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The Movima inverse from a typological perspective

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In this project we will carry out an in-depth investigation of the Movima direct-inverse system, which seems to contradict all common assumptions regarding the syntactic treatment of referentially higher-ranking participants. Movima is an isolate of Amazonian Bolivia, spoken in and around the town Santa Ana del Yacuma by still several hundred speakers. Despite current revitalization efforts, Movima is seriously endangered: almost all speakers are older than 50, bilingual in Spanish, and the language is not transmitted to children anymore.

In Movima transitive clauses, constituent order is determined by the place the nominal referents occupy on a referential hierarchy that involves person, animacy, and topicality. The semantic roles of the nominal constituents are assigned through direct or inverse morphology on the predicate. One of the arguments of a transitive clause has the same formal properties as the single argument of an intransitive clause, the other one shares its formal properties with a nominal possessor. Since inverse-marking reverses the semantic-role assignment of the arguments, the Movima system can be described as "remapping inverse" (cf. Zúñiga 2006).

Strikingly, and unlike other remapping patterns that have been described so far, in Movima, the argument that patterns with the single argument of an intransitive clause refers to the participant lower in the referential hierarchy. Furthermore, this argument has a privileged syntactic status, as is reflected most of all in relativization. As a consequence, direct clauses, in which the higher-ranking participant is the agent and the lower-ranking participant the patient, pattern ergatively, and inverse clauses, which display the reversed situation, pattern accusatively. This system poses a number of challenges to the typological assumptions about direct/inverse systems:

1. Direct/inverse as a syntactic phenomenon
Since direct/inverse systems typically occur in languages with pronominal affixes, these systems are often seen as a morphological rather than as a syntactic phenomenon. In Movima, by contrast, which lacks person agreement and has a fixed constituent order, the system has a direct impact on the interpretation of the nominal constituents. Furthermore, there is an asymmetry in the encoding of argument NPs, the referentially lower-ranking argument of a transitive clause aligning with the single argument of an intransitive clause. This alignment alignment asymmetry seems to be unusual of languages of the direct/inverse type.

2. Unusual alignment split
According to many typologists (e.g. Silverstein 1976, DeLancey 1981, Comrie 1989), in languages displaying ergative/accusative alignment splits based on a referential hierarchy (usually, 1/2 vs. 3), the upper section of the hierarchy (1st and 2nd person) is associated with accusative case marking, the lower section (3rd persons) with ergative case marking (cf. Silverstein 1976, Dixon 1994). Furthermore, in other "remapping inverse" systems (Zúñiga 2006), the direct construction patterns accusatively and the inverse construction ergatively. Both these patterns are usually accounted for by the fact that a high-ranking referent is a typical agent and a lower-ranking referent a typical patient.
In Movima, however, the direct construction patterns ergatively and the inverse construction accusatively. Given that the direct construction is pragmatically unmarked, it can even be argued that in terms of case marking, the higher section of the hierarchy (in particular, first and second person) is expressed by "ergative" forms in a transitive clause.

3. Mismatch of hierarchies
There is a general tendency, often claimed to be universal (cf. Aissen 1999), for entities higher in the referential hierarchy to be expressed as an argument with a privileged syntactic status. However, in Movima, the opposite is true: the participant lower in the referential hierarchy is expressed in the same way as the sole argument of an intransitive clause, and it is syntactically privileged. The referential hierarchy, therefore, goes against the grammatical-role hierarchy.

Due to its syntactic nature, a thorough analysis of this system can contribute important insights into the relationship between direct/inverse systems, alignment typology and voice. The research will be based

on fieldwork and corpus analysis, using the data collected during the DobeS project "Documenting Movima, an unclassified language of the Moxos region (Bolivia)".

References

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