

Ergative alignment from a perspective of binary opposing grammatical options

This paper deals with binary pairs of various features of grammatical structures concerning ergative and accusative alignment, focusing particularly on cases of Papuan languages. Historically, the active alignment uses two kinds of subject markings, i.e. active/nominative marking for dynamic verbs and inactive/ergative marking for stative verbs. This binary pair was perhaps based on the nominal binary system between active and inactive nouns. When this alignment system turned into accusative or ergative system, this binary pair was broken and only one type of subject marking was chosen. This is a single instance where a different choice in a binary opposition is taken. However, this type of opposing choice in binary features seems to be very pervasive between accusative and ergative alignments.

There are some pieces of further evidence suggesting that languages with ergative alignment, especially Papuan, seem to take a different choice in a binary option. For instance, a verb of hearing is often used, among other mental verbs, as a base for metaphorisation to cover other senses such as comprehension (cf. Evans and Wilkins 1998; 2000). In verbal conjugation, it is common that the third person singular is used as a least marked form for both person and number, but this is normally the most marked form in Papuan languages, and the tense system of some Papuan languages is known to be future v. non-future, not past v. non-past (Haiman 1980), and possibly some special conceptualisation, too. The choice Papuan languages made in the past in forming ergative alignment seems to be consistently the opposite of a choice made by languages with accusative alignment, including both linguistic and non-linguistic features.

Binary oppositions seem to be useful in earlier stage of grammatical development, but this pair is bound to be broken up as languages develop (cf. Toyota 2009). This pattern is also observed in alignment change. When grammar is seen from a perspective of binary oppositions, alignment change seems to be more systematic, and various changes can be also found elsewhere in grammar. Judging from the consistency of choice of opposing features in accusative and ergative alignment, there seems to be opposite world view by speakers. Thus, it strongly suggests that this is not a mere grammatical issue, but something more general at the level of human cognition or conceptualisation.

Junichi Toyota

Lund University
SOL Centrum,
Centre for Cognitive Semiotics/linguistics
Box 201
SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden

Email: Junichi.Toyota@englund.lu.se