

Contensive Typology and the Problem of Ergativity in Indo-Aryan

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The theoretical framework of the contensive typology elaborated in the works of G.A Klimov (e.g. 1973; 1976; 1977; 1983) has been widely criticized by Western scholars, particularly in the context of the ‘active’ languages. Despite the criticism, it appears that some of the ideas are still being reinterpreted (Wichmann 2008) and even applied to the reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European alignment system (Bauer 2000; Lehmann 1989; 1995).

Within Klimov’s theory of ergativity (1973), the Indo-Aryan branch was assumed to have borrowed the ergative pattern from the neighboring Tibeto-Burman languages (as had been earlier suggested by Regamey (1954)). This line of thought was developed by Russian scholars (Zakharyin 1979; 1982), who tried to reconstruct the possible formation of ergativity in Indo-Aryan as an effect of syntactic borrowing reinforced by the possible existence of a language of the active typology, which was presumably spoken in the Himalayas and which must have assimilated with surrounding Indo-Aryan tongues.

The point of departure for the present paper is the question of whether we in fact have any language data which would support such claims. In order to give an initial answer, I propose examining briefly the inscriptional language sources of Eastern Pahari presented by Joshi (2009), which seem to show that the replacement of old synthetic markers by new postpositional ones actually served to maintain the continuity of the ergative and obligative patterns. It would also be feasible to demonstrate that the tendencies in the development of the ergative pattern in the Pahari tongues are different from those observed in the languages of the plains. Even though the content-oriented typologists consider the Indo-Aryan ergativity a shallow phenomenon, it will be interesting to see how some of their own main arguments, for example regarding the unidirectionality of alignment change (from active to ergative), can be reinterpreted.

Therefore, in opposition to the contensive typology claim, I will postulate that the ergative pattern in Indo-Aryan was not borrowed, but could have been reinforced due to foreign influence.

Then I would like to reexamine the set of anti-impersonal verbs (cf. Lazard 1985), which are conceived as an active residue in ergative languages (Klimov 1977). They constitute a well-attested phenomenon in the Indo-Aryan languages (Montaut 1991), and therefore a transition from active to ergative type within Indo-Aryan cannot be excluded.

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