

The detection of word order freezing in old Indo-European languages Questions of unidirectionality

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All the earliest attested Indo-European languages (Hittite, Vedic, Greek and Latin) have a word order which is to some extent 'free', ie. the word order serves pragmatic and not syntactic purposes. However, there are clear differences between the languages: the verb has a much freer position in Greek than in the other languages, where it tends to come last in a sentence; and the object has a freer position in relation to the verb in Greek than in the other languages.

I survey these differences in my paper, with special focus on Greek and Vedic, whose configurational syntax is better described than the other languages. I then discuss whether we can decide which system is the oldest. Stricter configurational syntax can be seen as an encoding of syntactic dependency through word order, and its evolution can therefore be considered as a kind of grammaticalization, as Meillet did. While the change of OV to VO (or vice versa) is hardly a change from less grammatical to more grammatical, it is not unreasonable to claim that the change from a preverbal focus position (as has been proposed for example from Ancient Greek, cf. Dik 1995, Matić 2003) to a preverbal object position (as proposed for Vedic by Schäufele 1991) is a change to a more grammatical meaning. Hopper and Traugott's (2003:160) claim that "Word order changes are not unidirectional. Therefore, they should not be identified with grammaticalization in the narrowest sense" but this leaves unidirectionality vacuously true.

Following Heine and Kuteva (2007:317) I will argue that while changes of the type OV to VO are reversible, changes from focus position to object position are not. Changes of complex syntactic structures into pragmatic function markers do not disturb this picture. Therefore, the unidirectionality principle allows us to detect word order freezing in the old Indo-European languages. This means that discussions of whether PIE was VO or OV, or whether it had prepositions or postpositions, are futile, since word order must have been generally pragmatic in nature.

References

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