Towards a new paradigm in Historical Syntax

It has been said that morphology represents the "footprints of yesterday's syntax" (Weir, 1987). If we operate under the assumption that prefixes and suffixes have resulted from formerly independent syntactic entities that univerbated with other entities with which they co-occurred, then these morphemes preserve syntactic constituency and linear order. Morphology is perhaps our current best window into proto-language syntax; absent univerbation, the order of independent syntactic units can change, seemingly without a trace. In this paper, I propose a new method of syntactic reconstruction that examines covert traces of proto-syntax preserved in the syntactic combinatorics.

My proposed "pure syntactic reconstruction" begins with a conceptualization of syntactic categories based on the foundational assumptions of Categorial Grammar (CG) and Inferential-Realizational approaches to morphology. CGs represent a theoretical subset of phrase structure grammars that fundamentally assert a direct connection between syntax (γ), semantics (σ), and prosodic form (π). In Hybrid Type-Logical Categorial Grammar (HTLCG, a type of CG; Kubota & Levine, 2020), each lexical entry contains a triple $[\pi; \sigma; \gamma]$, and each member of the triple is intrinsically linked to the other. For instance, the English verb *run* is intransitive; its semantic functor has a single abstracted variable $\lambda x[run'(x)]$; likewise, the corresponding syntactic category encodes the location of the argument in the linear order $NP\backslash S$, an entity that returns a sentence when given an NP on its left. The syntactic category and the semantic functor cannot disagree in terms of valence. CGs are considered lexicalist because the syntactic combinatorics are stored in the lexicon along with prosody, semantics, social meaning, etc.

Inferential-Realization theories approach morphology as a series of paradigmatic relationships between fully inflected word forms, eschewing the traditional view of morphemes as discrete units of corresponding form and meaning. In other words, "morphology is the organizing system of the lexicon" (Karim, 2021, 122). It follows from these foundational assumptions that syntactic combinatorics are stored in the lexicon and organized in morphological paradigms. Note that this assertion is already necessary for derivational morphology (Karim, 2021) and inflectional periphrasis (Ackerman & Stump, 2004).

The implications for historical syntax are numerous: (1) Morphology: all aspects of analogical change that operate over paradigms are valid avenues for syntactic change (leveling, extension, etc.); (2) Syntax: a reanalysis of the functor argument relationship can alter the valence of a particular form; a typological analysis of these functors may reveal common clines of syntactic change; (3) Semantics: the shift from adjunct to argument involves a reanalysis of the category of functor and argument paving the way for semantic drift.

In this paper, I use Iranian and Indic data to illustrate examples of syntactic change rooted in analogy, syntactic ambiguity, and semantic drift. I focus on well-understood syntactic changes, namely the development of ergative subjects from instrumental and genitival agent phrases from Old Indic to Hindi (Butt & Deo, 2017) and the de-adpositional development of applicatives from early Kurdish to Soranî (Karim & Salehi, forthcoming), to showcase the way that traces of these changes are preserved in CG-style syntactic functors. I propose that this type of analysis could be a portal to a better understanding of, and a new paradigm in, diachronic syntax.

References

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