

The emergence of split-oblique case systems: a view from the Bhili dialect continuum (Indo-Aryan)

Indo-Aryan ergativity is aspectually conditioned: the transitive subject, if marked, is marked only in perfective clauses, and verb agreement in most (but not all) such cases, is not with the subject but rather determined by case-marking on the direct object. Existing research has amply noted language-specific variability in overt marking of ergative case on the subject, overt marking of accusative case on the object (differential object marking (DOM)), and concomitant effects on verbal agreement.

While Hindi-Urdu presents the best studied system, the systems obtaining in Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Kutchi Gujarati, Nepali, and several dialects of Marathi have also been analyzed (Mahajan 1990, Mohanan 1994, Mistry 1997, Patel-Grosz 2012, a.o. for individual systems, with a comparative treatment in Deo & Sharma 2006).

The case-marking patterns found in several case-marking systems in the Bhili dialect continuum (a set of closely related Indo-Aryan dialects spoken in Western and Central India) present an interesting deviation. In contrast to the split-ergative pattern seen in much of Indo-Aryan ($S = O$, $S \neq A$), these systems exhibit a split-oblique pattern ($A = O$, $S \neq A$) in significant subparts of the case paradigms.

Three properties of the relevant paradigms are worth considering:

- a. In several systems, there is syncretism between ergative and oblique marking in much of the pronominal and nominal inflectional paradigms (1pl, 2pl, 3sg, 3pl).
- b. In some systems, the bare oblique is further used to mark possessors in lieu of a dedicated genitive case (with num-gen-case features) seen in standard languages like Hindi and Gujarati.
- c. In other systems, the bare oblique is additionally used to mark direct objects (DOM) in parts of the pronominal paradigm.

In this talk, I investigate the hypothesis that the oblique form was recruited for marking agents in perfective, transitive clauses as well as patients with high animacy/referentiality properties for those cells in the paradigm that lacked distinct inflectional ergative and accusative marking. The emergence of a split-oblique system from an original split-ergative system can be thus tied to the reduction of the morphological case-inventories of particular languages. I take the first steps towards explaining these synchronic/diachronic patterns by appealing to a constrained interface between abstract and morphosyntactic case of the sort assumed in Kiparsky (2001). On this approach, abstract case features function as constraints on morphosyntactic case and the assignment of morphosyntactic case marking to abstract structural roles is determined by optimizing featural correspondence between the two.