

Proto-Indo-European ergativity... revisited

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Since Uhlenbeck's seminal article (*Agens und Patiens im Kasussystem der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 1901) many scholars have dedicated a great deal of work to the hypothesis of an ergative case in Proto-Indo-European (PIE), its possible consequences, and the enlightments it could shed on many obscure facts discovered by the comparatist school inside the IE family, not mentioning all the constructions it permitted in the more hypothetical fields of Pre- and Proto-IE. The Soviet linguistic school has been particularly active on ergativity in relation with their interests for living languages of the Caucasus (Georgian, Laz, Chechen...) and for ancient languages of the Middle East (Sumerian, Hurro-urartean, Elamite...).

More recent works have shifted the focus to Australian languages, in particular to Dyirbal, extensively used by Dixon and Comrie in their works on ergativity. When the trend towards language universals became active also in the field of ergativity, scholars began to seek explanation of the so-called „split ergativity”, i.e. discrepancy between the ideal and real manifestations of ergativity, in the animacy hierarchy of noun phrases. A sequel of this was that the kind of split ergativity demonstrated by PIE seemed contrary to the accepted universals and the ergative hypothesis became old-fashioned.

The talk will not bring new facts that could redeem the old hypothesis, but it will challenge the way language universals had been used to knock it over. The influence of the animacy hierarchy is known to be effective in many languages, but this leads more to a tendency than to an absolute universal. Also, PIE is not a language, even not a reconstructed one, but rather a field of experimentation. We will also present the viewpoint that PIE could have had no split at all, but solely a semantic impossibility to use inanimate noun phrases in agent role, which seemed backed up by the so-called „Anatolian ergative”.

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