

How to Succeed in Indo-European without Really Trying

An enthralling, yet ill-known, fact about roots for the verb ‘succeed’ in Indo-European is that a large majority of these verbs occur with subject-like arguments marked in the dative or accusative case. These verbs form a subset of predicates that take non-canonically case-marked subjects, well documented across the Germanic languages (cf. Barðdal 2004, Barðdal et al. 2016) and other Indo-European languages more generally (cf. Hock 1990 on Sanskrit, Barðdal et al. 2012 for five IE branches, Fedriani 2009, 2014 on Latin and Danesi 2015 on Greek).

These verbs of success appear to find their etymological source in metaphorical extensions of verb roots that fall into a variety of semantic fields: verbs of i) motion, ii) giving, iii) touching/contact, iv) aiming/reaching, v) growing, and vi) luck, among others (selected examples below). While semantic change is of course difficult to analyze, the fact that these semantic extensions recur in our dataset is not unexpected, as semantic extensions in general “reflect certain basic metaphorical extensions that all humans can construct, and so it is not surprising that they are found again and again in the histories of languages” (Fortson 2005: 658). Whether the extensions are universal or specific only for Indo-European remains to be investigated, although such verbs are often constructed with non-nominative subjects in several of the Indo-European branches.

- (i) **hós hoi dólōi ou proekhóree** (Greek)
since him.DAT craft.DAT not [$<$ motion]
‘since he could not succeed by craft’ (Hdt. 1.205)
- (v) **him wiht ne speow** (OE)
he.DAT thing not [$<$ grow]
‘he did not succeed at all’ (Beo. 2852)

The largest set of verbs with oblique subject-like arguments used to indicate success are derived from verbs of motion accompanied by a preposition/prefix, e.g. Old Icelandic *ganga* ‘go (+ well)’ and Germanic cognates (from the Proto-Germanic verb **gangan-/gungan-*), Latin *succedō* ($<$ *sub* ‘under’ + *cedō* ‘step’), and Greek *sym-bainō* ($<$ *syn* ‘with’ + *bainō* ‘step/go/walk’). Other categories of ‘success’ metaphors that produce verbs that take oblique subject-like arguments include “touch success” (e.g. Old Icelandic *taka* $<$ **takan-/tēkan-* ‘touch’, Latin *contingere* $<$ *cum* ‘together’ + *tangere* ‘touch’), “give success” (e.g. Old Icelandic *gefast vel* ‘give well’, Old Russian *ou-dati-sja* $<$ ‘at’ + ‘give’ + refl), “grow success” (OHG *ge/spuon* ~ OCS (*ou-*)*spěti* $<$ PIE **speh₁-* ‘to succeed, prosper’ [$<$ ‘become fat, ripen’]) and “luck success” (Icelandic *heppnast* $<$ *heppni* ‘chance’, *auðnast* $<$ *auðna* ‘fortune, good luck’, *lánast* $<$ *lán* ‘luck’ ~ Middle Dutch *ge/lucken*).

Based on the large set of cognates across Germanic and their analogues across Indo-European, we reconstruct an argument structure construction meaning ‘succeed’ for Proto-Germanic with a dative subject and verb of motion (**gangan-/gungan-*, **faran-*, **lingwan-*; for reconstructed forms, see Kroonen 2013), growth (**spōan-*), and luck (**galukjan-*) and a more general schema for Indo-European, where such meanings are produced by a construction with a verb of the given semantic types and an oblique experiencer. In their basic sense, the verbs that can be used in these constructions occur with a different predicate-argument structure, i.e. with a nominative subject, but also involving other differences. These facts about Indo-European are modeled in the form of a Constructicon, representing speakers’ knowledge about the interrelation between verbal polysemy and argument structure. The goal is to contribute, through the analysis of these verb roots, to a better understanding of Indo-European syntax, namely, the relation between semantic fields and morphosyntactic patterns.

References

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