

On Some Universals? of Case and Agreement

The distribution of the major case and agreement alignments has been held to reflect a tetrachoric (implicational) universal: languages may show the same alignment in both case and agreement, but if they diverge, then it is always the case that case alignment is ergative-absolutive, while agreement alignment is apparently nominative-accusative. The reverse combination is unattested. After reviewing the explanation of this universal in Bobaljik 2008 (cf. Baker 2008, Legate 2008), I examine alleged counter-examples, arguing that the universal survives scrutiny. The proposed explanation makes use of the grouping of cases known as the Dependent Case Hierarchy: {nom/abs} < {erg/acc} < {dat/obl}.

Dependent Case Theory may play a central role in the explanation of another asymmetry between case and agreement, specifically, in explaining the the typological observation that “Split-S” and other “active” alignments are surprisingly much rarer as case alignments than as alignments of bound person marking. The account, developed in joint work in progress with Mark Baker, relies on the observation that where active agreement systems can be readily described, an active case pattern cannot arise as a core alignment under DCT. Such patterns can only arise as the interaction of one of the core alignment patterns with independent aspects of the grammars of individual languages. In developing that account, we predict a further, and as far as we are aware previously unobserved, asymmetry between what Bittner & Hale called “accusative active” and “ergative active” languages.