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The diachronic emergence of accusative alignment cross-linguistically

In the functional-typological research tradition that originated from the work of Joseph Greenberg, accusative alignment in case marking is traditionally explained in terms of similarity between A and S arguments: these arguments are encoded in the same way because they are both topical, or because they both represent starting points in discourse (Moravcsik 1978, Dixon 1979 and 1994, DeLancey 1981, Kibrik 1997, Mithun and Chafe 1999, Givón 2001). P arguments, on the other hand, are encoded differently because they need to be disambiguated from A arguments, and the use of distinct forms for different such arguments (differential object marking) may depend on their relative need for disambiguation, or their relative degree of prototypicality (Hopper and Thompson 1980, Comrie 1989, among many others).

These explanations have been extremely influential both in language typology and elsewhere, prompting for example psycholinguistic research on the assumed explanatory principles (see e.g. Fedzechkina, Jaeger, and Newport 2012, Kurumada and Jaeger 2015, Tal, Smith, Culbertson, Grossman, and Arnon 2022), as well as models where these principles are properly incorporated into a speaker's mental grammar (Aissen 2003, de Hoop and Malchukov 2008). However, they are based on the synchronic properties of accusative alignment (what arguments are or are not encoded in the same way), not diachronic processes that give rise to this pattern or shape its distribution from one language to another. This paper discusses the available diachronic evidence about the origins of accusative case marking alignment cross-linguistically, based on data from grammaticalization studies and studies of language change in general. This evidence, it will be argued, shows that accusative alignment is an epiphenomenal result of the properties of several different source constructions and developmental processes, rather than principles pertaining to particular synchronic properties of this alignment pattern in itself.

A recurrent developmental path leading to accusative alignment is one where A, S, and P arguments are originally undifferentiated, and some case form develops either for P arguments, or for A and S arguments. In many cases, this is a result of metonymization processes whereby various types of source elements (topic markers, focalizers, 'take' verbs in serial verb constructions) are reinterpreted as marking the role of a co-occurring argument (either P, or A and S), whereas the other arguments retain their original form. For pronouns, the case form may develop through phonological reduction of the original form when used with particular arguments (e.g. A and S), whereas the other arguments retain the original unreduced form.

A second major developmental path is reanalysis of argument structure. In particular, various types of intransitive construction can be reanalysed as transitive, at which point their S argument (usually a notional agent) becomes an A argument, whereas some other NP in the construction (usually a notional patient) becomes a P argument. The derived A argument retains the form used for S arguments, whereas the P argument retains the form used for its source NP.

Metonymization, phonological reduction and reanalysis are standard processes of language change, typically explained in terms of properties of the source construction, not properties of the resulting grammatical patterns. These properties include the contextual co-occurrence of particular forms and particular meanings, leading to their association, the high discourse frequency of particular forms, resulting in phonological reduction, and the availability of multiple interpretations for the same construction, leading to reanalysis. To the extent that these factors play a role in different languages, the same grammatical patterns will recurrently arise from one language to another, but this is unrelated to the synchronic properties of these patterns (Bybee 2006, among others).

This means that explaining accusative aligment requires an understanding of multiple factors unrelated to its synchronic properties, for example contextual factors driving different processes of metonymization or reanalysis, or usage-based factors leading to phonological reduction. These factors remain to a large extent unexplored, prompting different research questions than those formulated in traditional funcitonal-typological approaches to accusative alignment. For instance, why is it that particular source elements, e.g. topic markers, give rise to markers for P arguments in some languages but A and S arguments in others? When individual markers encode both A and S arguments, is this because they develop simultaneously for both, or because they are extended from one argument to another? Does accusative alignment emerge in different ways for different NP types, e.g. nouns and pronouns, and is this relevant for its distribution across these NP types? Also, there are several possible ways for accusative alignment to develop from particular source elements, which should be disentangled in individual cases. For example, while many accusative markers are transparently related to dative markers, this may be because the dative marker originally functioned as a topic marker that evolved into a direct object marker, or because some dative NP in an intransitive construction was reanalysed as a direct object as the construction became transitive.

These facts call for an explanatory approach where the focus shifts from the synchronic properties of accusative alignment (or any other cross-linguistic pattern) to disentangling the effects of several different phenomena that may give rise to this pattern and shape its cross-linguistic distribution over time.

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