

Texts and trees

Much of the recent debate about the possibility of syntactic reconstruction (Ferraresi & Goldbach 2008, Barðdal & Eythórssón 2010, Walkden in press) assumes what might be called the worst-case scenario, that is to say a group of related languages and a desire to project back beyond the attested situations to the linguistic system or systems from which they are descended. This of course is what one would have to do when faced with a group of apparently cognate but previously unrecorded languages from say Amazonia or Papua New Guinea. But in many instances that is not the reality of the historical challenge we face. Rather what we have are patterns of partial attestation through texts and the need to integrate the evidence they provide with our understanding of the general processes of morphosyntactic change. However, what those who would seek to reconstruct say Proto-Germanic or Proto-Indo-European have in common with Amazonianists and Papuanists is that the systems they postulate antedate the attested material whether written or oral. A different set of issues arises when the textual evidence goes back to an earlier time so that the target of reconstruction lies between the earliest texts and the modern evidence, as is the case for those whose focus is the history of languages such as Greek, Chinese or many of the languages of modern India, both Indic and Dravidian.

In my paper I will consider perhaps the best studied such case to date, namely the history of Latin and the Romance languages. Indeed, it was a Romanist, W.D. Elcock, who wrote that ‘it is the special privilege of Romance philologists that they are not compelled to rely entirely upon reconstruction’ (1960: 33). However, like all privileges, this one also comes with a responsibility, namely to be alert not only to the complementarity of reconstructed and textual evidence but also to their potential conflicts. With this in mind, I will discuss the evidence provided from texts in relation to three issues, conveniently captured in three senses of the word ‘tree’, namely:

- a) the types and transmission of texts (trees as stemmata)
- b) the grouping of languages over time (family trees)
- c) the theoretical constructs applied to proto-stages (trees as syntactic models)

Elcock of course had in mind phonological and etymological reconstruction. Instead, I will examine aspects of Romance morphosyntax with a view to understanding how this change of domain affects the general argument and to drawing out some general methodological principles of wider applicability.

The particular dataset that I will draw on concerns the non-finite forms of the verb (what are traditionally labelled participles, gerunds, and infinitives) and I will investigate their place within the larger morphosyntactic system of the evolving languages. This dataset is of interest for a number of reasons. First, these forms have not been the focus of much attention from modern syntactic theory with the consequence that the traditional labels are often deployed unreflectingly, suggesting equivalences and differences which are belied by the historical tradition. I therefore pay particular attention to the theoretical characterisation of these items before investigating their historical profiles. Second, these items combine with a variety of auxiliary verbs to yield a wide range of periphrases through the mechanisms of grammaticalization, a process which in turn has been claimed to be particularly amenable to reconstruction (Vincent 1980, Lemaréchal 1997) because of its inherent directionality. Third, at the same time, in their independent non-periphrastic uses these forms are often restricted to very high register texts, which are not plausibly representative of the spoken language. If data from such texts are not excluded, or at least very carefully sifted, they risk creating a dangerous trap for reconstructionists since in these uses the daughter languages are in effect borrowing from their own mother language, a complication unknown in the context of studies say of the syntax of Germanic or Indo-European and one which is potentially fatal to the application of standard reconstructive techniques. Indeed, a more extreme issue here is whether what have been called ‘text languages’ can even be directly compared with ‘native speaker languages’ (Fleischman 2000).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 briefly reviews the Latin system of non-finite forms, while in section 2 I examine the reflexes of those forms in the modern Romance

languages. Section 3 considers the attestation of the Romance forms in relation to the textual tradition. In section 4 I contrast the attested system(s) with what we would be led to reconstruct if we worked back from the Romance data. Thus, core Romance constructions such as the perfect and the passive would be impossible without a past participle for the verb 'to be' yet Latin has no such formation. By contrast, the Latin so-called future active participle in *-urus* has a rich set of syntactic uses in Latin but has no Romance reflexes beyond adjectives like Italian *futuro* 'future' and *venturo* 'coming'. Between these two extremes lie a range of intermediate behaviours and distributions relating to different types of infinitival or control constructions, and to uses of what is variously termed the gerund, the *gerundio* or the *gérondif*.

Finally, in section 5 I briefly review two connected debates current within the field of contemporary Romance linguistics where the potential conflict between text and reconstruction are to the fore. The first of these concerns the goals and methods of the project for a new *Dictionnaire Étymologique Romane (DÉRom)* as presented by Buchi & Schweickard 2011a, b) and vigorously challenged by Varvaro (2012). For Buchi & Reinhardt (2012) the new dictionary achieves its goal 'en reconstruisant le signifiant, la catégorie grammaticale et le signifié des étymons des données romanes et en établissant, le cas échéant, la stratification interne des bases étymologiques dégagées'. The debate however has a somewhat anachronistic ring to it precisely because it is conducted solely in terms of traditional categories and constructs, and in particular does not stray far beyond the bounds imposed by the methods of phonological reconstruction.

A different kind of conservatism with respect to the lessons of modern syntactic theory for the historical enterprise, reconstruction included, is expressed by Sornicola (2011: 48-9) when she writes that while 'at the close of the nineteenth century, Schuchardt held that a Romanist should be a general linguist before addressing problems of historical linguistics', now a century later the work of Coseriu and Malkiel has shown 'the importance of being a Romanist before being a general linguist'. Our conclusion is rather that one needs to be both at the same time and that this applies not only when one works, so to speak, forwards in an attempt to characterise and explain the patterns and processes of change, but also when one moves backwards with the goal of reconstructing the earlier stages of a language or language family.

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