Alignment Change in the Hindu Kush-Karakorum

Systems of grammatical relations can be analyzed and classified according to their synchronic features, but in order to understand their origins, it is essential to take into account which historical source constructions developed into TAM formations in a particular language (Bybee et al. 1994: 9–12; Harris & Campbell 1995: 240–281; Harris 2008; Cristofaro 2013, 2019). A detailed understanding of source constructions often allows us to explain the current properties of the grammatical system. In cases where the exact source construction is not known, it can in turn be deduced from the traces left in the synchronic morphosyntax in combination with a comparison to earlier attested stages of related languages as well as typological parallels.

The Hindu Kush-Karakorum (HKK) as a region with highly diverse morphosyntactic alignment patterns (Liljegren 2014) among languages mostly belonging to a language family with a relatively well-known earlier history can serve as a testing ground for this approach. In our talk, we would like to explore the histories of two intriguing systems of grammatical relations from the HKK region.

The first is the nominative-accusative system in Prasun, which contrasts with the aspect-based split-ergative systems of the other Nuristani languages. Buddruss & Degener (2017: 119 & fn. 45) stress that the former presence of a split-ergative system in Prasun is "not provable" and "not supported by any evidence". If Prasun never went through a split-ergative stage, it would resemble Indo-Aryan Khowar and Kalasha which retain older Indo-Iranian synthetic past forms with a consistent nominative-accusative alignment pattern. This has also served as evidence for a "North Hindu Kush micro-area" (Liljegren 2021: 254, 276–277).

We argue, on the contrary, that synchronic properties of Prasun grammar, such as participle orientation and transitive-intransitive asymmetries in the verbal morphology, as well as the etymologies of pronominal forms, provide crucial evidence in support of the former existence of split ergativity. In order to show how this system was restructured towards a nominative-accusative pattern, we draw on parallels from typology and the history of earlier Indo-Iranian languages like Sogdian.

The second case is the consistent ergative-absolutive case marking in Shina, which goes along with nominative-accusative verbal indexing. The ergative case marker *-s ~ -se (-sa)*, limited to imperfective contexts in some varieties, as well as the alignment system as a whole, is commonly explained as a borrowing from Tibetan (Grierson 1927: 350; Bailey 1924: 211; Anderson 1977: 341–347, Schmidt & Kohistani 2008: 51, Liljegren 2014: 162). Though this scenario has also met with some skepticism (Lorimer 1924: 482–483; Tegethoff 2026: 207, fn. 456), and alternative proposals involving internal origin (Lorimer 1924: 483) or calquing from Burushaski (Berger 1991: 21) have also been proposed, it is generally "supported by modern-day Shina scholars" (Radloff & Liljegren 2022: 327).

In our talk, we will revisit the consensus explanation and the alternative proposals and evaluate their respective explanatory power and plausibility within the context of a diachronic typology of alignment change, focusing particularly on the possibilities and limits of borrowing of alignment patterns.

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