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Typology of Morphosyntactic Variations of Ergative Constructions in the Batsbi and the Georgian Languages

Languages can be divided into three major types, depending on the extent to which the three main dimensions of relational structuring (*semantic roles, information flow, and deictic anchoring)* are grammaticalized: "pivotless" languages, with no or little grammaticalization of any of these dimensions, "pure" languages, strongly grammaticalizing only one of them, and "mixed" languages, strongly grammaticalizing more then one dimension [5].

According to this typology, Georgian is a mixed language, more precisely a role-deixis-oriented language, but the same qualification would apply to Batsbi (or Tsova-tush, the designation now preferably used by native speakers), where ergative case is used provided that the noun is *(i) Ag, (ii) I/II person, and (iii) acts according to his/her 'free will' and controls the action* [4]. Due to this peculiarity, it seems that Tsova-tush developed a fluid-S pattern [3] from an original ergative pattern which is preserved in the other Nakh languages. However, verb concord (class markers), which represents the category of 'transitivity', keeps the original ergative construction of the Nakh languages: It is not restricted to I/II person and the Patient does not show the I/II versus III dichotomy either (no person markers). Therefore, in Tsova-tush, the category of 'Transitivity' is stronger and stands above the category of 'Communicative Act'; so, the hierarchy T>CA holds.

Peculiarities of ergative constructions in Tsova-tush, presumably, might result from Georgian language influence (the Tsova-tush language is spoken in the Axmeta region of Georgia), in so far as Georgian strives for formal markedness of the I/II:III opposition and grammaticalization of the dichotomy is a dominant feature in the system of its grammatical categories [1]. But in Georgian, on the other hand, a different, opposite hierarchy should be used to arrive at adequate linguistic structures: CA>T.

Although Tsova-tush is similar to Georgian in one respect (both can be qualified as role-deixis-oriented languages), it also differs from it in a significant way: Because of contact with the Georgian language Tsova-tush shows the I/II versus III dichotomy, although its formalization takes place only after grammaticalization of the class category which is the basis for the prototypical ergative constructions. That is, it keeps the original category as stronger and puts it on a higher position in hierarchy.

Such a theoretical approach gives us an argument to conclude that for purposes of a comprehensive description of languages, it is not enough to define languages as merely mixed systems, but we must also state of which hierarchies they make use.

The hierarchies are defined according to the priority given to marked categories in surface realizations: They reflect dynamic synchronic processes of linguistic structuring. The hierarchies can explain diachronic linguistic changes as well and, we suppose, they can give us new understanding about the nature of linguistic change in situations of language contact: When new categories or structures rise in languages because of contact (or because of language internally motivated variation), the old ones do not disappear but take a high position in a hierarchically organized linguistic system.

References

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