Syntactic reconstruction as lexical reconstruction: V2 in Proto-Germanic
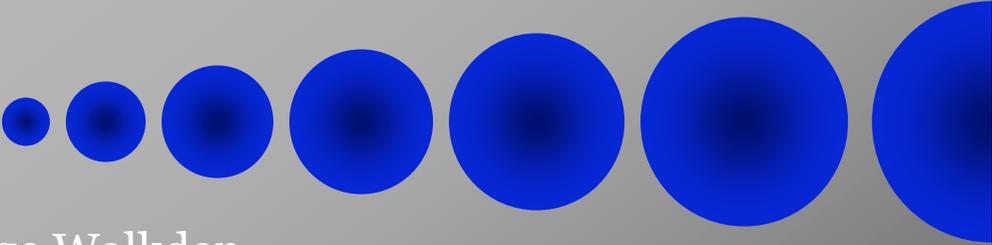
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Traditional reconstruction

- An example of comparative phonological reconstruction:

Old English	Old Saxon	Old High German	Old Norse	Gothic
wulf	*wulf, wolf*	*wolf*	*úlfr*	*wulfs*

Proto-Germanic

*wulfaz

'wolf.NOM'
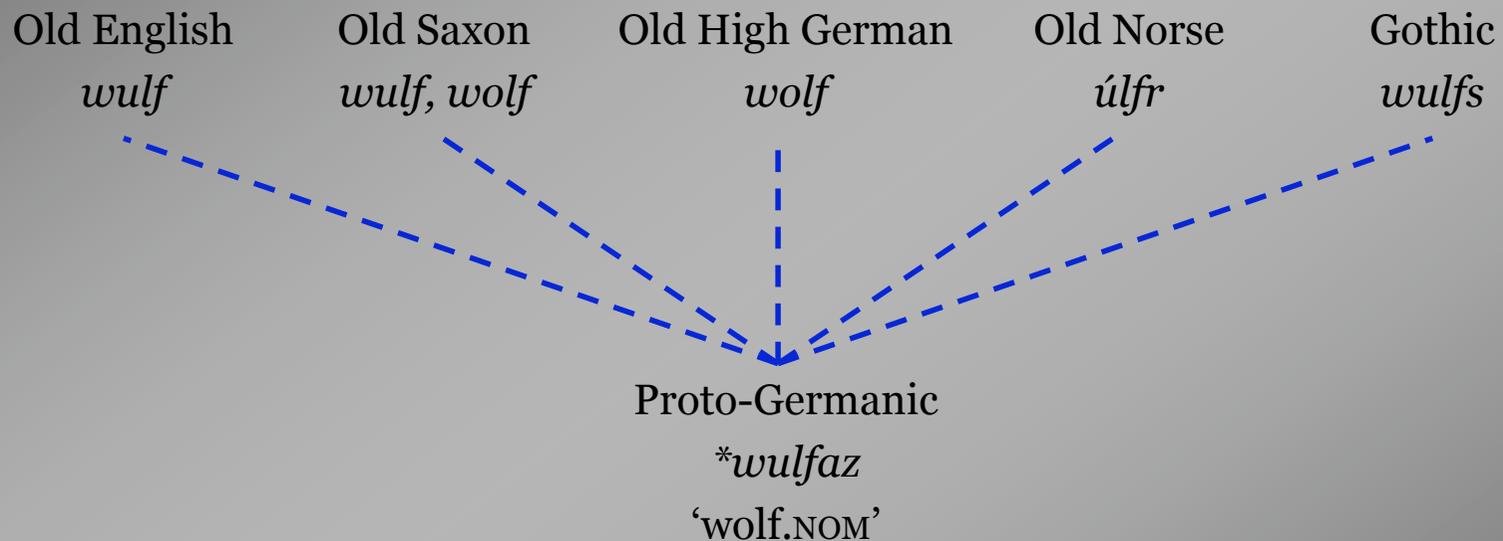
- Two main steps:
  1. Find correspondences
  2. Decide what to reconstruct as the proto-value

Reconstructing syntax

- Syntactic reconstruction in the past has either been extremely tentative...
  - Delbrück (1900: 83): based largely on Sanskrit, suggests that Proto-Indo-European was normally verb-final, but makes few other claims about the syntax of the protolanguage

- ...or based on false or dubious premises
  - Lehmann (1974): reconstruction of PIE as Subject-Object-Verb based on strong theory of typological consistency and change towards 'harmony'
  - Harris & Campbell (1995, ch. 12): reconstruction based on 'cognate sentences' - but sentences cannot really be cognate, in the sense of diachronic identity (cf. Mengden 2008: 103)

Reconstructing syntax

- Lightfoot (2002a,b) calls both steps of syntactic reconstruction into question:
  - Due to the nature of syntactic variation, it is impossible to establish correspondences in syntax (2002a: 119-121)
  - We do not have a 'rich theory of change' to help us decide what to reconstruct as proto-form (2002a: 126-7)

'If somebody thinks that they can reconstruct grammars more successfully and in more widespread fashion, let them tell us their methods and show us their results. Then we'll eat the pudding.' (2002b: 625)

Reconstructing syntax

- The 'Borer-Chomsky Conjecture' approach to syntactic variation (cf. Borer 1984):

  All parameters of variation are attributable to the features of particular items (e.g., the functional heads) in the lexicon. (Baker 2008: 353)

- If we adopt this approach for reconstruction purposes:
  – We know that lexical items are transmitted and can be cognate, so lexical items can be taken as the unit of correspondence for syntax
  – Isomorphism: phonological reconstruction reconstructs sounds in the context of lexical items; syntactic reconstruction reconstructs lexical items in the context of sentences

Reconstructing syntax

- How do we decide what form to reconstruct in syntax?

  - Synchronic typology: we shouldn't postulate a system that appears to violate absolute universals, e.g. a final complementiser in a VO language (cf. Dryer 1992: 102)

  - Directionality: *pace* Lightfoot, directionality does exist in syntactic change, in the form of grammaticalisation (lexical > grammatical, clitic > affix etc.). Exceptions exist to this general tendency, but these are unproblematic for reconstruction

  - Majority rule: All else being equal, adopt the hypothesis which posits the minimal number of diachronic changes to get the attested data (cf. Hale 2007: 240-2)

A case study: Proto-Germanic

- Word order in PGmc. was often considered to be free:

  'l'ordre des mots était souple et n'avait pas de valeur grammaticale' (Meillet 1917: 187)
  ('word order was flexible and had no grammatical value')

- More recently, the usual view has been that PGmc. was essentially OV (e.g. Hopper 1975: 38, Kiparsky 1995: 152)

A case study: Proto-Germanic

- But: Eythórsson (1995) has argued that this is an oversimplification, and that other positions of the finite verb, such as verb-initial or verb-second, are common or even categorical in certain environments in the early Germanic languages

- I looked at (and am still looking at!) the textual records of the early Germanic languages to ascertain where these orders can be found, and what can be postulated for the protolanguage on this basis
  - The following slides discuss (very sketchily) the situations in the individual early Germanic languages

Runic inscriptions

- Generally held to be OV:

  ek hlewagastiz holtijaz horna **tawido**

  I   Hlewagastiz Holtijaz horn **made**

  'I, Hlewagastiz Holtijaz, made this horn.'   (Golden Horn of Gallehus)

- But other examples exist:

  wate hali   hino horna

  wet stone this horn

  'Let the horn wet this stone!' (Strøm whetstone) (Eythórsson 1995: 183)

  – The above seems to be an imperative...

- V2 examples also exist

Old Norse

- Except in the very earliest texts, Old Norse is almost universally V2 in both main and subordinate clauses:

  Nú **skaltu** drekka blóð dýrsins

  now **shall**.2SG drink blood beast.DEF.GEN

  'Now you shall drink the beast's blood'

  (Hrólfs saga kraka, chapter 34, line 101)

- The exceptions are all V1: negated initial verbs, yes/no questions, imperatives, conditional clauses without complementiser, and a verb-initial pattern known as 'Narrative Inversion' (Eythórsson 1995: 249-50)

Gothic

- Kiparsky (1995: 162): V2 is absent from Gothic
- But V2 is found at least in direct *wh*-questions:

> hwas **ist** sa   sunus   mans?
> what **is** this son.NOM man.GEN
> 'Who is this Son of Man?'   (Gothic Bible, John 12: 34)

- Also V1 in imperatives:

> **wairþ** hrains
> **become** clean
> 'be cleansed'   (Gothic Bible, Matthew 8: 3)

Gothic

- Narrative Inversion, seemingly similar to that in Old Norse, can be found:

  > **Usgeisnodedun** þan allai þai hausjandans is ana frodein
  > **were.amazed** then all they hearers his in wisdom
  > 'Everyone who heard him was amazed at his wisdom'
  > (Gothic Bible, Luke 2:47)

- V2 sometimes found in declaratives (both main and subordinate)
- It is unclear whether there was an asymmetry between main and subordinate clauses (as in German)

Old English

- The position of the verb in Old English has received vast amounts of attention in the literature

- An all-too-brief overview:
  - 95% of ordinary main clauses are V2 or, especially with pronominal subjects, V3:

    Ēasteweard hit **mæg** bīon syxtīg mīla brād

    eastward   it **may** be sixty miles broad

    (Orosius, Voyage of Ohthere)

  - Main clauses may also be verb-final
  - 65% of subordinate clauses are verb-final (Fischer *et al.* 2000)

Old English

- Invariably V1 in imperatives and direct questions

- V1 Narrative Inversion also found

- Invariably V2 after initial negatives and in *wh*-questions:

  Hwǣr **sindon** seledrēamas?

  where **are**   hall.delights?

  'What has become of revelry in the halls?'   (The Wanderer, line 93)

Old High German

- In OHG, V2 is the norm in matrix declarative clauses (Axel 2007: 63):

  Chindh **uuirdit** uns chiboran

  child **becomes** us.DAT born

  'A child is born to us'   (Isidor translation, line 93)

- Direct questions and imperatives are V1
- V1 Narrative Inversion is found
- *Wh*-questions are V2
- V3 orders (as in OE) are found, but only rarely and only in older texts

Summary

- Very rough overview of verb positions in the early Germanic languages:

	Direct questions	*wh-* questions	Neg-initial	Imper-atives	Narrative Inversion	XP-fronting	Matrix declar.	Subord. clauses
Runic	?	?	?	V1	?	V2	Final	?
ON	V1	V2	V1/2	V1	V1	V2	V2	V2
Gothic	V1	V2	V1/2	V1	V1	V2?	Final?	Final
OE	V1	V2	V1/2	V1	V1	V2	V2…	Final…
OHG	V1	V2	V1/2	V1	V1	V2	V2	Final

- More V1/V2 - and less verb-final - than generally thought

Hypotheses

- Direct questions and imperatives were V1 in Proto-Germanic

- The pattern of V1 Narrative Inversion existed in PGmc.

- *Wh*-questions were V2 in PGmc.

- Negated verbs (with preverbal negator) were clause-initial in PGmc.

- More tentatively: there existed a V2 topicalisation construction in PGmc. of the form XP-V-...

Hypotheses

- 'Ordinary' main clauses in PGmc.: verb-final…?

- Even more tentatively: the development of generalised V2 was a late Northwest Germanic change (affecting all the Germanic languages except Gothic)

⇐ The current state of my research

The future state of my research ⇒
(hopefully)

Work still to be done

- Look at Old Saxon, a much under-studied language, in detail
- Look at Beowulf, which apparently has non-V1 imperatives
- Look at Gothic in far more detail
- Differentiate contexts in a more fine-grained way, e.g. include social/stylistic factors to a greater extent?
- And much, much more…

Thank you for listening!

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