The historical development of the phrase

The phrase is a syntactic constituent intermediate between the word and the clause, which has a syntactic function in the structure of the sentence, and which can be identified by means of precise tests for syntactic constituents, such as coordination, word order, anaphora, answer fragments, clefting, etc. The constituency of a phrase (noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective phrase, and adverbial phrase) may present a remarkable variation across different languages, as well as in the syntax of the same language. That is, in a certain language, some syntactic tests may work better for some phrases than for others, or a certain syntactic test may allow to better identify a phrase in a language than in another. However, textbooks on syntax are usually not so interested in this variation, and mainly describe the phrase of English from a synchronic point of view (cf. van Valin 2001; Carnie 2010; Sportiche et al. 2014, etc.).

This paper, instead, discusses the phrase from a diachronic perspective. It has been observed that ancient Indo-European languages were less configurational than modern Indo-European languages, as they allowed a more flexible use of hyperbaton and of null anaphora, for example (cf. Schäufele 1990; Sigurđsson 1993; Devine & Stephens 1999; Luraghi 2010; Viti 2015: 249ff). Along these lines, we will argue that much of the synchronic variation of the phrase may be explained diachronically, and we shall show how the phrase may develop in time and bring about a gradual establishment of syntactic hierarchy and configurationality in Indo-European.

We will take into account materials drawn from different prose texts of the ancient Indo-European languages, which will be compared with corresponding phrases in later linguistic stages. Our corpora are especially represented by the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* for Vedic, Herodotus' *Histories* for Ancient Greek, and Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* for Latin. In these corpora, we will also show a diachronic change in the status of the components of a phrase, such as the head and the dependent, the former having the same syntactic category as the whole phrase. We will see that the diachronic establishment of the phrase is strongly conditioned by semantic properties such as animacy and specificity, as well as by pragmatic factors concerning topic, focus, contrast, etc. All this aim to be a contribution to the emerging field of historical syntax and to the study of the interdisciplinary connections between syntax and other components of grammar.

Literature

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