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Syntactic Reconstruction

Historical-comparative reconstruction has traditionally been focused on lexical, morphological and phonological comparisons, while syntactic reconstruction has either been systematically left unattended, regarded as fruitless or uninteresting, or even rebuked. The reason for this is that syntactic structures have been regarded as fundamentally different from, for instance, morphological structures, in several respects. That is, syntactic structures are larger and more complex units than morphological units. Semantically they have not been regarded on par with morphological units either, in that their meaning is regarded as the sum of the meaning of the lexical parts that instantiate them, and because of this semantic compositionality they have not been regarded as being arbitrary form–meaning correspondences like words. It has also been argued in the literature that syntactic structures are not inherited in the same way as the vocabulary, that there is no cognate material to compare when comparing sentences across daughter languages, there is no regularity of syntactic change, as opposed to the regularity of phonological change, and that there is no arbitrariness found in syntax, all of which render syntactic reconstruction fundamentally different from phonological reconstruction.

Recent work within historical-comparative syntax takes issue with this view, arguing that the concepts of “cognate status,” “arbitrariness” and “regularity” are non-problematic for syntactic reconstruction. This is so, first, because cognates are also found in syntax. Second, because the arbitrariness requirement is simply not needed in syntax, as it’s role is first and foremost to aid in deciding on genetic relatedness, which is usually not an issue when doing syntactic reconstruction. And, third, because a) the sound laws are only regular by definition, and b) the sound laws are basically stand-ins for a similarity metric when deciding upon cognate status.