

# Reconstructing Syntax: Construction Grammar and the Comparative Method\*

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## ABSTRACT

It has been argued in the literature that syntactic reconstruction is problematic because of differences between syntax, on the one hand, and phonology, morphology and the lexicon, on the other (Jeffers, 1976). This may be a consequence of the fact that a) the neogrammarians had not worked as much on syntax as they had on other areas of grammar, and hence that their lacking knowledge of syntax may have been a hampering factor, b) that within modern syntactic theory, syntactic structures are considered as fundamentally different from words and morphemes, i.e. as not being form–function correspondences, and hence syntactic structures have not been considered a legitimate object of the Comparative Method. In other words, as the Comparative Method is based on form–function correspondences, syntactic structures have been excluded from reconstruction.

The form–function requirement of the Comparative Method means that similarity in either form or function is not enough to establish correspondence sets as a basis for reconstruction. However, as Construction Grammar takes syntactic structures, like argument structure constructions, including case frames, to be form–function correspondences, Construction Grammar allows for the reconstruction of predicates, which take non-canonical case marked arguments, and their argument structure constructions.

The theoretical inventory of Construction Grammar, i.e. the *Constructicon*, where all form–function correspondences are stored, provides the correspondence sets for the individual Indo-European languages, on which basis proto-constructions for each language branch can be reconstructed. These proto-constructions, in turn, make up a part of the constructional inventory of the *constructicons* of the proto-language of each language branch. These proto-constructicons for each language branch again provide the correspondence sets necessary for reconstructing a constructicon for a proto-language for the whole language family. In this sense, Construction Grammar allows for not only the reconstruction of proto-constructions but also for the reconstruction of the grammar of proto-stages and proto-languages, as the *constructicon* is the grammar in the constructional framework.

The present paper lays out the argument presented above that the tools of Construction Grammar make it possible to reconstruct syntactic structures for protolanguages, as Construction Grammar assumes that syntactic structures are form–function correspondences like words. A first attempt at a reconstruction will be carried out for the Dative subject construction in Proto-Germanic, based on the form and function of the construction, using sign-based formalism.

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\* Joint work with Thórhallur Eythórsson, University of Iceland.