Optional ergative case marking: what can be expressed by its absence?

Oral presentation

Both the presence and the absence of information are sometimes equally useful for communication. A substantive example of this paradox is found in languages where otherwise obligatory grammatical information identifying core arguments (e.g. ergative case) may be 'optionally' absent without any consequences for the grammatical function of NPs in the clause. Far from being communicatively uninformative, the absence of ergative case marking has been linked to a range of different effects on the meaning of a clause within languages exhibiting this variability (McGregor 2009). These include focus alternations (e.g. Tounadre 1995), and the marking of modality (e.g. Hildebrandt 2004) and aspect (e.g. Li (2007).

The existence of optional ergative case marking (OEM) raises important questions about our understanding of the role of case in language by (i) contesting the theoretical predominance of purely structural and lexically governed cases in mainstream linguistic theory and (ii) challenging preconceived ideas about the relationship between effability, obligatoriness and grammaticality. The factors that condition OEM cross-linguistically indicate that an adequate model of language must take into account subtle yet generalisable semantic and pragmatic conditions on the morphological form of core arguments (McGregor 2009). This clearly indicates that both morphosyntactic *features* (such as case) and *conditions* on those features (in the sense of Corbett 2006, 2012) play an important role in the distribution of case marking.

OEM is attested in many languages of the Himalayas, Australia and Papua New Guinea, yet little is currently known about possible variation in conditions on case-optionality across closely related languages in contact. This research reports on the results of a micro-typology of Indic, Tamangic and Tibetan languages spoken within the Tibetan Plateau Buffer Zone between the more typologically consistent Indospheric and Sinospheric Tibeto-Burman languages of the region (Matisoff 1991, Bickel and Nichols 2003, Hildebrandt 2007). Our approach, which uses data gathered using parallel elicitation and discourse collection methods, permits the exploration of linguistic variability through exploring the consistencies and subtle differences among the languages under investigation.

In this paper we discuss the factors that permit OEM for each language, including the types of features underlying splits in grammatical domains that permit OEM, and the language-specific pragmatic and structural conditions under which ergative case marking is absent. Specifically, we consider the roles that features and conditions play in establishing the distribution of ergative case and consider whether instances of 'optional ergative case' involve an ergative case feature.

Our approach aims to distinguish between (i) arguments that are consistently ergative (i.e. where the role of this case feature value is clear), (ii) arguments where the absence of ergative marking simply indicates the use of a morphologically unmarked case (such as absolutive, which is zero-marked in many of the languages in our survey), and (iii) arguments where the absence of ergative case marker indicates an alternation in the morphosemantic or information-structural properties of the clause, but not the grammatical function of the NP.

We demonstrate that while tense-aspect, focus and volitionality of the subject are clearly important factors in determining the splits in the marking of ergative case in some languages such as Nepali and Lhasa Tibetan, conditions on the distribution of ergative in other languages such as in Nar-Phu (Noonan 2003) and Manange (Hildebrandt 2004) are much less consistent. Rather than being predictable on the basis of a single condition or, indeed, being rigidly fixed, the evidence examined points to an analysis of OEM in which a multitude of conditions on case marking are employed to indicate a meaningful contrast.