

Ergativity/accusativity revisited

(oral presentation)

Historically, two different kinds of observations on language structure have contributed to the emergence of the notion of ergativity/accusativity:

- Observations on *A-centered* vs. *P-centered transitive constructions*: linguists confronted with languages such as Basque or Caucasian languages observed that, in the languages in question, the asymmetry between the two core terms of the transitive construction differs from that observed in more familiar languages, since the core term showing coding characteristics that clearly distinguish it from obliques (use of a form identical to the quotation form of nouns and/or indexation) is P (and not A).
- Observations on *A-aligned* vs. *P-aligned intransitive constructions*: linguists analyzing the indexation systems of Amerindian languages in which the transitive construction does not show the kind of asymmetries commonly found in the transitive constructions of the languages of Eurasia (absence of case contrast and obligatory indexation of both A and P) observed that in some of those languages, S is indexed like A, whereas in others, S is indexed like P (Sapir 1916).

With some notable exceptions (such as DeLancey 1981), recent works on ergativity operate with a notion of ergativity/accusativity explicitly formulated in terms of *intransitive alignment* only. This approach to ergativity/accusativity follows from the acknowledgment that, in languages in which the transitive construction shows asymmetries of the kind commonly found for example in Daghestanian languages, the coding characteristics of S and P tend to be identical, whereas S and A tend to have identical coding characteristics in languages in which the asymmetry is of the type encountered in Latin. However, the correlation is very far from perfect, and the complex relation between the asymmetries in the transitive constructions and the coding properties of the single argument of intransitive verbs cannot be captured on the basis of a definition of ergativity/accusativity formulated exclusively in terms of alignment. A crucial point is that, in some domains (such as nominalizations, presentational focus constructions, “unaccusative” predicates) “ergative alignment”, even in the coding properties of S, seems to constitute a universal tendency rather than a typological characteristic of some languages.

In order to overcome some shortcomings of the current approach to ergativity/accusativity, it is proposed to conceive ergativity/accusativity as a complex notion involving prototypes defined on the basis of the possible correlations between a typology of *asymmetries in the transitive construction* and a typology of *intransitive alignment* conceived as two logically independent but typologically related domains.