Algonquian languages are not ergative

Ergativity

In most languages, intransitive subjects are treated the same as agents. These languages are known as accusative. However, in twenty-five percent of the world’s languages, the roles are reversed, and intransitive subjects are treated the same as objects.

These languages are called ergative, and the phenomenon is known as ergativity. While some languages are “fully ergative,” others only have ergative structures and patterns.

In linguistics, ergativity is often illustrated by this image of alignment: accusative vs. ergative (where A stands for agent, S for intransitive subject, and O for object).

Approach

The goal of my research was to understand whether Algonquian languages are truly ergative or rather accusative languages that happen to have ergative patterns.

This was done by working with Algonquian data, examining the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative, and critically evaluating these arguments based on what constitutes the fundamental ergativity of a language.

These are the existing arguments for Algonquian being ergative that were examined in my work:

- Peripheral agreement (Hewson 1987, Bruening 2007)
- TA absolute form (Hewson 1987)
- Coordination (Johnson & Rosen 2012)
- Verb stem agreement (Johnson & Rosen 2012)

Findings

All the existing evidence for Algonquian languages being ergative seems to demonstrate:

1) shallow ergative patterns can’t be used as a diagnosis for whether a language is ergative or not (which includes peripheral agreement, verb stem agreement, and coordination);

2) patterns that aren’t ergative, just are common among ergative languages, which cannot be used as evidence for a language being ergative (such as the existence of TA absolute form and antipassives).

Based on this evidence and after examining the properties of the inverse, the pattern that does demonstrate deep ergative properties, I conclude that Algonquian languages are, in fact, accusative, despite having a number of ergative patterns.

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