Parallel grammaticalizations in Tibeto-Burman languages: Evidence of Sapir’s ‘drift’

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1. Introduction

In chapters seven and eight of his book Language, Sapir talked about what he called ‘drift’, the changes that a language undergoes through time. He characterized it this way:

... [L]anguage is not merely something that is spread out in space, as it were—a series of reflections in individual minds of one and the same timeless picture. Language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has a drift . . . The linguistic drift has direction. In other words, only those individual variations embody it or carry it which move in a certain direction, just as only certain wave movements in the bay outline the tide. The drift of a language is constituted by the unconscious selection on the part of its speakers of those individual variations that are cumulative in some special direction. This direction may be inferred, in the main, from the past history of the language. (1921:150/155)

Dialects of a language are formed when that language is broken into different segments that no longer move along the same exact drift. Even so, the general drift of a language has its deep and its shallow currents; those features that distinguish closely related dialects will be of the rapid, shallow currents, while the deeper, slower currents may remain consistent between the dialects for millennia. It is this latter type that Sapir felt is ‘fundamental to the genius of the language’ (p. 172), and he said that ‘The momentum of the more fundamental, the pre-dialectal, drift is often such that languages long disconnected will pass through the same or strikingly similar phases’ (p. 172).

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One example of such a situation that Sapir discusses is the development of plurals of the type *mouse : mice, foot : feet* in both English and German (*Maus : Mäuse, Fuss : Füsse*), even though there is no evidence of this type of plural in the common parent of these two languages (see p. 172ff. for details).\footnote{Malkiel (1981) argues that the concept of drift should be separated from the concept of parallel independent development. He suggests the use of 'slope' to refer to the latter. He bases this view on his interpretation of the relationship between Sapir's discussions of drift in Chapter 7 and in Chapter 8. Malkiel argues that the discussion of the depth of drift and the relationship of this depth to parallel independent developments in Chapter 8 'reads almost like an afterthought' (p. 550) to Chapter 7, saying 'Sapir impressionistically tosses off a few supplementary ideas ...' (p. 550) in discussing the depth of drift, and that the remarks about depth and parallel development are 'tangential' (p. 551) to the main idea of drift. His main evidence of this is the fact that Sapir did not mention this aspect of drift in his 1933 article 'Language'. My own view of this is that while it is possible to talk about drift in a single language without reference to parallel developments, it is not possible to talk about parallel developments in related languages without reference to something like the concept of drift (assuming parallel independent developments in related languages is of a different nature than in unrelated languages). For this reason I feel Sapir's discussions of drift and its depth are two aspects of a single cohesive argument. That the depth concept was not mentioned in the 1933 article is insignificant, as the one short mention of drift in the article was not in a context where the mention of parallel developments would have been relevant.}

In the Tibeto-Burman family of the Sino-Tibetan language stock we also have examples of this type of parallel drift. We often find that a specific type of grammaticalization appears in different sub-groups of the family, even sometimes using the (etymologically) same morpheme(s), though there is evidence that the particular grammaticalization arose independently in each of the languages (or language groups). In this paper I will give examples of six such types of grammaticalization ('anti-ergative' marking, ergative marking, direction marking, causative marking, person marking, and existential verbs), and argue that the fact that so many languages in the family grammaticalize the same types of grammatical categories, and often use the same morphemes to do it, is a result of the influence of the drift that is 'fundamental to the genius of the language', the common core or nature that these languages share as a result of their having a common origin. That is, certain characteristics of the common starting point of these languages influenced the path of development of each language, and this caused the parallel developments. I will go one step further than Sapir and suggest that just as the direction of the drift 'may be inferred ... from the past history of the language', we can trace back along that direction to infer from the drift the nature of that common starting point.
2. Anti-ergative and ergative marking

From a survey of 'object' marking in one-hundred-twenty-six reliable grammars or descriptions of languages and dialects in the Tibeto-Burman family,² it was found that twenty-two languages had no nominal object marking, twenty languages had nominal morphology consistently marking the patient as object, regardless of whether the clause included another non-agent argument (i.e. was either transitive or ditransitive), and eighty-four languages had a type of marking where the patient in monotransitive clauses is often or always marked with the same postposition as the goal, beneficiary, or other non-actor argument in ditransitive clauses. Following are examples of this type of marking from three Tibeto-Burman languages:³

(1) Lahu (Northern Thailand; Matisoff 1973:156-7)
   a. น่า ท่าน ต่า ดี?.
      1sg OBJ NEG.IMP hit
      Don't hit me.
   b. ลิ้น ชีน ท่าน พี่?.
      book that 1sg OBJ give
      Give me that book.

(2) Kokborok (Bangladesh; Karapurkar 1976:54-5)
   a. บรูย-คีกๆ-นั ร่ย-ดิ.
      girl-young-many-OBJ send-IMP
      Send the young girls.
   b. บ่า-ตา-นั  may ข้า-ดิ.
      pron.pref.-elder.brother-OBJ rice eat-give-IMP
      Give food to your elder brother.

(3) Kham (Nepal; Watters 1973:44, 46, 54)⁴
   a. น่า: ซิ้ม น่า-จ้าย-เค.
      1sg house 1sg-build-PAST
      I built a house.

² LaPolla 1992a presents an earlier study of the same type based on a somewhat smaller database. See that paper for more extensive discussion.
³ These examples are also presented in Dryer 1986, where this phenomenon is discussed as 'primary object marking'.
⁴ In those Tibeto-Burman languages that have person marking (verb agreement) systems there may be some overlap where the person marking system and the nominal marking seem both to be marking the anti-ergative argument (as in this example, which led Dryer (1986) to claim that the person marking system also marks anti-ergative arguments—his 'primary objects'), but the person marking systems in many Tibeto-Burman languages are based on person hierarchies (1p > 2p > 3p, or 1p/2p > 3), not on semantics or grammatical relations (see LaPolla 1992b).
b. no-e ka:h-lay poh-ke-o.
   3sg-ERG dog-OBJ beat-PAST-3sg
   He beat the dog.

c. no-e nga-lay cyu:-na-ke-o.
   3sg-ERG 1sg-OBJ watch-1sg-PAST-3sg
   He watched me.

d. no-e nga-lay bxhtanjı ya-na-ke-o.
   3sg-erg 1sg-OBJ potato give-1sg-PAST-3sg
   He gave a potato to me.

To discuss just one of these examples in depth, we can see that in (3a) the marker lay is not used, and this is because the relevant referent (house') is not animate; in (3b) lay marks an animate patient; in (3c) it marks a human patient; and in (3d) it marks a human recipient. I will refer to this type of marking as 'anti-ergative' marking, as the crucial function of this type of marking is to mark an animate argument, that might otherwise be interpreted as an actor, as being something other than an actor. In this way it is the opposite of the type of ergative marking we find in some of these same languages, which marks an argument as being an actor.\(^5\) In those languages that have both types of marking, it is often optional whether to use one or the other or both, but the marking is often not systematic, as it is used only to disambiguate two arguments when that becomes necessary due to the semantics of the referents, the actions involved, or the pragmatic viewpoint (see for example Matisoff 1973:155-8 on Lahu thåʔ, Wheatley 1982 on Burmese kou). It is especially common for overt marking (either ergative or anti-ergative) to be necessary when the most natural (unmarked) topic, the agent, is not the topic, and instead appears in the preverbal focus position.

We find this type of postpositional anti-ergative marking in the following languages and dialects:\(^6\) Achang, Longchuan (te\(^31\)); Achang, Xiandao (te\(^23\)); Adi, Milang (m/um); Adi, Padam (om-m); Akha, Lampang (âɲ); Anong, Mugujia (kha\(^31\)); Apatani, Reru/Mudan Tage (mi); Bai, Jianchuan (no\(^33\)); Baima, Baima Commune (tsa\(^33\)); Balti, Baltistan (la); Bengni, Na (ni:/m); Bokar, Smin-gling

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\(^5\) The term 'anti-ergative' may be somewhat infelicitous, as, like the term 'ergative' itself, it may lead the reader to credit these particles with more of a paradigmatic nature than they actually have, but I will continue to use 'anti-ergative' in this paper, as it is already somewhat established in the literature (e.g. Comrie 1975, 1978, LaPolla 1992a), and clearer than Blansitt's (1984) term, 'dechificative'. I also do not use the term 'primary object' because Dryer (1986) defines 'primary object' as a grammatical function. The use of this type of marking in most of the Tibeto-Burman languages where it exists is not of the nature of a grammatical function, and in some languages it is also not limited to marking 'objects'.

\(^6\) This list consists of the language name followed after a comma by the dialect name, if available, then in parentheses the postposition used to mark an anti-ergative argument.