

Indirect diachronic explanations in typology: the case of Differential Agent Marking

Until recently, direct synchronic functional explanations played a crucial role in typology to account for (sometimes only alleged) universal tendencies. However, such explanations have at least two shortcomings: they cannot account for rare patterns and exceptions to universal tendencies, and they neglect diachronic developments. Fortunately, the situation has changed in recent years, and typology has become a discipline that also seeks to explain diachronic developments (see e.g. Bickel 2007).

The present paper aims at accounting for synchronic patterns in terms of their diachronic emergence by studying instances of Differential Agent Marking (DAM), which refers to a variation in the case-marking of the Agent argument of two- and three-argument constructions. (I follow Bickel's (2011) approach to grammatical relations.) DAM can be conditioned by the following factors:

- Referential properties of the A argument, such as person, number, animacy
- Predicate class (where classes are defined on morphosyntactic grounds alone, i.e. according to their case frame)
- Clause properties: TAM values, polarity, clause type (main vs. different types of subordinate clauses), scenario (nature of co-arguments)
- Semantic function (such as volitionality)
- Information structure

Many instances of DAM are diachronically unstable: They are found when one alignment pattern (e.g. accusative alignment) changes to another alignment pattern (e.g. ergative alignment). Interestingly, the change of alignment patterns need not be unidirectional, which e.g. the history of modern Iranian languages shows (cf. Haig 2008).

New A markers often occur towards the lower end of the Silversteinian hierarchy (see Silverstein 1976), but counterexamples are found. My paper suggests that these counterexamples cannot be explained in purely functional terms; rather, they have to be accounted for in terms of language-specific diachronic developments.

Contexts and mechanisms involved in the emergence of DAM include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Reanalysis of complex NPs as full clauses
- Emergence or extension of predicate classes with different case frames
- Reanalysis of elliptical variants of constructions (e.g. instruments that are reanalyzed as inanimate A arguments)
- Reanalysis of biclausal constructions as monoclausal constructions
- Reanalysis of focus markers as A markers

These diachronic mechanisms show that in many cases the emergence of DAM is often a mere side effect of diachronic changes occurring in other parts of the grammar (cf. Creissels 2008).

The present paper aims to address the following points:

- Determination of language-internal contexts in which DAM occurs
- Mechanisms that give rise to DAM
- Origins of the involved case markers
- Postulation of crosslinguistic regularities

These points will be illustrated by examples based on a worldwide language sample.

References

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