

“Woe to the Rich and the Sordid Fellows”: The Syntax, Semantics and Information Structure of ‘Woe’ in Indo-European*

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Vae vobis dicebatur ab antiquis, et nō nobis
‘Woe to you was an ancient exclamation,
no longer used by ‘modern’ Romans’
(Paulus Diaconus, 8th century AD)

Abstract

In contrast to the received consensus in the historical-comparative linguistic community, we argue that syntactic reconstruction is both a plausible and a feasible enterprise. We illustrate this with an investigation of the syntactic behavior of ‘woe’ across five subbranches of Indo-European, i.e. Germanic, Italic, Slavic, Baltic, and Indo-Iranian. The adverbial interjection ‘woe’ is found in extra-sentential exclamatory use, as expected, but also in finite contexts in an argument structure construction that we have labeled the *DAT-is-woe* construction, and which can be shown to be a member of a larger family of dative subject constructions. On the basis of the comparative evidence, a predicate-specific construction, the *DAT-is-woe* construction, may be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, as well as a subject–verb construction, which determines the default word order properties between the subject and the verb, and finally a focus construction where focalized material occurs in first position. We couch our analysis within the formalism of Sign-Based Construction Grammar, establishing beyond doubt that syntactic reconstruction is a viable endeavor within historical-comparative linguistics.

1. Introduction

The Comparative Method in historical-comparative linguistics has most successfully been applied within the fields of phonology, morphology and the lexicon, while syntactic reconstruction has been subject to considerable controversy, regarded as uninteresting, being to no avail, or even abnegated (cf. Watkins 1964, Jeffers 1976, Lightfoot 1979, 2006, Harrison 2003, Pires & Thomason 2008, Mengden 2008, *inter alia*). There are several reasons for this, but one of the main reasons is that syntactic structures have been regarded as fundamentally different from morphological and lexical structures when it comes to meaning. It has been generally assumed that since syntactic structures are larger and more complex than words and morphemes, their

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meaning is a sum of the meaning of the parts, i.e. compositional, and hence that they are not simple form–meaning correspondences like words (cf. Klein 2010). As is well known, form–meaning correspondences form the basis for the input of correspondence sets, so if syntactic structures are not form–meaning correspondences, they do not form any basis for correspondence sets across languages, and hence there can be no reconstruction.

Several other issues have been brought forward as arguments against syntactic reconstruction, such as lack of COGNATE STATUS, lack of ARBITRARINESS, lack of REGULARITY in syntactic development, and the problem of DISCONTINUOUS TRANSMISSION. Recent work within historical-comparative syntax challenges these views of syntactic reconstruction (Kikusawa 2003, Harris 2008, Bowerman 2008, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2011, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2011, Barðdal 2012, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012), arguing instead that syntactic reconstruction is not only possible but also quite feasible. We have dealt thoroughly with these issues elsewhere (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2011, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2011, Barðdal 2012), and refer the interested reader to these publications for details. Instead, what we want to accomplish in the present article is to show how syntactic reconstruction may be carried out in a satisfactory manner. We propose to do this with the aid of the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar, in which the basic unit of language is the CONSTRUCTION, i.e. a form–function correspondence. As is already mentioned above, it is precisely form–function correspondences that function as units of comparanda in the Comparative Method. This is why we believe that Construction Grammar is the ideal theoretical framework for reconstructing syntax, as the leap from synchronic form–function correspondences to historical form–function correspondences is minimal.

As an exercise in syntactic reconstruction, with the aim of illustrating in detail how such reconstruction may be carried out, we compare the syntactic environments found for an Indo-European interjection, traditionally reconstructed as PIE **wai* ‘woe’, which is found in most of the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages. This interjection is used in several different syntactic constructions in the attested daughter languages, and in this article we focus on its co-occurrence with a dative argument in exclamatory use and in particular its use in the compositional “dative subject” construction with the verb ‘be’. Examples of this are given from Latin in (1a–c) below:

- | | | |
|------|--|--------------|
| (1a) | vae <i>victis</i>
woe conquered-ones.DAT
‘Woe to the conquered ones!’ (Livy, 5.48.9) | <i>Latin</i> |
| (1b) | Vae <i>miserō</i> <i>mihi!</i>
woe miserable.DAT me.DAT
‘Woe to miserable me!’ (Terence, Hec. 605) | <i>Latin</i> |
| (1c) | Immo uae <i>tibi</i> <i>sit</i>
then woe you.DAT is.3SG.SUBJ
‘Then, you shall have woe’ (Plautus, Cas. 633) | <i>Latin</i> |

We will henceforth refer to examples like these as the DAT-*is-woe* construction. The example in (1a) is an optative exclamation, hence it is expected that the subjunctive form of the verb ‘be’ be left unexpressed. The same is true for curses and other exclamations expressing wishful thinking. Also, since most of the ancient Indo-

European languages are ‘be’-drop languages, i.e. languages where the verb ‘be’ may be dropped in the present tense, examples like (1b) may be assumed to contain a present-tense elliptical ‘be’. In many cases it will be difficult to distinguish between the two readings, but the outcome is the same, namely that the verb ‘be’ is dropped, either in present tense indicative or in the subjunctive mood.

We will, moreover, be using this example with ‘woe’ for two purposes:

- a) to argue for the existence of argument structures where the first subject-like argument is not in the nominative case in Proto-Indo-European, but is non-canonically marked
- b) as a test case for showing how syntactic structures may be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, based on cognate lexical items and cognate argument structure constructions, i.e. inherited argument structure constructions consisting of the same syntactic form and the same meaning or function

In the following, we start in Section 2 with an introduction of the form, etymology and use of **wai*. We then discuss the syntactic function of the dative argument in Section 3. Next we present data from Germanic, Latin, Old Slavic, Baltic, and Indo-Iranian, each in different subsections of Section 4, documenting the existence of the DAT-*is-woe* construction in all of these Indo-European subbranches. In Section 5 we place the DAT-*is-woe* construction in a wider context of Dative Subject Constructions in the Indo-European languages, in order to show that DAT-*is-woe* is not an isolated instance, but a part of a much larger family of constructions. In Section 6 we discuss the word order differences found both across the Indo-European languages and within each language, before we, in Section 7, present an attempt at reconstructing the DAT-*is-woe* construction for Proto-Indo-European. Section 8 contains a summary of the content of this article.

2. Form and meaning

The lexical item **wai* was originally an adverbial interjection and is found in all the major branches of the Indo-European languages, as shown in Table 1. This interjection is also found outside of Indo-European, namely in Semitic (Bomhard 2011), as well as in some languages that have been in close contact with these two language families. This may suggest that the adverbial interjection ‘woe’ is even more ancient than Proto-Indo-European. Such an assumption is confirmed by the observations of the Lombardian historian, Paulus Diaconus, in the 8th century AD, who claims that *vae* is an ancient interjection which has already fallen into disuse in the synchronic language of his time.

Table 1: The lexical item ‘woe’ in Indo-European

Germanic:	
Old English	<i>wā</i>
Old Saxon	<i>wē/wēla</i>
Old High German	<i>wē</i>
Old Norse-Icelandic	<i>vei</i>
Gothic	<i>wai</i>
Italic:	
Latin	<i>vae</i>

Old Slavic:	
Old Russian	<i>ouvy</i>
Old Church Slavic	<i>ouvy</i>
Baltic:	
Latvian	<i>vaì</i>
Lithuanian	<i>vaĩ</i>
Ancient Greek	<i>óá</i>
Armenian	<i>vay</i>
Albanian	<i>vaj</i>
Celtic:	
Old Irish	<i>fē</i>
Welsh	<i>gwae</i>
Anatolian:	
Hittite	<i>wai</i>
Indo-Iranian:	
Gatha Avestan	<i>auuōi</i>
Young Avestan	<i>āuuōiia</i>

The form **wai* is generally reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European on the basis of the evidence from the daughter languages, irrespective of the fact that it may perhaps be regarded as having an even earlier onomatopoeic origin. Pokorny (1959: 1111) argues that New Testament Greek *ouá* and Serbian *vāj* are later developments. He suggests moreover that the noun *fāed* ‘scream’ in Middle Irish, the verb *vajāt* ‘ache’ in Latvian, the verb *wajamērijan* ‘slander’ in Gothic and the adjective *veill* ‘weak’ in Old Norse-Icelandic are derivations of **wai*, to mention only a few of the related forms he cites.

Examples of ‘woe’ in its interjectional exclamatory use are given in (2) below:

- (2a) Sô sprichet manic mensche: **weh!** ... *Middle High German*
such talk many people: woe
‘Many people say: woe! ...’ (Predigten: Berth.Reg., Pred., 17, 728)
- (2b) Sirgau visa žiema, **vaĩ** *Lithuanian dialect in Belarussia*
be-sick all winter, woe
‘I’ve been sick all winter, woe’
- (2c) **āuuōiia** aθra ava diðaēm ... *Young Avestan*
woe there towards see.1SG.INJ
‘Woe! There I saw ...’ (Vištāsp Yašt 43)

Observe, moreover, that the interjection **wai* does not behave as a noun in earlier stages of Indo-European, although it developed nominal uses in many Germanic languages, and adjectival uses in English and German (cf. OED 1989, Kluge 2002). It does not alternate between a singular and a plural form, it cannot be relativized, and it occurs systematically outside of the clause proper. An Indo-European nominative form ending in *-ai* would, moreover, be highly unlikely, if not impossible; Latvian, for instance, cannot have a nominative ending in *-ai*, Old Norse-Icelandic cannot have a nominative ending in *-ei*, and, finally, if *vai* in Latin were a noun, it would have to be plurale tantum of the first declension, which in turn means that it should select the form *sint* and not *sit* when it occurs with the subjunctive of ‘be’. This, however, is not

the case, as evident from (1c) above. Consider also the following example from Old English, where ‘woe’ in the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* construction is juxtaposed with ‘well’, showing beyond doubt that Old English *wa* is not a noun, but an adverb:

- (3) **Wa** bið *hæm* þe sceal þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan, wihte gewendan; **wel** bið *hæm* þe mot æfter deaðdæge drihten secean ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

‘**Woe** be to him who through severe affliction thrust his soul into the fire’s embrace, hope not for relief, or to change at all; **Well** be to him who after his death may seek the Lord and long for peace in the Father’s arms’

(Beowulf 183–188)

As to the use of the interjection **wai* in texts, it turns out that it was generally used when something bad happened to people. It is exploited to convey anguish and consternation, basically functioning as “Ausdruck des Jammers” (Hofmann 1936: 13). It is used in 1st person when the speaker feels as if he or she is in trouble, is ruined or lost, or generally when something negative happens. When used with 2nd or 3rd person referents, it is most often a curse, an insult, or is used to heap abuse on somebody. Leumann, Hofmann & Szantyr (1972–79 II: 93) suggest, for instance, that the Latin phrase *vae tibi* is semantically equivalent to *male tibi sit*, meaning ‘bad to you’.

Before presenting the specifics of our ‘woe’ data, a few words on the syntactic function of the dative argument are needed.

3. The syntactic role of the dative

In Latin-based grammars the standard view is that the subject is nominative and that only nominatives can be subjects (cf. the discussion in Barðdal 2000a). A more modern view, first proposed within generative grammar, is that subjects can also be non-canonically case marked. In 1976 Andrews was the first to argue for a subject analysis of subject-like non-nominative arguments in Icelandic, based on their syntactic behavior rather than on case marking. In the same year, Masica (1976) proposed a comparable analysis for South-Asian languages. Since then, several languages, both Indo-European and non-Indo-European, have been shown to exhibit structures where the syntactic subject is not in the nominative case but is non-canonically case marked (cf. Aikhenvald, Dixon & Onishi 2001, Bhaskararao & Subbarao 2004), for instance Russian (Moore & Perlmutter 2000), South Asian languages (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Dardic, Tibeto-Burman and Munda, cf. Verma & Mohanan 1990, Steever 1998, Bickel 2001) and native American languages (Hermon 1985). The insight that there are non-canonically case-marked arguments which behave syntactically in the same way as nominative subjects is now an established fact, which all theoretical frameworks, formal and functional ones alike, must take into account

Establishing the syntactic behavior of non-nominative subject-like arguments is considerably easier for a living language than for a dead one. Such research has, however, begun and at this point it has been shown beyond doubt that Old Norse-Icelandic had non-canonically case marked subjects (Rögnvaldsson 1991, 1995, 1996, Barðdal 2000b, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003a, Ingason, Sigurðsson & Wallenberg 2011), that Old English had non-canonically case-marked subjects (Allen 1995), and

that non-canonically case-marked subject-like arguments in early Germanic in general, including Gothic, also behaved syntactically as subjects (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012), exactly as in Modern Icelandic and Modern Faroese. Research on the syntactic behavior of non-nominative subject-like arguments in the other early and ancient Indo-European languages is also being carried out at the moment (cf. Hock 1990 and Danesi, in prep, on Sanskrit, Fedriani 2009 and Dahl 2011 on Latin, Grillborzer 2010 on Old Russian). Fedriani's, Dahl's, and Grillborzer's studies suggest that non-canonically case-marked subject-like arguments are syntactic subjects in Latin and Old Russian. However, since this research has not been carried out in the necessary detail for several of the early and ancient Indo-European languages, it is premature to make any claims about the syntactic status of these subject-like arguments in Proto-Indo-European, on the basis of their syntactic behavior.

Eythórsson & Barðdal (2005) observe that the syntactic behavior of subjects, i.e. the subject tests, always involves the first or the leftmost argument of the argument structure of a predicate. That is, when one tries to generalize across the subject tests, those generalizations will always target the leftmost argument and not the second or third argument of an argument structure construction. This suggests that it is the leftmost argument that makes up the empirical core of subjecthood. It is of course a well-known fact for several languages with non-canonically case-marked subjects that this oblique subject does not fulfill all the subject tests of a particular language. This may be because they are morphologically marked subjects and not unmarked (cf. Barðdal 2006). What is even more important, however, is that non-canonically case-marked subjects do not pattern with unambiguous objects when it comes to syntactic behavior, which in turn shows that they are not objects.

There is no doubt, moreover, that non-canonically case-marked subject-like arguments are the first argument of their argument structures, i.e. the S argument in Dixon's (1994) typology, where A is the subject of a transitive clause, O (or P) the object of a transitive clause, and S the subject of an intransitive clause. Onishi (2001) and Andrews (2001), for instance, refer to oblique subjects in Icelandic and Bengali as the S argument, and Donohue (2008), Malchukov (2008), Mithun (2008) and Nichols (2008) also refer systematically to oblique subjects of transimpersonal predicates, i.e. two-place predicates with oblique subjects, as S. Therefore, what we mean here by the term "oblique" or "dative subject" for the early and ancient Indo-European languages is the S argument of such predicates.

Returning to our DAT-*is-woe* construction, it is clear that the dative subject-like argument is the S argument. As it is the only argument of this predicate, it is clearly the highest or the leftmost argument of this argument structure. In contrast, 'woe' cannot be the subject as it is not an argument, but an adverb. Moreover, this pattern is not an aberration in the syntax of early Indo-European, because, as we will show in Section 5 below, the DAT-*is-woe* construction is a part of a much larger family of Dative Subject Constructions in the Indo-European languages, occurring with a range of different, although related, meanings.

We now turn to the specifics of the 'woe' data attested in the five archaic and ancient Indo-European language branches under investigation.

4. The syntax of ‘woe’ in some ancient and archaic Indo-European daughter languages

In the following subsections we will review data from early Germanic, Latin, Old Slavic, Baltic, and Old Indo-Iranian, respectively. As we will show below, it turns out that the DAT-*is-woe* construction is found in all these Indo-European language branches.

4.1. Germanic

As is evident from Table 1. above, the interjection ‘woe’ is well attested in the early Germanic languages, and, as already stated, it has developed nominal uses in many of these and adjectival uses in English and German (cf. OED 1989, Kluge 2002). The interjection ‘woe’ is found in the Gothic Bible, as well as in several Old and Middle High German, Old Saxon, Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic texts.

- (4a) **wai** *izwis þaim gabeigam* *Gothic*
 woe you.DAT the.DAT rich.DAT
 ‘woe to you, the rich’ (Luke 6,24)
- (4b) **Wa** *eow þe gadriað hus to huse* *Old English*
 woe you.DAT that gather house to house
 ‘Woe to you, who gather house from house’ (Pastoral Care xlix. 378)
- (4c) **vei** *oss, vei oss at vér skyldim alnar verða* *Old Norse-Icelandic*
 woe us.DAT woe us.DAT that we should born become
 ‘woe to us, woe to us that we were borne’ (Klm. 62³⁰)

The Germanic languages are not ‘be’-drop languages; however, the examples in (4) all qualify as optatives, which explains why the verb ‘be’ is left unexpressed in these examples. Instances with ‘be’ may also be found, as in (5) below, showing beyond doubt the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction exists in Germanic.

- (5a) **Wa** *bið þæm þe sceal ...* *Old English*
 woe is them.DAT that shall
 ‘Woe have they that shall ...’ (Beowulf 183)
- (5b) **uuê** *uuarð thi, Hierusalem* *Old Saxon*
 woe became you.DAT, Jerusalem
 ‘you had woe, Jerusalem’ (Heliand 3691)
- (5c) *nú er oss vei, er vér erum hjalplausar* *Old Norse-Icelandic*
 now is us.DAT woe, as we are helpless
 ‘now we have woe, as we are helpless’ (Ridd 65³⁴)

Examples like in (5), i.e. unambiguous examples of the DAT-*is-woe* construction are not documented in Old High German, but are frequent in Middle High German and Middle English and at least one Middle Dutch example is attested:

SO: Et *miquidem*: nam haec res ...
 and me.DAT-also: for this thing
 ‘Woe to miserable me! – And to me! This situation ...’ (Terence, Hec. 605)

Three examples are also attested with ‘woe’ occurring with an accusative in Latin, of which we present one in (8) below:

- (8) **vae** *me*, puto, concacavi *me*.
 woe me.ACC think defiled me.ACC
 ‘Woe to me! I think I have made a mess of myself’ (Seneca, Apoc. 4.3)

The adverb *vae* can, moreover, be metonymically used with reference to body parts or even to one’s life: the most frequent expressions are *vae capiti tuo* ‘woe to your head’ and *vae aetati tuae* ‘woe to your life’; the former is used six times by Plautus, and the latter twice.

However, there are unambiguous examples of the DAT-*is-woe* construction attested in Early Latin, where the verb ‘be’ is not dropped. Consider the example in (1c) above, repeated here as (9), where ‘be’ occurs in the subjunctive mood:

- (9) immo **uae** *tibi* sit
 then woe you.DAT is.3SG.SUBJ
 ‘Then, you shall have woe!’ (Plautus, Cas. 633)

The existence of this example with ‘be’ suggests that the examples in (7) above, without ‘be’, should be interpreted as ‘be’-drop sentences, either because ‘be’ is dropped in the present tense or because the context is optative. Observe, also, that the semantic characterization of DAT-*is-woe* is in line with that found across the other Indo-European daughter languages, as ‘woe’ mainly conveys disappointment and dismay expressed by the speaker. The DAT-*is-woe* construction in Latin is thus consistent both in form and in function with structures which are clearly cognate argument structure structures in the other Indo-European language branches.

4.3 Old Slavic

The interjection *ouvy* is attested in both Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian. There is, moreover, no doubt that *ouvy* is a rendering of New Testament Greek *ouai* (cf. Sreznevsky 1912: 1123), but the form is most likely an inherited form and not a borrowing. The interjection still exists in Modern Russian, with the form *ovy*.

In Old Slavic ‘woe’ mostly occurs in translations of the Bible from Greek and in other ecclesiastical texts. The examples in (10) are from Old Church Slavonic and the ones in (11) are from Old Russian:¹

- (10a) **ouvy** *mъnĕ*-ko prišelĕstvo moe oudali sje *Old Church Slavonic*
 woe me.DAT-PTCL sojourn my went.away self
 ‘woe is me that I sojourn’ (Psalm 119:5 Sin.Prog.)²

¹ We here opt for the transliteration of the older Slavic form *ouvy* and not the accepted phonetic transcription, *ovy*, which corresponds to a transliteration of the Modern Russian form, *ovy*.

² Psalm 119:5 corresponds to Psalm 120:5 in the Greek canon.

- (10b) **ouvy mně ouvy mně** *Old Church Slavonic*
 woe me.DAT woe me.DAT
 ‘Woe to me, woe to me!’ (Supraliensis 78:27)
- (11a) **ouvy mně, jako uviděxъ azъ dьnъsъ** *Old Russian*
 woe me.DAT for.that saw.1SG I.NOM today
 ‘Woe to me, for I saw (it) today’ (Pand.Ant., 11th century, 206)
- (11b) **ouvy mně, čьto imamъ sьtvoriti** *Old Russian*
 woe me.DAT what have.1SG create.INF
 ‘Oh woe to me, for what I shall do’ (Zlatostr., 12th century)

All the examples in (10–11) instantiate the DAT-*is-woe* construction. Also, all examples of this type that we have found are finite, i.e. they are not examples of the bare extra-sentential use of ‘woe’ in free exclamations, and since both Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian are ‘be’-drop languages, these examples clearly represent the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction. Yet another example, (12) below, is ambiguous between the DAT-*is-woe* construction and the bare exclamatory use of ‘woe’.

- (12) **ouvy mně g(ospo)di svjadětelju vdovici** *Old Church Slavonic*
 alas me.DAT lord.VOC calamity.ACC widow.DAT
 ‘O Lord my God, (hast thou also brought) calamity to the widow’
 (III Kingdoms 17:20)³

This example is ambiguous because the dative case in older Slavic may also mark possession of a noun, in this case *g(ospo)di* ‘lord’. It is more common, however, for the dative possessor to follow a vocative noun than to precede it, as vocatives are typically topical.

Notice, however, that all the Old Slavic examples have the same word order, namely *ouvy mně*. This might be taken to suggest that *ouvy mně* is a fixed or a lexicalized expression. An argument against such an assumption stems from the fact that examples may be found of *ouvy* occurring in the second person, as in (13) below, even though such examples are rare:

- (13) **Ouvy tebe, okaпъnyi gorode** *Old Russian*
 woe thee.DAT unhappy.VOC town.VOC
 ‘Woe be to thee, o’ unhappy town’ (Povest vremennyx let, 107)

There is thus no doubt that the finite DAT-*(is)-woe* construction existed in the Old Slavic branch of Indo-European.

4.4 Baltic

In Baltic ‘woe’ is attested in both Lithuanian and Latvian, as *vaĩ* and *vai*, respectively. A variant of Lithuanian *vaĩ*, *ai* with the initial *v-* lost, is found in the DAT-*is-woe* construction in the Lithuanian examples in (14) below. As the Baltic languages are ‘be’-drop languages, examples from earlier Baltic reference grammars of the DAT-*is-woe* construction do not include ‘be’:

³ This text corresponds to I Kings in Western Christianity.

- (17a) Bylo apie tinginius, kokių yra, **ai**manęs, tarp mūsų *Lithuanian*
 talked about lazy.ACC.PL who.GEN.PL are woe.me.GEN among us
 ‘Talked about the lazy ones, how many they are, woe me, among us’
 (DP 381,37)
- (17b) kaip’ tos paklūdušios Dwáfiūs: kurių **ái**manęs *Lithuanian*
 like those lost souls.NOM.PL who.GEN.PL woe.me.GEN
 teip’ nu išėjo daug ant’ pafaulo.
 how now go many on earth
 ‘like those lost souls, how many, woe me, they are that walk on earth’
 (DP 232,13)

As dative subjects in older Lithuanian texts have not generally merged with the genitive, it is possible that the genitive here is a result of GENITIVE ATTRACTION, i.e. that the genitive immediately before in this utterance has affected the case marking of the dative subjects of ‘woe’, so that it appears in the genitive case and not in the expected dative case. It is at least quite striking that in both attested examples of a genitive subject, there is a genitive earlier in the linear clause, preceding the ‘woe’ construction.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the DAT-*is-woe* construction existed in Baltic, and the Latvian examples, where the construction still exists, show that the construction occurs with ‘be’ in non-present tense and non-optative contexts.

4.5. Indo-Iranian

No certain attestations of ‘woe’ are found in Early Vedic, although in Gatha Avestan, the most archaic stage of Avestan, we find the adverb *auuōi* ‘woe’ attested in one passage:⁴

- (18) *aēibiīō* aṅhāus **auuōi** aṅhat apēməm *Gatha Avestan*
 them.DAT life.GEN woe were.3SG.SBJ last
 ‘Woe shall be to them/they shall have woe at the end of (their) life’
 (Yasna 45.3)

In this case, *auuōi* is preceded by a demonstrative pronoun in the dative case, *aēibiīō* ‘them’, and succeeded by a finite verb ‘be’ in the third singular. This example is parallel to the Latin example in (9) in that the verb ‘be’ is in the subjunctive mood in both examples and not in the unmarked present tense indicative.

Note that this is the only example of its sort in Gatha Avestan. Interestingly, however, there is a derived form in Young Avestan *āuuōiia* ‘woe’ which is somewhat better attested. The following examples are illustrative of its use:⁵

⁴ Cf. Humbach et al. (1991): ‘For them ‘woe’ will be the last (word) of (their) existence’.

⁵ The forms *auuōi* in Gatha Avestan and *āuuōiia* in Young Avestan are clearly morphologically related. In fact, it is not uncommon that the feminine *-ā* suffix is used to derive abstract nouns in Old Indo-Aryan (cf. Wackernagel & Debrunner 1954). Thus, it may be that *āuuōiia* is a nominal derivation of *auuōi* possibly meaning something like ‘woedom’, with an additional vriddhi (lengthened grade) derivation of the initial vowel. It should be noted, however, that there appear to be no unambiguous parallels of this particular word derivation pattern in Indo-Iranian and therefore this suggestion remains to be substantiated.

- (19a) **āuuōiia** aθra ava diðaēm ... *Young Avestan*
 woe there towards see.1SG.INJ
 ‘Woe! There I saw ...’ (Vištāsp Yašt 43)
- (19b) **āuuōiia** mē **bāuuōiia** *Young Avestan*
 woe me.DAT PCTL-woe
 ‘Woe to me, woe!’ (Yašt 3.14)
- (19c) kaθa tē darəgəm **āuuōiia** aṅhat *Young Avestan*
 how you.DAT long.ACC.SG woe is.3SG.SBJ
 ‘How is it that woe will be to you/you shall have woe for long’
 (Haδox̄t Nask 2.34)

The example in (19a) illustrates *āuuōiia* used as a bare exclamative interjection, the one in (19b) illustrates the DAT-*is-woe* construction in the present tense where ‘be’ is elided, and (19c) instantiates the DAT-*is-woe* construction with a non-elliptical ‘be’. Notice that the example in (19c) is exactly parallel to the Gatha Avestan example in (18) above, and as in the Latin example in (9) and the Gatha Avestan example in (18), the verb ‘be’ is in the subjunctive mood.

In sum, these examples show beyond doubt that the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction is found in Indo-Iranian, more specifically in Avestan.

4.6 Interim Summary and Conclusions

In this section we have compared data from early Germanic, Italic, Old Slavic, Baltic, and Old Indo-Iranian. The interjection ‘woe’ is found in all these Indo-European language branches, both in the bare exclamation, as expected, and also in the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* argument structure construction. In addition to the systematic use of dative subjects in the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* construction, sporadic examples are found of ‘woe’ occurring with an accusative in Latin and a genitive in Old Lithuanian.

We have, so far, not discussed any data from Ancient Greek. In Homer we find instances of *ō*, occurring with the dative personal pronoun *moi* ‘me’, expressing a feeling of disgust or disappointment (cf. Homer, *Iliad* 1.148–151). We also find *ōimoi* used in the same meaning in other contemporary texts (cf. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1223–1226). All the examples, however, are in first personal singular and without the verb ‘be’. The Ancient Greek data, therefore, even though compatible with the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* construction, do not unanimously confirm its existence in that language branch. We will therefore not be pursuing this analysis for Ancient Greek at present.

Since the Germanic languages are not generally ‘be’-drop languages, we have presented examples where the verb ‘be’ is present, showing beyond doubt that in the early Germanic languages we find ‘woe’ used in the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* argument structure construction, as well as in bare extra-sentential exclamations and optative contexts. The verb ‘be’ cannot be dropped in ordinary declaratives in Germanic, while in all the other Indo-European branches discussed here, the dropping of the verb ‘be’ is readily found in the present tense indicative. Examples of the finite DAT-(*is*)-*woe* argument structure construction, where ‘be’ has been dropped, have here been documented from the four other Indo-European language branches. In addition to that, we have presented examples from Latin and Indo-Iranian where ‘be’ is present in the subjunctive form, and from Latvian where it is in the future tense, corroborating our analysis that the ‘be’-less forms are examples of ‘be’-drop in either

present tense or optative contexts. We therefore conclude that the DAT-(*is*)-*woe* argument structure construction existed in at least five subbranches of Indo-European, i.e., Germanic, Italic, Slavic, Baltic and Indo-Iranian.

5. The Semantics of the Dative Subject Construction

As already shown in the previous section, ‘woe’ is generally used with an animate subject in the dative case in all the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages that we have discussed (cf. e.g., Behaghel 1923 I: 663). Sometimes the dative of DAT-*is-woe* introduces the interested party in a narrative and thus functions as an empathy-seeking device, establishing specific contact with the addressee. This use of the dative is usually referred to as the dative of interest, advantage or favor, i.e., *DATIVUS COMMODI*, or dative of affect, i.e., *DATIVUS ETHICUS*. In such cases, the dative is clearly being oriented towards animacy and non-agentivity, which is a well-known use of the dative in the Indo-European languages (cf. Blake 1994: 145–146, Aristar 1996, Van Hoeske 1996, Fried 2011).

In case the reader regards it as odd that a predicate may consist of the verb ‘be’ together with an adverb, as with ‘woe’, it can be added that further examples are easily found among the early Indo-European languages, which are similar to the DAT-*is-woe* construction in that they feature an adverb, in addition to the dative subject and the verb ‘be’:

- (20a) og varð *honum* **illt** við *Old Norse-Icelandic*
 and became him.DAT badly with
 ‘and he was startled’ (Færeyinga saga, Ch. 5)
- (20b) nec tamen *illis* **bene** erit *Latin*
 not although they.DAT well is.3SG.FUT
 ‘although things will not be well with them’ (Sen. Vit. Beat. 11, 4)
- (20c) **wel** bið *þem* þe ... *Old English*
 well is him.DAT that
 ‘well be to him who ...’ (Beowulf 185)

The dative here signals a participant which is somehow involved in the situation but is not agentive, an instantiation of indirect participation, which is a general function often associated with the dative in the Indo-European languages (cf. Bauer 2000).

Moreover, the DAT-*is-woe* construction can be regarded as an instance of a much larger family of “Dative Subject” constructions in Indo-European, with a similar form, and expressing a host of polysemous meanings. Barðdal et al. (2011) suggest the following five event-type constructions of the “Dative Subject” construction, on the basis of data from Old Norse-Icelandic, Classical Latin, Ancient Greek, Old Russian and Lithuanian:

- Experience
- Happenstance
- Modality
- Evidentiality
- Possession

These five event-type constructions may be further divided into at least 14 predicate-class-specific constructions, which may in turn be divided into 51 predicate-subclass-specific constructions, corresponding to narrowly-defined semantic verb classes (cf. also Barðdal 2001, 2004, 2008, 2011, Barðdal, Kristoffersen & Sveen 2011, Croft 2003, Toft 2009, Fedriani 2011 on lexicality–schematicity hierarchies making use of abstract schematic constructions, low-level concrete verb-specific constructions and intermediate verb-class and verb-subclass-specific constructions). One example of each of the 14 predicate-class-specific constructions is given below:

- (21a) EMOTION: from Old Russian (Pčel.I.publ.b.l.45)
 Iže *tělou svoemou* **ougažajetъ**, tъ ne *sebě* **ougažajetъ**
 &so body.DAT one's.own.DAT likes, that not oneself.DAT likes
 'And so if the body enjoys it, one should not like it'
- (21b) ATTITUDE: from Old Norse-Icelandic (Hrafn þáttur Guðrúnarsonar, Ch. 6)
 svo að þér mun eigi **duga**
 so that you.DAT will not be-sufficient.INF
 'so that it will not be sufficient for you'
- (21c) COGNITION: from Ancient Greek (Iliad 15.509)
hēmin d' ou tis toude **noos** kai **mētis** ameinōn
 us.DAT as not a.NOM this.GEN sense.NOM and wisdom.NOM better
 'We won't have a better idea and wisdom (than) this one'
- (21d) PERCEPTION: from Old Norse-Icelandic (Heilag. I, 110²⁵)
vitrar *einhverjum sýn*
 appears somebody.DAT vision.NOM
 'somebody has a revelation'
- (21e) BODILY STATES: from Old Lithuanian (WP 22: 1573)
Kam **niežta**, tas kasos
 whom.DAT itches, he scratches
 'The one who itches, he will scratch'
- (21f) GAIN: from Latin (Cicero)
 nunc *mihi* nihil libri, nihil litterae, nihil doctrina **prodest**
 now me.DAT not books not literature not philosophy get
 'now I can get nothing good out of books, literature, or philosophy'
- (21g) SUCCESS: from Latin (Cicero)
 si proinde, ut ipse mereor, *mihi* **successerit**
 if just-as when self deserve, me.DAT succeeds
 'if, as I deserve, I will have succeeded'
- (21i) HINDRANCE: from Old Russian (Žit.Nik.2Min.čet.apr.29)
Protivitъ že *mi sja paky straxъ*
 hinders but me.DAT self again fear.NOM
 'I am again hindered by fear'

- (21j) HAPPENING: from Latin (Caesar)
Mihi ne illud quidem accidit
 me.DAT not this.NOM even happened
 ‘But not even this happened to me’
- (21k) ONTOLOGICAL STATES: from Old Norse-Icelandic (Hkr. ii. 188)
henni er þannig farit, at hon er mikil ey
 she.DAT is so been, that she is great island
 ‘the island is so shapen, that it is large and long’
- (21l) MODALITY: from Old Norse-Icelandic (Barl. 202: 15)
ger nú sem þér berr ok
 do now as you.DAT are-obliged and
 ‘do now as you should and’
- (21m) EVIDENTIALITY: from Ancient Greek (Aesch.)
hōs emoi dokei
 as me.DAT seems
 ‘as it seems to me’ or ‘in my opinion’
- (21n) POSSESSION: from Old Lithuanian (BB1Moz 19,8)
man yra dvi dukteri
 me.DAT is two daughters
 ‘I have two daughters’

The present analysis provides a straightforward semantic motivation for the use of the dative in the DAT-*is-woe* constructions, as the dative argument may well be regarded as a participant which is not directly involved in a situation, although affected by it, i.e. a maleficiary or an experiencer. Therefore, the use of the dative to encode an animate experiencer-like participant in compositional constructions with a dative subject with ‘woe’ might have been triggered by its use in semantically similar constructions from neighboring semantic domains.

Having discussed the semantics of the Dative Subject Construction, we now turn to the word order variation found between DAT-*is-woe* and *woe-is-DAT* in Indo-European.

6. Word Order

As evident from the examples in the discussion above, there are two clear word order patterns found for the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction, namely DAT-*is-woe* and *woe-is-DAT*. Now, the dative constituent is an argument of the DAT-*is-woe* construction and *is-woe* is the predicate. As already stated in Section 2 and Section 5 above, this is a compositional predicate, consisting of the verb ‘be’ and the adverb ‘woe’. It is clear that ‘woe’ is not an argument here, as it is an adverb. The dative subject can be said to carry the thematic role of a MALEFICIARY, as the pragmatic function of this predicate is to signal danger, adversity or any kind of a difficult situation.

Generally, in the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages, the neutral or unmarked word order of the subject and the verb is SV, i.e. the subject precedes the

verb, although objects and various other elements may intervene between the subject and the verb, yielding SVO and SOV orders. Verb-initial (VS) orders are also found in most of the languages, conditioned by certain syntactic and pragmatic factors (e.g. Delbrück 1900: 81, Krisch 2002). Notable exceptions to this general rule are Old Irish and other Insular Celtic languages (e.g. Watkins 1963, Fife 2002, Eska 2004) and Lycian (Garrett 1994, Melchert 2004), where the unmarked word order is VS. Leaving the position of the object aside, this means that SV word order is a common Indo-European characteristic which in all likelihood is inherited from the proto-language, whereas the generalized VS pattern in Insular Celtic and Lycian is an innovation.

As for the ‘woe’ construction, it is clear that the dative is an argument while the adverb is not which in turn means that the string DAT-*is-woe* represents the neutral or unmarked word order pattern. The relationship between this word order and the string *woe-is*-DAT can be captured within a derivational account by means of preposing or “fronting” of the adverbial. However, in terms of a monostratal Construction Grammar framework (see next section), one would say that there is a systematic alternation between two word order constructions which exhibit different information structural properties.

Given the assumption that the neutral word order is DAT-*is-woe*, the question arises why the reversed word order, *woe-is*-DAT, appears so frequent. We would like to suggest that this is due to the fact that ‘woe’ itself is an exclamation of misfortune. It is typically used when something bad happens to people, and in that context it expresses the speaker’s dismay. As such, ‘woe’ is the quintessential candidate for being focused in situations where adversity arises. To illustrate this, consider the following examples, (7b) from Latin and (5a) from Old English, repeated here as (22–23), embedded in their full context:

- (22) SOSTRATA: Obsecro, mi Pamphile, non tute incommodam rem, ut quaeque est, in animum induces pati? Si cetera ita sunt ut vis itaque uti esse ego illa[m] existumo, mi gnate, da veniam hanc mihi redduc illam.

‘Pray, my Pamphilus, can you not, seeing how each woman is, prevail upon yourself to put up with one matter of inconvenience? If every thing else is according to your wish, and such as I take it to be my son, do grant me this indulgence, and take her back.’

PAMPHILUS: **Vae** misero *mih!*
 woe wretched.DAT me.DAT
 ‘Woe to miserable me! (Terence, Hec. 602–606)

In this example, Sostrata, the mother of Pamphilus, is trying to convince her son to give up on a woman and send her back to where she came from. In this context both the woman and Pamphilus himself are topical. Therefore, in Pamphilus’ response, the dative subject in first position would have picked up on Pamphilus as a topic. ‘Woe’, however, is not a topic, but new information occurring in first position, which is clearly a focus position here. As evident from Pamphilus response, he finds the idea of giving up the woman disastrous.

Consider now the Old English example:

- (23) Swylc wæs þeaw hyra, hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon in modsefan, metod hie ne cuþon, dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten god, ne hie huru heofena helm herian ne cuþon, wuldres waldend. **Wa** bið *þem* þe sceal þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan, wihte gewendan; **wel** bið *þem* þe mot æfter deaðdæge drihten secean ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

‘Such was their custom, heathens’ hope, in hell they pondered in the depths of their hearts, they knew not God, the judge of deeds, they were not aware of the Lord God, Indeed they did not know how to praise Heaven’s Protector, Ruler of Glory. **Woe** be to him who through severe affliction thrust his soul into the fire’s embrace, hope not for relief, or to change at all; **Well** be to him who after his death may seek the Lord and long for peace in the Father’s arms’
(Beowulf 178–188)

In the text in example (23), the narrator is telling of heathen people who live in godlessness, who do not pray and lead a non-spiritual existence. It is the godless people who are the topic of the narrative. Then at the end of this description, the narrator pauses and makes a statement about the fate of such a person, who does not know God. This is therefore a turning point in the narrative, and the fate of this godless person qualifies as new information, in this case ‘woe’. If the narrator had used the dative subject, that would have been a natural continuation of an established topic. However, by having ‘woe’ in first position, the new information is focalized.

Observe also that immediately following the sentence beginning with ‘woe’, there is a sentence beginning with *wel* ‘well’. The structure of the first part of the two utterances is exactly parallel, i.e., *woe-is-DAT* and *wel-is-DAT*, where the fate of the godless person is contrasted with the fate of the religious one. This is a clear example of PAIRED FOCI, corroborating our analysis of the position of the ‘woe’ in *woe-is-DAT* as a focus position.

A question that now arises relates to the nature of this focus fronting. Lambrecht (1994, 2000, 2001), and following him Dahlström (2003), distinguishes between three types of foci: sentence focus, argument focus and predicate focus. Sentence focus is typically found with default word order, while argument focus and predicate focus may involve fronting. In our case, it is clearly not argument focus that we are dealing with here as ‘woe’ is not an argument but an adverb. In other words, when ‘woe’ occurs in first position, which is a marked word order, it is the predicate that is focalized. In Icelandic and the older Germanic languages, for instance, this kind of fronting is quite common. Notice that this is an old feature of these languages, found already in the early Runic inscriptions. Consider, for instance, an example from the Sjøælland 2 inscription, which starts with the following string (Eythórsson 2001: 21, with references):

- (24) Hariuha haitika farawisa
 Hariuha am.called.I danger.knowing
 ‘I am called Hariuha, the one who knows danger’

In this runic inscription, the complement *Hariuha* of the verb *haita* ‘be called’ occurs in first position, while the subject is represented as a clitic attached to the verb. Obviously, the person, *Hariuha*, has not been mentioned earlier in the context, as this is the opening string of the inscription. *Hariuha* clearly represents new information, and is thus the most focal constituent in this sentence.

In the next section we will show how these constructions may be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, with the aid of Sign-Based Construction Grammar.

7. Reconstructing the Syntax of ‘woe’

In this section we present three reconstructions for Proto-Indo-European using Sign-Based Construction Grammar formalism (Sag 2011, Michaelis 2010, 2011). We start with the reconstruction of the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction, we then suggest a reconstruction for the neutral word order pattern and finally a reconstruction for the fronted focus construction where ‘woe’ occurs in first position.

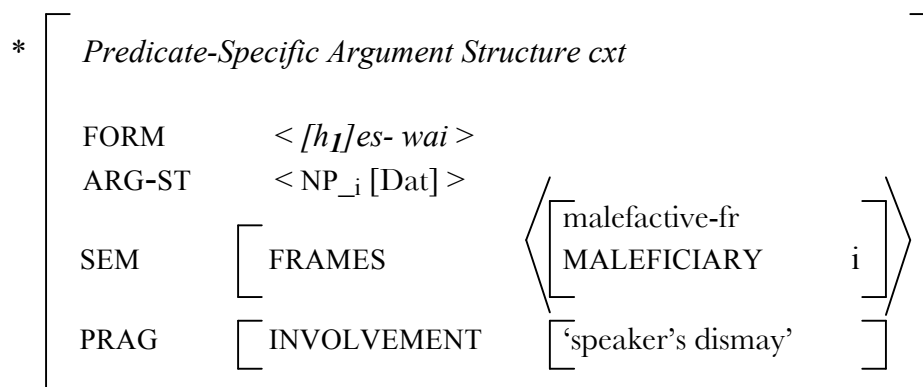
Starting with the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction, consider first Table 2, which gives the correspondence set for the construction. There are three alternatives in the correspondence set: ACC-*is-woe*, DAT-*is-woe* and GEN-*is-woe*. This means that the daughter languages show a certain degree of variation here, although the variant with the accusative is found only in Latin and the variant with the genitive is found only in Old Lithuanian. The data presented above from the five Indo-European subbranches, Germanic, Italic, Slavic, Baltic and Indo-Iranian, are sufficient for a reconstruction for Proto-Indo-European.

Table 2: Correspondence set for the DAT-*is-woe* argument structure construction

	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3
Old Germanic		DAT- <i>is-woe</i>	
Latin	ACC- <i>is-woe</i>	DAT- <i>is-woe</i>	
Slavic		DAT- <i>is-woe</i>	
Baltic		DAT- <i>is-woe</i>	GEN- <i>is-woe</i>
Avestan		DAT- <i>is-woe</i>	

As the ACC-*is-woe* and GEN-*is-woe* are only found in one Indo-European subbranch each, a reconstruction on the basis of these cannot be carried out. In contrast, the DAT-*is-woe* construction is found in all the Indo-European subbranches under investigation. We therefore opt for that variant of the correspondence set in our reconstruction for Proto-Indo-European.

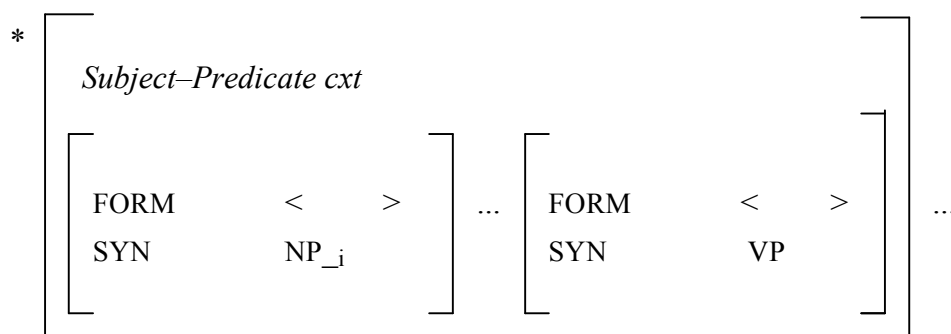
Figure 1: A reconstruction of the DAT-*is-woe* construction for Proto-Indo-European



Following Barðdal (2012), we propose a verb-specific argument structure construction like that in Figure 1, which consists of four levels. At the first level, labeled FORM, we find the morphophonological form of the predicate, in this case the verb ‘be’, here

given with its reconstructed root, and the adverb/interjection ‘woe’, with its standard etymological form. At the second level ARG-ST, the argument structure of the predicate is given, in this case there is only one argument and it is in the dative case. The third level SEM specifies the semantics, which is here given in terms of frame semantics (Fillmore 1982, 1985, Petruck 1996). The relevant frame for the DAT-*is-woe* construction is the maleficiary frame with only one participant, the maleficiary, here coindexed with the dative argument. We have also added a fourth level, PRAG (following Fried & Östman 2005 and Fried 2009), which expresses the pragmatic properties of the construction in language use, namely a high degree of speaker involvement, here labeled INVOLVEMENT. As this construction is generally used when something bad happens to people, the INVOLVEMENT feature is realized here as ‘speaker’s dismay’.

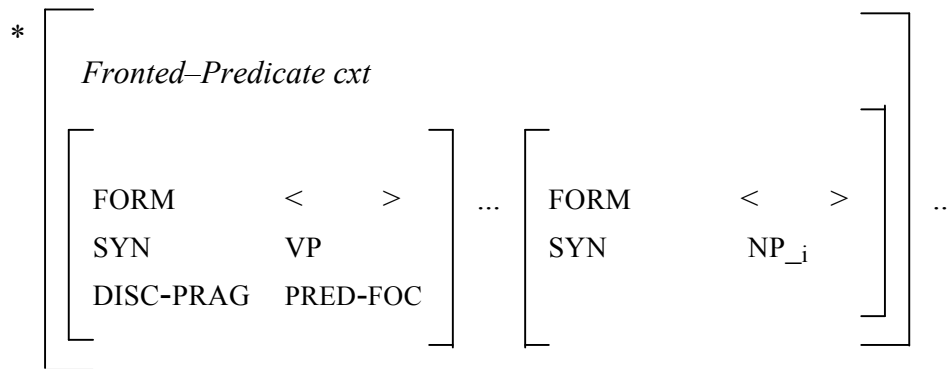
Figure 2: A reconstruction of the Subject–Predicate Construction for Proto-Indo-European



Since it is clear that VS initial word order in the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages is an innovation, we feel confident in reconstructing a general word order construction for Proto-Indo-European, where the subject precedes the verb, as shown in Figure 2. The FORM field is left empty here as this is not a reconstruction of the word order of any particular construct, but rather a reconstruction of the general word order properties of subjects and their predicates (cf. Kay & Fillmore 1999, Kuningas & Leino 2006). The SYN field specifies that the first part of the Subject-Predicate construction is a noun phrase, which is coindexed with the first argument of the argument structure in Figure 1, i.e. NP_i. In the second field of the Subject-Predicate construction the SYN field is specified as a VP. Notice that the ellipsis between the two constituents, the subject and the predicate, shows that other material may intervene between the two, and the ellipsis following the predicate shows that other material may follow it.

Finally, for a focus construction in which the focused element has been fronted to initial position, in this case predicate focus, the word order between the subject and the predicate will be reversed, as shown in Figure 3, where a discourse pragmatic level, DISC-PRAG has been added, with the value PRED-FOC for predicate focus. Again, the ellipsis between the two constituents shows that other material may intervene, and the ellipsis after the subject shows that other material may follow the subject in the clause.

Figure 3: A reconstruction of the Fronted Predicate Focus Construction for Proto-Indo-European



To conclude, the formalism of Sign-Based Construction Grammar may be adequately used to reconstruct the properties of the DAT-*is-woe* construction under discussion in the present article. First we have reconstructed a predicate-specific argument structure construction for the DAT-*is-woe* construction where the case marking of the predicate is specified in relation to its arguments, in this case the only argument of the predicate, i.e. the dative subject. We then reconstructed a general word order construction which specifies that the subject precedes the verb, and finally a fronted focus construction which specifies that the order of the subject and the verb is inverted when the predicate is fronted in predicate focus constructions.

We believe that these properties are all inherited from Proto-Indo-European, and as such, these three constructions are sufficient to reconstruct a syntactic behavior of the DAT-*is-woe* construction on the basis of the five subbranches that we have investigated here, namely the case marking of the subject argument and the two word orders attested with the construction.

8. Summary

This article has dealt with the syntactic behavior of the ancient Proto-Indo-European interjection, traditionally reconstructed as **wai* in the literature. It has furthermore dealt with its semantics, its use in human interaction, and thus its use in discourse. We have here investigated in detail the syntactic environments that ‘woe’ instantiates in a subset of the daughter languages, i.e. Early Germanic, Latin, Old Slavic, Baltic, and Old Indo-Iranian. In addition to its bare extra-sentential use in the daughters, ‘woe’ also occurs systematically with a dative subject-like argument, a construction which we have here referred to as the DAT-*is-woe* construction. We have categorically referred to this dative subject-like argument as a “dative subject” on the basis of the fact that it is the only, and hence, the first or leftmost argument of its argument structure, namely S in Dixon’s alignment typology.

Our investigation into the above-mentioned five Indo-European language branches has revealed that the DAT-*is-woe* construction is found in all the daughters. Four of the relevant language branches allow the verb ‘be’ to be dropped in the present tense, but examples from Latin and Gatha Avestan with the verb ‘be’ in the subjunctive mood, examples from Latvian with the verb ‘be’ in future tense, in addition to the Germanic examples with and without ‘be’, corroborate our analysis that examples of DAT-*woe* really are instances of the finite DAT-*is-woe* construction. In

several cases, moreover, the DAT-*is-woe* construction is found in optative contexts where the omission of the verb ‘be’ is quite natural. It is also clear from our examples that instances of ‘woe-me’ cannot be analyzed as a fossilized lexical expression, as ‘woe’ is documented to occur not only with 1st person pronouns, but also with 2nd and 3rd person pronouns, in the Indo-European daughter languages investigated here. In addition to the systematic occurrences of the DAT-*is-woe* construction, we have also found sporadic examples of ‘woe’ with an accusative in Latin and a genitive in Old Lithuanian.

We have then shown that the DAT-*is-woe* construction is not an aberration in the Indo-European language system, as it belongs to a family of related constructions, of which other instances have been documented with compositional predicates of the type ‘be’ together with an adverb, adjective, noun or prepositional objects. This family of constructions is highly polysemous, with meanings encompassing semantic concepts like EXPERIENCE, HAPPENSTANCE, MODALITY, EVIDENTIALITY and POSSESSION. Yet another issue in need of explanation is related to the word order variation found within all five of the branches, manifested as a systematic variation in the order of the dative subject and ‘woe’, i.e. as DAT-*is-woe* and *woe-is-DAT*. An examination of the *woe-is-DAT* instances clearly shows that when ‘woe’ is in first position it represents new information, not mentioned earlier in the discourse. As such, ‘woe’ in first position functions as fronted focused material. Given that ‘woe’ is generally used when something bad happens to people, it is the quintessential candidate for predicate focus in situations of adversity.

As we believe that the properties of the DAT-*is-woe* construction are inherited, we have here reconstructed three constructions for Proto-Indo-European to account for the behavior of DAT-*is-woe*: a) an argument structure construction which specifies that there is only one argument and that this argument is in the dative case, b) a subject-verb construction which specifies that the default word order in Proto-Indo-European was with the subject in initial position and the verb following it, and c) a predicate-focus construction which places the predicate in first position, preceding the subject, if the predicate was in focus in the discourse. These three constructions are sufficient to capture the behavior of the DAT-*is-woe* construction across the five Indo-European daughter languages discussed here, and hence to reconstruct the behavior of the construction in Proto-Indo-European.

In contrast to the consensus in the field that historical-comparative syntactic reconstruction is a futile and unavailing enterprise, we have shown in the present article how syntactic reconstruction may be fruitfully carried out with the aid of Construction Grammar, here specifically using the formalism of Sign-Based-Construction Grammar.

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