On the Rise of Ergative Structures in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa has long been seen as a continent without any ergative languages, that is languages with a grammaticalized ergative case system (see e.g. Creissels, 2000). In the last 15 years this view has been revised. There is an area stretching from the southern Sudan to south western Ethiopia where four genetically closely related West Nilotic languages (Nilo-Saharan), namely Anywa, Päri, Jur-Luwo and Shilluk (all Northern Lwoo) show ergative features to a different degree. Shilluk is the only pure ergative language with a full fledged ergative case system, the remaining languages are split ergative languages with either showing an ergative or a marked nominative system. The latter, a peculiarity outside of Africa, is the most widespread case type within Africa. Marked nominative languages (also called extended ergative) are a mixture of ergative and nominative-accusative languages. All African ergative languages are areally and genetically surrounded by pure marked nominative case languages. In the literature there is a hot debate on whether these languages have acquired their ergative features out of a former marked nominative system, or the other way round. Or whether with regard to the case markers involved the ergative goes back to a former nominative or the other way round.

Outside Africa, there are claims for a development from ergative to marked nominative, as e.g. by Li, Thompson and Sawyer (1977) for Wappo.

Within Nilo-Saharan, Randal (2000) has speculated whether Proto-Surmic has been ergative.

I will propose a development from a former marked nominative to an ergative system; or from a nominative to an ergative case marker, respectively. The source for the ergative marker in Anywa, Päri and Jur-Luwo is a definiteness marker; in Shilluk it is a preposition, originally used to introduce agents as peripheral participants in passive clauses.

Typologically, ergativity in Africa shows some bizarre features since they all have an OVA word order.

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