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Spatial Frames of Reference in Old Latin

This paper investigates the spatial Frames of Reference (FoRs) in Old Latin within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics (cf. Talmy 1983; Levinson 2003; Levinson & Wilkins 2006). Differently from modern Indo-European languages, which are heavily based on the so-called *relative* or *egocentric* FoR, ancient Indo-European languages such as Vedic and Homeric Greek did not make use of such an egocentric orientation system at their earliest stage, since the relation between FIGURE and GROUND was not specified by imposing an external deictic observer's viewpoint (cf. Bartolotta 2018; 2021). The historical-comparative analysis of the most ancient literary texts in the Indo-European tradition gives us the opportunity to investigate early spatial orientation systems that might have been inherited from the proto-language. Strikingly, data from the Rigveda and the Homeric poems show that those languages made use of the same two orientation systems, i.e. the *intrinsic* and the *absolute*. Thus, the fact that both languages appear to lack the *relative* or egocentric FoR challenges the reconstruction of a deictic orientation system also for Indo-European. More specifically, the use of spatial terms FRONT, BEHIND, LEFT, RIGHT shows no evidence for a spatial perspective projected by bodily coordinates (on front-back and/or right-left axes) either in Vedic or in Greek. The aim of this study is to add the perspective of Old Latin, by focusing on the meaning and the contexts of use of these spatial terms in the comedies of Plautus. The results of this analysis are consistent with the hypothesis according to which the ternary *relative* FoR was not the primary orientation system in Proto-Indo-European. In fact, the data show that Plautus made primarily use of the binary *intrinsic* FoR (both *object-centered* and *direct*), as the GROUNDS taken as reference points of the spatial scene were always entities endowed with unambiguous intrinsic front-back sides (e.g. the house, the doors, the army, the human body and its parts). Furthermore, although more rarely, the spatial scene could also be described by referring to fixed constant bearings abstracted from the environment (e.g. prevailing wind directions), according to the *absolute* or *field-based* FoR. In both intrinsic and absolute FoRs, the spatial description does not change by changing perspective. Consequently, it is not strictly necessary to involve an extra-entity, i.e. a deictic observer imposing her/his own viewpoint to the scene, as is crucial in case of GROUNDS that are intrinsically 'unfeatured'. It is plausibly for this reason that no trace has been found of the more complex *relative* FoR in Plautus' comedies. These results are consistent with both typological and historical-comparative studies. In a typological perspective,

the universal status of the egocentric or *relative* FoR proper to modern Indo-European languages (Mühlhäusler 2001) has indeed been challenged by recent evidence on many non-Indo-European languages (see, among others, Levinson 2003; O'Meara & Pérez Báez 2011). In addition, it has been shown that there is a constraint toward the *absolute-intrinsic* FoR combination in the world's languages (cf. Kataoka 2002). In a historical-comparative perspective, these preliminary data might allow us to list Old Latin among those ancient Indo-European languages, like Vedic and Greek, which originally did not make use of a deictic orientation system.

References

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