

Reconstructing sources for hierarchical alignment in main clause grammar

Hierarchical alignment may be narrowly defined as cross-referencing morphology that, whether along with or instead of referencing role, references the highest-ranked participant in a transitive clause. The minimal ranking hierarchy is Speech Act Participant (SAP) > third person (3); attested expansions include ranking first and second person relative to one another and/or ranking two third persons with reference to semantic information (human > animate > inanimate) or to pragmatic status (pronoun > proper noun > definite > indefinite; primary topic [proximate] > secondary topic [obviative]). An additional component may be marking of direction: Direct (often unmarked) indicating that A is ranked higher than P, Inverse (usually marked) indicating that P is ranked higher than A.

So in reconstructing individual cases of hierarchical alignment, we must independently investigate three distinct phenomena: (i) the sources for the person-marking forms, (ii) the sources for direct and/or inverse markers, and (iii) the processes by which these alignment systems create the observed grammatical sensitivity to the hierarchy. With these reconstructions in hand, we can test the simplest hypothesis, that all three phenomena are related, and thus arise together, due to a natural inclination by speakers to give special treatment to higher-ranking participants. The data presented in this paper suggest that this hypothesis it is not always true.

In the Cariban and Tupí-Guaraní families of South America, hierarchical alignment is primarily seen in verbal person-marking prefixes. In both families, SAP prefixes always occur on the verb, whereas 3rd person prefixes are weakly attested or absent. In both families, A-marking forms come from the oldest (probably nominative) layer of verbal person-marking and the P-marking forms are more recently contracted forms of personal pronouns. Both families also present a verbal prefix that appears when P outranks A, and which by some has been called an inverse marker. In both families, this prefix derives historically from a “relational prefix”, which occurs instead of person-marking whenever any head N, P, or third-person subject V is preceded by a dependent noun or pronoun; as such, its co-occurrence with P prefixes is an epiphenomenon that follows from the relatively recent etymological status of P markers as free pronouns.

The remaining question is how this organization of prefixes merged into a system which shows sensitivity to the typologically common hierarchy. In both families, we have good grounds for internal reconstruction of a nominative system of verbal cross-referencing prefixes, in which the third person subject was unmarked, or identical to the relational prefix (**Ø-/j-* in Cariban, **Ø-/r-* in tupí-Guaraní), as opposed to the explicit forms marking SAP subject. Thus, when subject is third person, it was possible for speakers to reanalyze the verb as having no explicit person-marker. This allows the preceding SAP object pronouns to immediately precede the verb; when they cliticize, SAP subjects and SAP objects are the only entities marked, and the observed hierarchy is established: SAP > 3. The actual source of the hierarchy is, then, the typologically common pattern of zero third person subject marking.