The Evolution of Dative Subjects from Proto-Germanic to the Earliest Germanic Daughters

A resurgence of optimism with regard to syntactic reconstruction has been spreading in the historical linguistic community during the last years (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2011, Willis 2011, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012a, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012b), resulting in a new approach to the reconstructability of grammar and syntax. The conceptualization of language within the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar has resulted in a new implementation of the Comparative Method, namely in the realm of syntax and grammar. Since Construction Grammar views larger and complex grammatical structures as form–meaning or form–function correspondences, exactly like words, the status of the grammar also becomes more lexicon-like, and as such grammar becomes a legitimate object of the Comparative Method. Given this new tool to reconstruct grammar and syntax, it is a timely enterprise to start comparing and reconstructing patterns that recur among the earliest attested daughters of a given language family, in order to try, test and eventually revise, this new methodology.

The focus of the present work is argument structure constructions where the subjectlike argument is not in the nominative case. In this paper we confine our comparison to predicates selecting for dative subject-like arguments and leave, for instance, the study of accusative subject predicates to a later stage. As a part of a larger Indo-European historical-comparative project, we have gathered primary data from the earliest Germanic languages, including Gothic, Old Norse-Icelandic, Old Swedish, Old and Middle English, Old and Middle High German, and Middle Dutch. We thus aim to present a near-exhaustive list of predicates selecting for dative subjects that are reconstructable for Proto-Germanic. We will reconstruct these as predicate-specific and even predicate-class-specific argument structure constructions, as being a part of a larger reconstruction of the grammar of Proto-Germanic. We will give an overview of the semantics of the construction, including the differences and similarities found across the branches. And, finally, we present a phylogenetic analysis taking into account the different Germanic subbranches, in order to substantiate a proposal of the evolution of the category of Dative Subjects Predicates in Germanic.

References