Ergativity splits and DSM in Cabécar (Chibcha)

Oral

The crucial question in differential subject marking (DSM) is where the differences in the coding of subjects come from (Woolford 2008). The present contribution deals with an ergative language (Cabécar, Chibchan, Costa Rica, see previous related studies, Quesada 1999, Margery Peña 2003). DSM in this language relates to (a) the presence/absence of the ergative suffix and (b) the choice among two different ergative suffixes. The conditions that determine DSM are highly complex (prominence of the argument, aspect, clause type). This talk presents a detailed description of these conditions (based on competence data elicited in three fieldwork periods and observational data from a corpus of 150 narrative texts) and develops a unifying account that sheds light on the determinants of DSM in this language and its relation to prominence asymmetries as established in previous research in argument structure, see Aissen 1999 and discussion with respect to DSM in De Hoop & De Swart 2008.

We first establish that ergativity is a syntactic phenomenon in Cabécar (based on raising facts and argument dropping facts). The root of the asymmetries between ergative and non-ergative arguments lies in a strong syntactic constraint in this language, according to which the lowest argument (i.e., the object of transitives or the single argument of either unergatives or unaccusatives) is strictly left adjacent to the verb (the only possible order permutations are SOV, OVS, SV). This is the absolutive argument, which is not case-marked; ergative marking only appears with the subjects of transitive verbs (and not with subjects of unergatives as in some other languages). The following instances of DSM are observed:

(a) ergative marking is obligatory for postverbal subjects and optional for preverbal subjects (dropped with indefinites).
(b) ergative marking is obligatory in the imperfective/habitual/future and optional in perfective past (dropped with indefinites).
(c) ergative marking does not occur with reflexive and reciprocal constructions.
(d) the ergative marker is *të*/*te* in affirmative and *wã* in negative contexts (see Margery Peña 2003:xii).

We claim that the sources of these instances are multiple: The properties (b) and (c) reflect the fact that negation and non-perfective aspects involve changes influencing the thematic properties of transitive subjects (see Blaszczak 2008 for a similar account on Polish). The property (c) reflects the fact that the subjects of reflexives/reciprocals are absolutives in this language (independent evidence comes from word order). The property (a) reflects the asymmetry between canonical and non-canonical orders, which is expected since the latter are more likely to give rise to ambiguous interpretations than the former.

References
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