Alignment Typology in Diachronic Perspective

Eystein Dahl, UiT – The Arctic University of Norway

This workshop sets out to explore the diachronic dimension of alignment typology. Alignment typology is understood in a broad sense, as to include both the basic alignment pattern expressing core arguments of intransitive and transitive predicates and various types of valency-affecting constructions, e.g. causatives, passives, anticausatives/middles, antipassives, impersonals/transimpersonals and A- or P-lability. These two types of phenomena have different diachronic properties. While the basic alignment pattern or, in the case of split alignment, patterns of a given language generally tends to be diachronically stable, the inventory of valency-affecting constructions appear to be somewhat more prone to undergo change. Given that there appears to be a clear diachronic relation between certain types of valency-affecting constructions and certain types of alignment constructions, e.g. passives and ergatives (cf. e.g. Gildea 1997, Dahl 2016), it clearly makes sense to explore basic alignment and valency-affecting constructions together, as they may be regarded as two dimensions of the same area of grammar.

Alignment typology has been a central focus of linguistic research at least since the publication of Dixon (1972). A number of studies have been concerned with the emergence of ergative alignment (cf. e.g. Garrett 1990, Gildea 1997, Butt 2001, Dahl 2016) or semantic alignment (cf. e.g. Aldai 2008, Holton 2008). The development of other alignment types, e.g. accusative, neutral or tripartite alignment, have received less attention and, consequently, their synchronic and, especially, their diachronic properties are less well understood. Similar observations pertain to the emergence and development of valency-affecting constructions. Synchronically, there appears to be systematic correlation between certain types of basic alignment and certain types of valency-affecting construction types. For example, it has long been noted that antipassive constructions tend to show up in languages with predominantly ergative alignment (cf. Silverstein 1972), and that languages showing semantic alignment tend not to have passive constructions (cf. e.g. Wichmann 2007). Observations along such lines suggest a strong diachronic correlation between certain basic alignment types and certain types of valency-changing constructions. However, closer examination reveals that such correlations appear to be statistical tendencies at best (cf. e.g. Polinsky 2005, Janic 2016 on the existence of antipassive constructions in accusative languages), a fact suggesting that historical contingency plays an important role in the structuring of alignment systems. Thus the topic of the present
workshop bears directly on the relationship between universal and language-specific factors in language change.

A systematic study of the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of interactions between basic alignment types and valency-changing constructions is not only highly motivated but may be expected to contribute significant new insights into this area of grammar as well as into diachronic syntax more generally. A central aim of the present workshop is to bring together scholars working on alignment typology and change in different languages and from different theoretical perspectives in order to address research questions including but not necessarily limited to the following:

- To what extent are changes in alignment typology unidirectional?
- To what extent are particular correlations between certain types of basic alignment constructions and certain kinds of valency-affecting constructions diachronically persistent?
- To what extent are some basic alignment types diachronically more stable than others?
- To what extent do basic alignment systems with a split between different alignment construction types show different diachronic behavior from typologically consistent basic alignment systems?

References:


