

Some curious and subtle properties of grammatical objects in Aguaruna (Jivaroan)

Oral presentation

General session

Aguaruna is a Jivaroan language spoken mainly in Amazonas, Peru. Morphologically it is suffixing and agglutinating and shows both head and dependent marking. Unmarked constituent order is predicate-final, and clause-chaining is pervasive. Grammatical relations centre on Subject and Object, and basically follow accusative alignment. Morphological (case-marking and verbal indexing) and syntactic properties of Subject are uncontroversial, but Object is less clear. Two phenomena in particular stand out as typologically interesting: (i) split marking of objects and (ii) status of multiple objects.

Split marking

There is a scenario-conditioned split in accusative case marking (see Witzlack-Makarevich 2011 §8.6 for discussion), whereby third person objects remain unmarked if the subject is first person plural or second person. Overall (2007) relates this to a hierarchy 1sg > 2sg > 1pl/2pl > 3, but in fact this is not sufficient to explain scenarios with 1pl acting on 2sg/pl or *vice versa*. This paper will report on new fieldwork data and attempt to clarify the details of this typologically unusual system.

Multiple objects

Case marking of all objects (notional direct and indirect objects as well as those added by applicative derivation) is identical. Syntactic processes are even less selective, with relativisation and nominalisation simply contrasting Subject with “non-Subject”, which may include locations and other oblique participants. This suggests that Aguaruna is a symmetrical language, in the sense of Bresnan & Moshi (1990). There is only one morphological slot for marking SAP objects on the verb, and speakers paraphrase to avoid competition for this slot. These avoidance strategies, together with the marking of what Haspelmath (2007) labels ditransitive inverse situations, suggest a ranking of Beneficiary/Recipient over Theme, which in turn presupposes a syntactic distinction between these roles. However the very marginal role of this distinction in the grammar raises the question of what it means for a language to be asymmetrical (cf. Zariquiey 2011 on Kashibo-Kakataibo).

References:

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