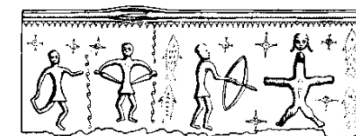
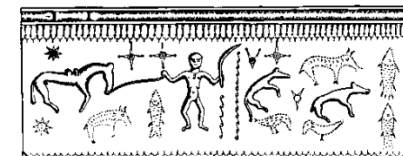
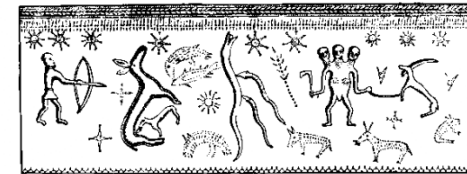
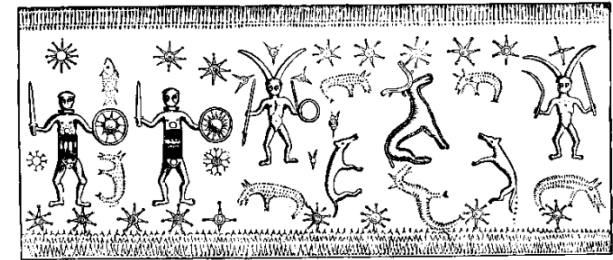


Reconstructing the syntax of protolanguages: can syntactic theory inform philology?

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Outline of the talk

- The syntactic reconstruction debate
- A methodology for reconstructing syntax
- Case study: Old Norse *-sk*
- Case study: West Germanic topicalisation

Background to the debate (1)

- Comparative phonological reconstruction has had a long and successful history.
- However, *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

Background to the debate (2)

- ...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’. Circular argumentation
 - Harris & Campbell (1995, ch. 12): reconstruction based on ‘cognate sentences’ - but sentences cannot really be cognate, in the sense of diachronic identity

Background to the debate (3)

- Two main steps in reconstruction:
 1. Find correspondences
 2. Decide what to reconstruct as the proto-value
- Lightfoot (2002) calls both steps of syntactic reconstruction into question:
 - Due to the nature of syntactic variation, it is impossible to establish correspondences in syntax (2002: 119-121)
 - We do not have a ‘rich theory of change’ to help us decide what to reconstruct as proto-form (2002: 126-7)

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Finding correspondences (1)

- Phonological theory views variation across items in phonological inventories as variation in features.

$$/t/ = \begin{bmatrix} +coronal \\ -voice \\ -cont \\ +ant \\ +dist \end{bmatrix}$$

Finding correspondences (2)

- 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)

$$T = \begin{bmatrix} \text{tense:past} \\ u\text{Case:nom} \\ u\text{Num:} \\ u\text{Pers:} \end{bmatrix}$$

Finding correspondences (3)

- 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 through their context of appearance in lexical items
 - syntactic reconstruction reconstructs lexical items through their context of appearance in sentences

Finding correspondences (4)

- **Problem:** Sounds are transmitted as items stored in an inventory, as are lexical items.
- But sentences are not. So we don't have a 'fossil record' of changes in syntax as we do for phonological change.
- We can, however, look for distributional patterns of individual lexical items: if they are in complementary distribution, they may be derived via lexical split.

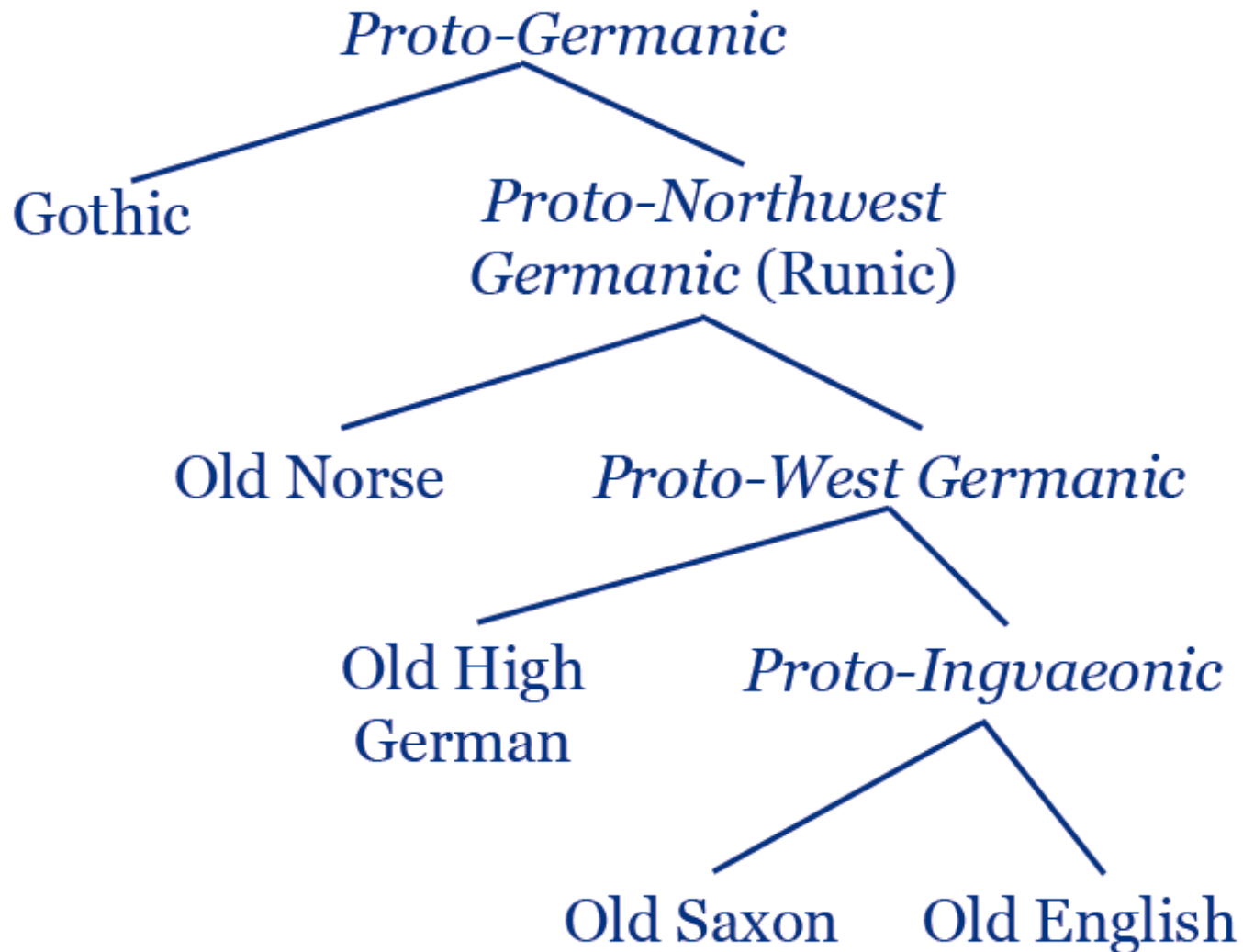
Reconstructing protoforms

- How do we decide what form to reconstruct?
 - **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 morphosyntactic change, in the form of grammaticalisation (e.g. word > clitic > affix).
 - **Economy**: All else being equal, adopt the hypothesis which posits the minimal number of diachronic changes to get the attested data.

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The early Germanic languages



Old Norse *-sk* (1)

- In Old Norse texts a ‘middle voice’ verbal ending can be found, with reflexive, reciprocal and passive functions:

	Active	Middle
Sg. 1	<i>kalla</i>	<i>kollumk</i>
2	<i>kallar</i>	<i>kallask</i>
3	<i>kallar</i>	<i>kallask</i>

(from *kalla* ‘to call’)

Old Norse *-sk* (2)

- No such ending exists in other early Germanic languages.
- However, the other languages do have a reflexive pronoun with a phonologically similar shape, e.g.:
 - Gothic *sik*
 - Old High German *sih*
 - Old Norse *sik*(3rd person singular forms)

Old Norse *-sk* (3)

- On the basis of phonological, semantic and distributional criteria we can posit that the Old Norse *-sk* ending is cognate with this pronoun.
- Since both items were retained, in formal terms we are dealing with a ‘lexical split’ analogous to the phonemic split often found in sound change.
- The syntactic context for the reanalysis as verbal ending is simply string-adjacency to the finite verb.

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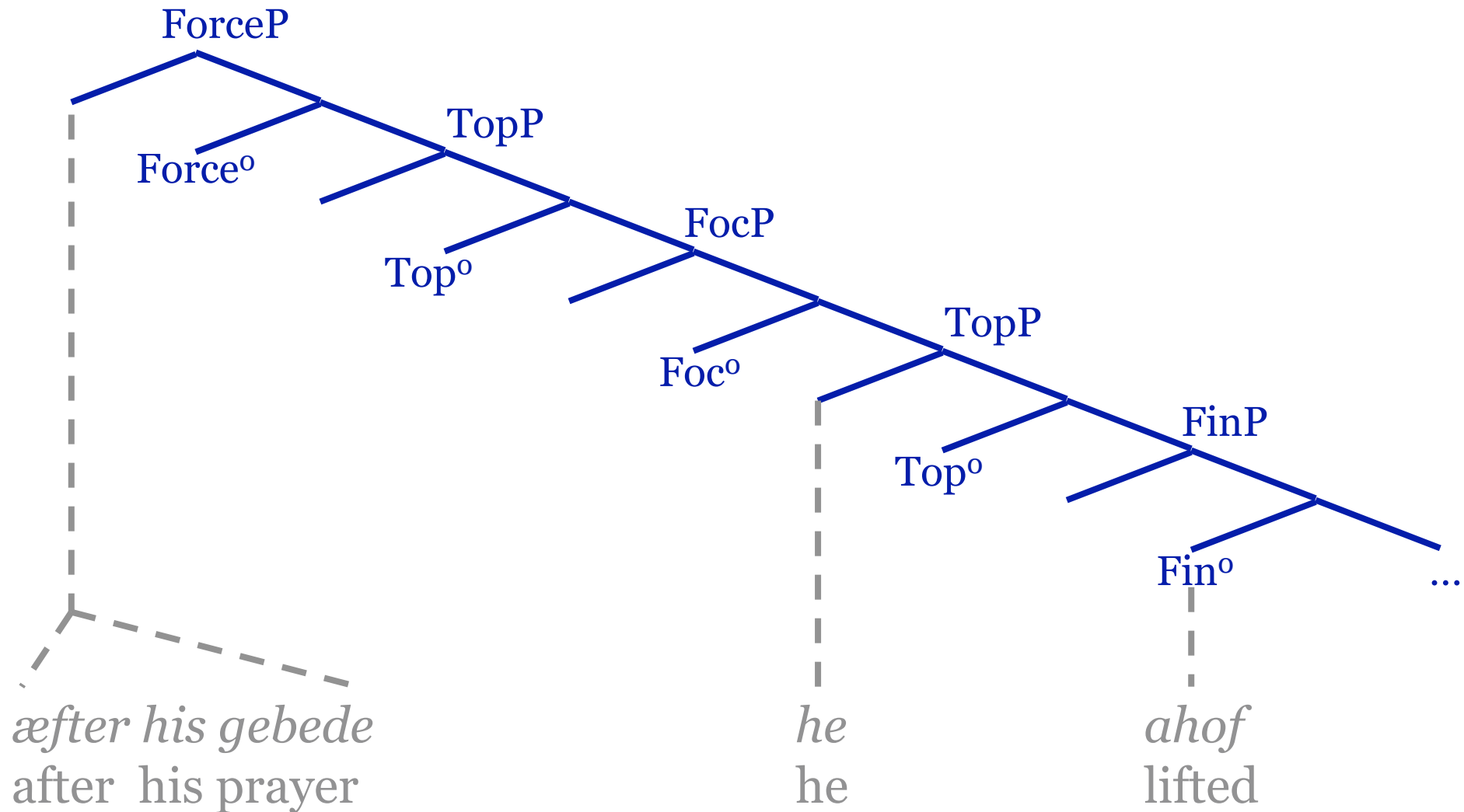
WGmc topicalisation (1)

- The older West Germanic languages are predominantly V2 in root clauses.
- But V3 is also found in Old English (OE):
æfter his gebede he ahof þæt cild up (AHTTh II, 28)
after his prayer he lifted the child up
- And in early Old High German (OHG):
bidhiu ih hepfu mina hant ubar sie (Isidor, 220)
therefore I raise my hand above them

WGmc topicalisation (2)

- In all such cases of V₃, the second constituent seems to be a definite DP or a pronoun, i.e. **discourse-given**.
- Walkden (2009) analyses this variation in terms of a split CP (Rizzi 1997), with verb-movement to Fin⁰ and the second constituent inhabiting SpecTopP.

WGmc topicalisation (3)

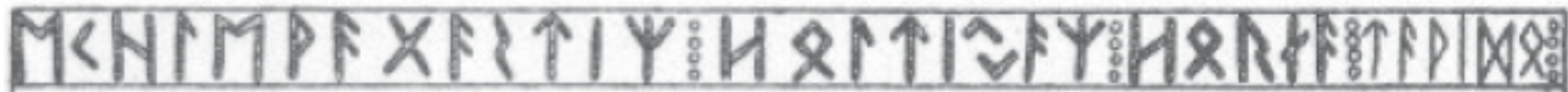


WGmc topicalisation (4)

- Old Saxon (OS) does not exhibit this V3 pattern:
*Thar fundun **sea** enna godan man* (Heliand 463)
there found they a good man
- V3 must therefore either have been lost in OS or innovated in OHG and OE.
- But we know that OHG and OE cannot have undergone a shared innovation without OS.
- The alternative - parallel innovation - fails on the criterion of economy.
- We should therefore reconstruct the availability of V3 for Proto-West Germanic.

More speculatively...

- The SOV runic inscription on the Golden Horn of Gallehus is classically analysed as evidence for lack of verb-movement in Proto-Germanic (Eythórsson 1995: 181):



ek hlewagastiz holtijaz horna tawido
I Hlewagastiz Holtijaz horn made

- But might it not in fact be a case of V₃ with the horn in SpecTopP and verb-movement to Fin^o?

Conclusions

- Syntactic reconstruction is **qualitatively different** from phonological reconstruction.
- This is because **strings of sounds are transmitted**, whereas **strings of lexical items are not**.
- However, **it is possible to reconstruct syntax** in a principled manner, at least to some extent.

Thank you for listening!

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