Towards a typology of TAM-determined case marking asymmetries

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Ergative languages are very rarely consistently ergative, rather they usually show some kind of case marking split. In his monograph on ergativity, Dixon (1994) presents a partial typology of alignment splits found within ergative languages. A specific type of split is what Dixon terms 'split conditioned by tense/aspect/mood.' This type of split is attested in a number of genetically independent Eurasian languages (e.g., the Kartvelian language Georgian, the isolate language Burushaski, some Tibeto-Burman languages and many languages of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family). Comrie (1978: 351) states "[o]ne of the commonest ways in which languages manifest split ergativity is according to tense/aspect: in some tenses or aspects the language is nominative-accusative, in others it is ergative-absolutive". Languages of this type usually show an ergative alignment in the past tense or perfective aspect but accusative alignment in the present tense or imperfective aspect. This type of split is often described as if tense/aspect determines case marking of the actor and undergoer argument simultaneously. Although some languages (e.g., Georgian) show evidence for the fact that tense/aspect affects the case marking of the two macrorole arguments simultaneously, many more languages show that tense/aspect only affects case marking of the actor argument. Case marking of the undergoer arguments is usually determined by referential properties (e.g., definiteness or animacy). Finally, a number of languages show a combination of different factors determining case marking of the actor argument. Many Indo-Aryan languages, for example, restrict ergative case marking to 3rd person actor arguments of perfective verbs.

Within the talk, I develop a typology of tense/aspect-determined case marking splits (mainly based on data from the above-mentioned Eurasian languages). The core of the typology is a distinction between tense/aspect-based and tense/aspect-conditioned case marking asymmetries. A split is classified as being tense/aspect-based if tense/aspect is the only relevant factor determining case marking. A split is classified as being tense/aspect-conditioned, if a saliency-based split (e.g., person-based differential actor marking) is restricted to a particular tense/aspect value. I propose the existence of four different types of TAM-determined case marking splits: TAM-based differential actor marking, TAM-conditioned differential actor marking, TAM-conditioned differential undergoer marking and TAM-based alignment splits ('alignment splits' refers to a split affecting both macrorole arguments simultaneously). Two further types of splits are unattested: TAM-based differential object marking and TAM-conditioned alignment splits.

The essential claim of the talk is that an infrequent type of split ergativity – TAM-based alignment splits – have been taken as the representative type of tense/aspect-based split ergativity. The preliminary results of the study presented in this talk will indicate that our view on the interaction between tense and aspect on the one hand and case marking on the other hand changes dramatically, if we investigate it from a broader typological perspective.

References
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