The Indo-European Root and Syntactic Reconstruction

There is little consensus on the relationship between syntax and lexical roots, but at least some cognitive linguists would accept the view that a root conveys syntactic information by way of its base semantic value, while generative linguistics generally holds that syntax is autonomous from semantics and the root is conceptual and grammar-neutral. Verbal forms contain inherent syntactic properties (e.g., valency, argument structure) and one may infer in *most* circumstances that the base (least-affixed) form of a verb speaks for the root in both semantic and syntactic properties. For example, the base (Class I) form derived from a given verbal root in Classical Arabic may be transitive, active-intransitive, or stative – this information is largely semantic. However, a Class I transitive verb will produce a Class II causative (e.g., *kataba* 'write' : *kattaba* 'cause to write'), a Class I active-intransitive will produce a Class II transitive (e.g., *ðakara* 'remember' : *ðakkara* 'remind'), and a Class I stative will produce a factitive (e.g., *salima* 'be safe' : *sallama* 'make safe') – so, in this way, the semantic properties of the base form of a triliteral root convey vital information about the syntactic properties of all its further derived forms. Naturally, the syntactic properties of a root in an ergative or especially a semantically-aligned language can be still more syntactically significant (to this end, one could cite the different case-marking patterns characteristic of the Kartvelian verbal classes, which are also differentiated semantically and morphologically). Likewise, morphological derivations like preverbs and *Aktionsart* suffixes in Indo-European languages often change the semantic, and thus syntactic, properties of a root's base form, but we will see that syntactic derivations like argument structure alternation can do the same.

This paper discusses some observations and methodological problems concerning the reconstructibility of the semantic and syntactic properties of Proto-Indo-European verbal roots that were made during a comparative investigation of argument structure across the older Indo-European languages, a methodological explanation of work partially published (Barðdal & Smitherman 2013, Smitherman 2015). In this research, lists of predicates that accommodate certain atypical argument structure patterns were gathered in various languages. Comparison was made first at the level of the PIE roots from which the predicates derived. This permits a view of the semantic evolution and corresponding dissemination of syntactic properties associated with certain roots that were compared across several IE branches. Roots of interest include *leikʷ-, *weid-, *gʷem-, *deḱ-, *swehₐd-(u-), and *peik-.

-Barðdal, Jóhanna & Smitherman, Thomas. 2013. "The Quest for Cognates: A Reconstruction of Oblique Subject Constructions in Proto-Indo-European". Language Dynamics and Change. 3: 28-67.
-Smitherman, Thomas. 2015. "Reconstructing non-canonical argument structure for Proto-Indo-European: Methodological questions and progress. In Perspectives on Historical Syntax", Edited by Carlotta Viti.