

What is Diachronic Syntax a Theory of? Transcending ‘the physical body of the sentence’

Mark Hale
Concordia University, Montréal

In this talk I examine the reasons behind the apparent relative lack of progress in the reconstruction of Indo-European syntax, against the backdrop of a specific issue: the syntax of indefinites in Vedic Sanskrit. That these elements have particularly interesting syntax can be seen from a few typical examples drawn from the quite regularly SOV word order language of the Vedic prose texts:

- (1) *no hi mánasā dhyáyataḥ kás can(á) -ājānāti*
NEG since mind-INSTSG thinking-ACCPL NOMSG-NEGINDEF understands
‘because no one understands those thinking with their mind’ (ŚB(M) 4.6.7.5)
- (2) *téṣāṃ yády ádhiśrite ’gnihotré ’ntarēṇa kás cit saṃcáret*
of these if put on-LOC SG A.-LOC SG between NOMSG-INDEF would run about
‘if any one of these should run between at the Agnihotra placement’ (ŚB(M) 12.4.1.4)

That this issue is of interest for the proto-language itself can be seen from similar structures in the likewise regularly SOV Hittite:

- (3) *nu ZAG šekkantet ZI-it anda lē kuiški zāḥi*
and border-ACCSG knowing-INSTSG mind-INSTSG PV NEG NOMSG-INDEF strike
‘let no one deliberately attack (lit. strike) the border’ (KUB 26.12 ii 15-16)

Various aspects of these constructions in the earlier Vedic period (that of the mantra texts) will be presented, with a view to exploring the relationship between diachronic and synchronic explanation for the observed properties of the syntax of indefinites.

As is well known, the successful development and application of the Comparative Method in the area of Indo-European languages provided a fertile foundation for similar investigations into the historical grammar of other language families. In the area of syntax, however, Indo-European is widely seen as having failed to provide such a foundation; indeed, it is a widely held position that syntactic reconstruction, at least in cases of non-identity, is not possible (e.g., Lightfoot 2002, and much earlier).

I will argue that in those domains within which the syntax of the more archaic daughter languages is relatively well understood, reconstruction has been rather trivially achieved (even in the quite normal absence of functional identity). ‘Word order’ has *not* been one of those domains, for reasons the talk attempts to diagnose and, to the extent time permits, cure.