for the reconstruction of the syntax of Proto-Indo-European, which is definitely its least studied subfield. On a constructional account, there is no fundamental difference between sentences and words. This means that if words can be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, as form-function correspondences, on the basis of the comparative method, so can structures at the sentence level. Hence, the development of the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar actuates a reconstruction of case and argument structure constructions for the proto-language, as the comparative method within Indo-European studies has only been applied to argument structure constructions to a very limited degree. Specifically the assumption that syntactic structures in themselves carry meaning, with which semantically compatible verbs are mapped, entails that case and argument structure constructions cannot be studied in isolation from the verbs which instantiate them.

Such a syntactic comparison, carried out across the archaic and ancient Indo-European languages, must thus involve both the relevant case and argument structure constructions, as well as the predicates instantiating these constructions. The etymological development of the relevant lexemes must also be investigated in order to throw light on the origin of the case marking patterns. Crucially, however, if the argument structure of oblique-subject predicates can be shown to have existed in several of the earliest Indo-European languages, then the likelihood of this being an inherited feature from Proto-Indo-European increases significantly. Consequently, the case marking of oblique subjects must have its roots in the case marking and alignment patterns of corresponding structures in the proto-language. This is consistent with a stative–active, i.e. Fluid-S, alignment system where case marking is semantically motivated. Hence, any attempt to reconstruct a stage in which the oblique subject was an object may be groundless, as structures containing oblique subjects must perhaps be assumed as far back as Proto-Indo-European.


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