

Split-ergativity in Nuristani languages

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Abstract

I give a preliminary analysis of split-ergativity in Nuristani languages and, in a second step, briefly discuss what this data means for some new generative approaches to split-ergativity laid out by Coon (e.g. 2013) and others. While this research is an ongoing process, it already becomes clear that split-ergativity in Nuristani exhibits differences from split-ergative constructions found in other, related and geographically close, Indo-Iranian languages. Additionally, the non-ergative alignment in the Nuristani and Iranian languages discussed here cannot easily be reanalyzed as ergative – which Coon has argued for regarding languages and language families such as Basque, Mayan and Indo-Aryan.

Data and Transcription

Data taken from other scholars is cited accordingly; uncited data stems from my own collaboration with native speakers.¹ The transcription follows the common practice in Nuristani and Iranian linguistics; data from other scholars is usually given in their notation. For Nuristani, note specifically *ě* (mostly [ə]), *č* [tʃ] ~ [tʃ̣], *ǰ* [dʒ] ~ [dʒ̣], *ř* [ɹ], *ň* [ɲ], *r* [r]. A superscript marks length. There is considerable phonemic variation and sandhi.²

1. Introduction

1.1. Nuristani Languages

The Nuristani languages are spoken in Eastern Afghanistan and form an independent subbranch of the Indo-Iranian language family. Together with the languages of the Iranian

¹ I would like to thank my Nuristani informants for their openness and patience regarding all my questions and giving me the opportunity to learn their languages. I also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable and helpful input.

² Oscillations in the pronunciation of vowels and difficulties recording them correctly have frequently been mentioned by scholars working on Nuristani, e.g. Morgenstierne 1949: 202, Buddruss 2006: 192, Buddruss, Degener 2017: 51. As such difficulties can potentially affect the correct morphological analysis – the obl.sg of nouns in the discussed languages commonly consists of a single short vowel (Kreidl forthcoming) –, I have refrained from using ambiguous examples in the present paper.

subbranch and the Indo-Aryan subbranch they go back to a common Proto-Indo-Iranian language. Not counting Dameli whose affiliation to Nuristani is controversial,³ there are about five distinct Nuristani languages – Ashkun-Wamai, Kati, Prasun, Tregami, Waigali (Nuristani Kalasha) – with partly quite considerable internal dialectal diversity. The individual Nuristani languages are known under a variety of names (and spellings) in the literature (cf Morgenstierne 1973, Strand 1973, Halfmann 2021), and their exact relationship to each other as well as subgroupings are equally controversial. For example, regarding the Waigali dialect continuum, I follow the usage of Morgenstierne 1954, who uses the term Waigali not only for the speech of the Waigal village as such, but for the whole dialect continuum. While this can have obvious drawbacks as it lacks the precision needed in some contexts, most of my informants call their language *wāygalí* when speaking Pashto or Persian – some even use this term when speaking their native dialect. The alternative term *kalaša alā* ('Kalasha language') mentioned by Strand 1973 and Halfmann 2021 as a cover term for all varieties of the dialect continuum was not especially common among my informants.⁴

Morphological ergativity is found in all Nuristani languages except for Prasun and – very likely – Tregami.⁵ Despite the fact that the Nuristani varieties therefore constitute a rich field to describe split-ergativity and test potential hypotheses regarding ergativity, Nuristani

³ Dameli is either an Indo-Aryan language which came under Nuristani influence at some point or a Nuristani language with a heavy Indo-Aryan element. The core vocabulary of Dameli is of Indo-Iranian origin, but characterized by both Nuristani and Indo-Aryan sound changes. Morphosyntactic features are not helpful in deciding genetic affiliation as local Indo-Iranian languages – be they Nuristani or Indo-Aryan – are typologically so similar. If mentioned at all, Dameli is usually listed as Indo-Aryan (e.g. by Strand 1973: 302), but detailed diachronic studies are still lacking and the classification could be due to geographical or cultural reasons, as Dameli is spoken outside of Nuristan proper in an area dominated by Dardic (Indo-Aryan) languages.

⁴ In the example sentences which are provided in this paper I distinguish Ashkun from Wamai; and Waigali (proper) from Nishey so as it is clear from which subdialect an example comes. The dialect of Nisheygram is subsumed under the name Waigali by Morgenstierne 1954, while Degener 1998 refrains from using an umbrella term for the dialect continuum and refers to the variety spoken in Nisheygram as *Sprache von Nisheygram*.

⁵ Degener 2022: 98 describes the alignment in Tregami – a language closest to the Waigali dialect continuum – as split-ergative, emphasizing, however, that “[e]rgativity in this language refers to agent marking, not to agreement.” As Degener 2022 *ibid* points out, the past transitive verb agrees with the object, not the subject. This interpretation is in line with the limited data which is available for Tregami. Theoretically, however, the limited examples involving past transitive verbs may also allow an interpretation of an ergative system similar to Tangut, a Tibeto-Burman language. In Tangut, the agreement always occurs with the object if first and second persons are involved, but in interactions between first or second person and third person, the verb agrees with the noun phrase which ranks highest in the person-animacy hierarchy, thus always with the first or second person, whether it is the subject or object (Beaudouin 2022: 95). To be clear, I do not argue that this is also the case in Tregami – even more so because similar systems where person-animacy hierarchy determines whether the verb has to agree with the subject or object are absent from Nuristani or other adjacent languages. But it needs to be emphasized that given the limited data currently available for Tregami, definite conclusions regarding even basic features of morphosyntactic alignment in the language remain difficult.

data is never featured in articles and monographs discussing (split-)ergativity – even those which discuss Indo-Iranian split-ergativity more specifically.⁶

All Nuristani languages which exhibit a system of split-ergativity (thus, all but Prasun and Tregami) use the oblique case to mark the ergative agent. The oblique case fulfills a variety of functions which, depending on the language, can include that of a genitive, adpositional and object case (Kreidl 2025). There is thus no specific ergative case.

Depending on the individual languages, one, two or more cases exist next to the oblique case. Following the usage of Degener 1998 and Buddruss, Degener 2017 (who use the corresponding term *Rectus*), I call the unmarked case “direct”, “direct case” (glossed DIR), although the term “nominative” has been used as well in the literature.

1.2. Generative approaches to split-ergativity

Both nominative-accusative and ergative(-absolute) alignment are well-known and well-studied alignment systems from a variety of theoretical viewpoints, including generative syntax. Analyses of split-ergativity – that is, of languages with split-alignment systems of which one alignment is ergative – have faced more difficulties, however.

For example, Coon 2013 argues that split-ergativity is not the result of two different subsets of grammatical rules in a language, but is due to a hitherto wrong analysis of the valency: The transitive verbs in non-perfective aspects in the investigated languages such as Mayan and Indo-Aryan which do not trigger ergative alignment should rather be analyzed as verbs (or nominalizations of verbs) with an auxiliary verb component which renders them intransitive. In other words, the transitive non-perfective aspects which are said to show nominative-accusative alignment are actually intransitive. Therefore, according to her view, alignment in the respective languages would not be split: There would just be one alignment, namely ergative alignment throughout all tenses, aspects and/or moods involving transitive verbs.

The idea was further elaborated in Coon, Preminger 2017. Coon 2019: 1 further proposes “[t]he different factors that trigger split ergativity boil down to a reduction in

⁶ But Nuristani data, also regarding alignment, is occasionally used and addressed in typological studies on the Hindukush linguistic area, e.g. in Bashir 2022, Liljegren 2022.

transitivity”, and that “[t]hese factors are present in *all* languages”. Coon’s intriguing theory seems to work well for the languages studied by her, such as Indo-Aryan or Mayan.⁷ But it fails to explain split-ergativity in Nuristani – and Iranian – languages, as will be laid out below.

2. Split-Ergativity in Nuristani languages

2.1. Grammatical alignment of intransitive verbs of any tense and mood

As with other ergative languages, ergative alignment is not visible with intransitive verbs of any tense and mood, as there are, per definition, no objects and the verb agrees with the sole argument present, the subject (agent). The subject is in the direct case, as can be seen in examples (1) to (3). In this respect, Nuristani languages do not differ from other Indo-Iranian split-ergative languages or any other prototypical ergative language like Basque, for example.

- (1) *ye di masrup wř-ëm, daptár-kë wř-ëm ye di*
 (Waigali)
 I.DIR also busy COP.PRS-1SG, office.DIR-in COP.PRS-1SG I.DIR also
 ‘I am also busy, I am also in the office.’

- (2) *Ningrahâr pohantún-wa kitābxāná-ta gō-m* (Wamai)
 Ningrahar.DIR university-POSS library.DIR-to went.PST-1SG
 ‘I went to the library of Ningrahar University.’

⁷ Maldonado 2017: 235, however, upholding split-ergativity in Mayan, disagrees with Coon’s analysis of the Ch’ol data (a Western Mayan language), saying that transitive verb forms are actually different from true nominalizations.

- (3) *a-dā-w* *ařäš* *üštüm* *wr-εt* (Waigali)
- PREP-forest-POSTP many tree.DIR.PL were.PST-3PL
- ‘There were many trees in the forest.’

2.2. Grammatical alignment of non-past transitive verbs

Alignment is split along a past vs. non-past dichotomy in Nuristani languages.⁸ Only past tenses and moods exhibit ergative alignment; non-past tenses and moods are nominative-accusative, as can be seen in examples (4) and (5).

- (4) *tu* *aspúr* *kā* *kõ-s* (Wamai)
- you.SG.DIR now what do.PRS-2SG
- ‘What are you doing now?’

- (5) *ay* *čay* *pī-m* (Wamai)
- I.DIR tea.DIR.SG drink.PRS-1SG
- ‘I am drinking tea.’

3. Grammatical alignment in the past tenses and moods

Only the past tenses and moods exhibit ergativity, as non-past transitive verbs require nominative-accusative alignment.

3.1. Intransitive verbs

As already mentioned, ergativity is not discernible with intransitive verbs in any past tenses and moods, as seen in (3) and (6). The subject is in the direct case, and the verb agrees with the subject.

⁸ In both Nuristani and Iranian languages, alignment is split along tense, not aspect. Coon’s theory focuses on the distinction between perfective and non-perfective aspects in Mayan and Indo-Aryan, but this is not applicable in the languages under investigation here. See also examples (33) and (34) and their discussion.

(3) *a-dā-w* *ařäš* *üštüm* *wɾ-εt* (Waigali)

PREP-forest-POSTP many tree.DIR.PL were.PST-3PL

‘There were many trees in the forest.’

(6) *yē* *amā* *go-m* (Waigali)

I.DIR house.DIR.SG went.PST-1SG

‘I went home.’

3.2. Monotransitive verbs

The subject of monotransitive verbs is in the oblique case (as opposed to the direct case like in the non-past tenses and moods), and the object is in the direct case. The verb agrees with the object in person, number, and also gender, depending on the tense and person. The following examples show ergativity, with (7) featuring a past perfect, (8)-(11) featuring preterite (simple past) tense verbs.

(7) *yama* *ek* *grōš* *oy-kñ-stë* *wřë*
(Waigali)

us.OBL.PL one-DIR.SG billy-goat.DIR.SG.M up-made-PP.SG.M COP.PRS.3SG

‘We have taken a billy-goat.’

(8) *yeme* *vř-ya* (Kati)

me.OBL.SG saw.PST-3SG.M

‘I saw him.’ (Mohammad 1991: 13)

(9) *manáş-a sa onto-y* (Nishey)

man-OBL.SG he.DIR.SG saw.PST-3SG.M

'The man saw him.' (Degener 1998: 236)

(10) *kyā ay lau-m* (Ashkun)

him.OBL.SG I.DIR.SG beat.PST-1SG

'He beat me.' (Morgenstierne 1929: 220)

(11) *íma mas wiēt-i* (Wamai)

us.OBL.PL moon.DIR.SG.F saw.PST-3SG.F

'We saw the moon.'

The same alignment and agreement pattern is known from other Indo-Iranian split-ergative languages. Example (12) is from Pashto, an Eastern Iranian language; the subject is in the oblique case, the object is in the direct case and the verb (in the imperfect) agrees with the object in person, number and gender.

(12) *šáj-e halak-án kat-ál* (Pashto)

woman-OBL.SG.F boys-DIR.PL.M IMPF.looked-3PL.M

'The woman was looking at the boys.'

As a preliminary finding, there is a tendency in Nuristani languages to put the direct object – regardless of animacy or definiteness – in the direct case when ergative alignment is used, while the oblique case would be used for the same object in a non-past tense sentence when we see nominative-accusative alignment. Such a split treatment of the definite direct object is also found in Zazaki, an Iranian language with split ergativity (Bossong 1985: 28).

(15) *ĩ tu-šë ošt dũ palá partó-š*
 (Waigali)

me.OBL.SG you.SG.OBL-to eight piece-DIR.SG apple-DIR.SG gave.PST-2SG

‘I gave you eight apples.’

(16) *yεmε t’u štreý pt-āš* (Kati)

me.OBL.SG you.SG.DIR books.DIR.PL gave.PST-2SG

‘I gave you the books.’ (Mohammad 1991: 17)

(17) *ay ímā sús-ë trë pul palé próto-m*
 (Wamai)

I.DIR my sister-OBL.SG three piece.DIR.SG apple.DIR.SG gave.PST-1SG

‘My sister gave me three apples.’

This differs from other regional Indo-Iranian languages like Pashto and Urdu, where the verb always agrees with the direct object (the “books” in (18) and (19) instead of “you”, which would rank higher in the person-animacy hierarchy).

(18) *kitāb-úna me dár-kړ-i* (Pashto)

book-DIR.PL me.ENCL ADV.PRON.2SG-PRET.made-PST.3rd

‘I gave you the books.’

(19) *maĩ-ne tum-ko kitāb-ē d-ĩ* (Urdu)

I-ERG you.SG-to books-DIR.PL gave.PST-3PL.F

‘I gave you the books.’

However, it would be premature to use person-animacy hierarchy in Nuristani as a shibboleth to syntactically distinguish the Nuristani languages from the Iranian (such as Pashto) and Indo-Aryan (such as Urdu) languages which also show split-ergativity. For example, Middle Iranian Bactrian might have exhibited the same person-animacy hierarchy we see in Nuristani:

(20) *odo=mo xoēsaoō ladd-ēio* (Bactrian)

and=me.OBL promise.DIR.SG¹⁰ gave.PST-2SG

‘And I gave you a promise.’ (Document R, 11; Sims-Williams 2012: 92f)

The examples we have are not sufficient to determine whether Bactrian knew person-animacy hierarchy or whether in Bactrian, the verb always agreed with the indirect object if there was one. But it becomes clear from example (20), that Bactrian at least in some syntactic situations behaved like Nuristani, and not like the genetically closer Pashto.

In example (21), however, the verb does not agree with the indirect object – although here, too, it ranks highest in the person-animacy hierarchy –, when a directional adverb (adverbial pronoun), which already hints at the indirect object, is used. Here, the verb agrees with the direct object, just as we would expect it in Pashto:

(21) *misido mano mozdabandago brarēgo taro fošt-ado*
(Bactrian)

furthermore me.OBL.SG Muzdabandag.DIR.SG nephew.DIR.SG thither.2nd sent.PST-3rd

‘Moreover, I sent you (my) nephew Muzdabandag.’ (Document cj, 5f; Sims-Williams 2007: 86f)

¹⁰ I analyze this form as DIR.SG although it is unclear to what extent native speakers still differentiated between direct and oblique case in nouns and adjectives in Bactrian at the time the document was written. Certainly dir.sg and obl.sg were formally identical. The translations of the Bactrian examples are mine, but do not differ substantially from the ones by Nicholas Sims-Williams.

Why we see this difference is not entirely clear; it could point to dialectal, chronological or sociolectal origins. It might also have to do with both direct and indirect objects being animate (although the 2nd person generally ranks higher than the 3rd person), making the hierarchical difference less stark than in example (20). But it shows in any case, that differences in syntax – be it alignment, be it verb agreement, be it differential marking – among local Hindukush languages cannot be used to determine the exact genetic position of Nuristani in relation to Iranian and Indo-Aryan, which is still a mystery.

4. Theoretical approaches to split-ergativity

As already mentioned in the introduction, Nuristani – or Eastern Iranian languages like Pashto – generally do not feature in cross-linguistic and/or theoretical approaches to split-ergativity. The somewhat closely related Indo-Aryan languages are, however. Coon 2019: 3, for example, cites Gujarati as an example of an Indo-Iranian language, which shows ergative alignment in (22), but nominative-accusative alignment in (23).

(22) *ramesh-e pen khārid-yi* (Gujarati)

Ramesh-ERG.SG.M pen.ABS.SG.F buy-PERF.F

‘Ramesh bought the pen.’ (Mistry 1976: 245)

(23) *ramesh pen khārid-to hāto* (Gujarati)

Ramesh.ABS.SG.M pen.ABS.SG.F buy-IMPF.M COP.IMPF.M

‘Ramesh was buying the pen.’ (Mistry 1976: 245)

In Coon’s theory, (23) with its auxiliary verb construction *hāto* ‘was’ renders the clause intransitive, with the consequence that there is no ergative marking on the subject. Thus, it is only to be expected that we do not see ergativity here, despite the verb *khārid-* ‘to buy’ being transitive.

Kashmiri, another Indo-Aryan language, behaves similarly. In (24), the transitive verb triggers ergativity, but in (25), it does not, presumably because of the presence of the copula *chus* ‘(I) am’.

(24) *me dits tamis kita:b* (Kashmiri)
 I.ERG gave him.DAT book
 ‘I gave him a book.’ (Wali, Koul 1997: 252)

(25) *bi chus tamis kita:b diva:n* (Kashmiri)
 I.NOM be.1SG him.DAT book giving
 ‘I am giving him a book.’ (Wali, Koul 1997: 252, cited by Coon 2013: 201)

Many more examples can be found in related Indian languages such as Hindi-Urdu; these languages employ an auxiliary verb or copula in non-perfective tenses and data from these languages validate Coon’s approach to split-ergativity. In other words, the reason why imperfective transitive verbs are nominative-accusative while perfective transitives are ergative seemingly lies in the fact that the former are embedded in an intransitive auxiliary verb structure, whereas the latter are not: Compare the difference between (26) and (27). This would make the so-called split-ergative languages simply ergative languages, with no split in alignment.

(26) *māĩ tum-hẽ do seb de-tā hũ* (Hindi)
 I.DIR you-DAT two apple.DIR.PL.M give-PP.SG.M COP.PRS.1SG
 ‘I give you two apples.’

(27) *māĩ-ne tum-hẽ do seb di-ye* (Hindi)
 I-OBL you-DAT two apple.DIR.PL.M gave.PST-PL.M
 ‘I gave you two apples.’

The idea that split-ergativity – that one language can exhibit two different morphological and/or syntactic alignments – is rooted in a wrong analysis of the data is not new. Another approach along these lines has been proposed by Johns 1992 for Inuktitut, who claims that some transitive verb roots in the language should be analyzed as nominal, rather than verbal. This, too, would amount to ergativity being epiphenomenal in Inuktitut, just as it would in Mayan, Indo-Aryan and other languages as argued by Coon 2013.

(28) *anguti-up nanuq kapijaa* (Inuktitut)
 man-REL polar.bear.ABS stab.PPP.3SG
 ‘The man stabbed the polar bear.’ (Johns 1992: 61)

Because the relative case in Inuktitut not only functions as ergative agent but can also express possession (29), Johns *ibid* draws attention to the fact that a more literal translation of (28) would therefore be ‘The bear is the man's stabbed one’.

(29) *Jaani Mary-up ataata-nga* (Inuktitut)
 John.ABS.SG Mary-REL.SG father-his/her.SG
 ‘John is Mary’s father. (Beach 2012: 11)

Both Inuktitut and many Nuristani languages with split-ergativity share the feature that they use one and the same case as both an ergative and a genitive, but the verb in Nuristani can generally not be analyzed as a participle or nominalized verb form of any kind – other than in compound tenses such as the perfect or pluperfect.

The presence or absence of verbal nouns / participles and auxiliaries does not determine alignment in Nuristani languages; the main verb used in a given sentence does. Past stems – which are derived from the Old Indo-Iranian past participle, or verbal adjective, in **-tá-* (less often **-ná-*) – trigger ergative alignment. Therefore, from a historical perspective, the approach Johns 1992 develops also offers insights for late Old and Early Middle Indo-Iranian (see Jügel 2015 for Iranian). But in contemporary Indo-Iranian

languages, the past stems are not formally identical with the verbal adjectives anymore.¹¹ Their analysis and translation as nominals are therefore not warranted in a synchronic analysis.

Thus, split-ergativity in at least some Iranian, Nuristani and Indo-Aryan languages cannot be explained away by a simple reduction in transitivity of the verbal constructions in question. As shown in examples (22) to (27), the assumption of a reduction in valency seems to work for mainstream Indo-Aryan languages. In these examples, the presence of an (intransitive) auxiliary element renders the whole verb phrase intransitive, explaining the absence of ergativity.

But this theory faces problems in the Iranian and Nuristani languages, even when an auxiliary verb is present. For example, the perfect tenses in Nuristani languages and Pashto consist of the perfect participle and a present auxiliary. Structurally, these perfect tenses are thus similar to, e.g., the Gujarati imperfective in (23). Nevertheless, the auxiliary does not render the whole verb syntactically intransitive in Nuristani and Iranian languages. In examples (7), (14), (30), (31) we find ergative alignment.

(7) *yama* *ek* *grōṣ* *oy-kñ-stě* *wřě*
 (Waigali)
 us.OBL.PL one-DIR.SG billy-goat.DIR.SG.M up-made-PP.SG.M COP.PRS.3SG
 ‘We have taken a billy-goat.’

(14) *tu* *yū* *wintěst=ěsě* (Wamai)
 you.SG.DIR me.OBL seen.PP.SG.M=COP.PRS.2SG
 ‘I have seen you.’

(30) *ũ* *äw* *pratóst=oš* (Nishey)
 me.OBL bread.DIR.SG given.PP.SG.M=COP.PRS.2SG
 ‘I have given you bread.’ (Degener 1998: 511)

¹¹ Past participles are, however, derived from the past stem via additional morphemes. For their usage in the verbal system and their effect on alignment see two paragraphs below.

(31) *matn me ná-dəy lidálay* (Pashto)

text me.OBL NEG-COP.PRS.3SG.M seen.PP.SG.M

‘I have not seen the text.’

The (in)transitivity of a verb in the perfect tense thus depends on the valency of the verb represented by the participle in both Nuristani languages and Pashto; the presence of the auxiliary is irrelevant in this respect.

If the main verb is intransitive like in (32) below, ergativity is not visible, as expected. But here again, transitivity is determined by the valency of the participle (*gešti* ‘gone’ from *g-* ‘to go’, an intransitive verb), and not by the presence of an auxiliary verb.

(32) *se pröš gešti oři* (Waigali)

she.DIR.SG sleep gone.PP.SG.F COP.PRET.3rd

‘She was sleeping.’

As the dichotomy between perfective and imperfective aspects (rather than past vs. non-past distinctions) is often said to play an important role in analyses of split-ergativity, it should be noted that in Pashto – where the difference between perfective and imperfective aspect is present in almost all tenses and moods – aspect is not a factor in whether ergativity is triggered or not: See (33) for the Pashto imperfect (the imperfective past) and (34) for the Pashto preterite (the perfective past). In Pashto, aspects are not distinguished from each other by the employment of a copula, but by means of different verb stems.¹² This, of course, does not speak per se against Coon’s theory, as it may simply be a consequence of Pashto not using (intransitive) auxiliaries to express the imperfective aspect.¹³ Nevertheless,

¹² In more or less “regular” verbs, the perfective aspect of simple tenses is differentiated by the morpheme *wá-*, (*w*)*ú-*, etc added to the imperfective aspect of the same tense. But in irregular verbs, the imperfective and perfective past stems (as well as the imperfective and perfective present stems, which, however, are not relevant for discussions of ergativity) can be entirely unrelated, synchronically and/or diachronically.

¹³ This avoiding of auxiliaries to express differences in aspect is also observed by Hicks 2015 in his discussion of split-alignment in North American languages, where he finds aspect to be “a relatively rare split inducer” (p. 205).

as noted above, Coon prefers the split to be between perfective (showing ergativity) and non-perfective aspects rather than past and non-past tenses, an assumption which fails to account for the situation in Pashto and Nuristani languages.

(33) *dā sar-í stā lur kat-ála* (Pashto)

this.INV man-OBL.SG.M your.SG-INV daughter.DIR.SG.M IMPF.looked-PST.3SG.F

‘This man was looking at your daughter.’

(34) *dā sar-í stā lur wú-kat-ála* (Pashto)

this.INV man-OBL.SG.M your.SG-INV daughter.DIR.SG.M PF-looked-PST.3SG.F

‘This man looked at your daughter.’

4.2. General thoughts on split alignment; alternative theories

The reason why a language would have two alignment systems – instead of simply using one, which seems far more economical – has not been explained satisfactorily from a synchronic, generative viewpoint. While I am not able to propose an alternative theory which could reduce the two alignments in the languages under investigation to a system with one alignment, a few general remarks are in order. It is obvious that far more research is needed, but for the time being, it may be acceptable to simply uphold the idea that the grammar of a language allows for two alignment systems depending on tense, aspect and/or mood.

Despite occasional assumptions of the contrary (e.g. Back 1992, Nichols 1993: 57), I agree with Korn 2010: 14 that split alignments, at least in the linguistic area discussed here, are not per se “too unstable” or impractical and are also not simply ephemeral features in transitional periods in the syntax of a language. In fact, looking at the Indo-Iranian language family which is quite well attested for a long period of time, I would argue that, from a diachronic perspective, split alignment is actually just as stable or unstable as many other grammatical features. It is true that split-ergativity has disappeared or is disappearing or changing in many Indo-Iranian languages (e.g. New Persian; Pamir languages – see Payne 1980, Wendtland 2008 for the latter). But often, we seem to forget that split-ergativity had to arise in the first place, and no one would call nominative-accusative alignments

“unstable” only because there was a time in late Old and early Middle Indo-Iranian when most languages were switching to a split-ergative system (Jügel 2015 for Iranian, Dahl, Stroński 2016 for Indo-Aryan). Some languages have since switched back to nominative-accusative systems, but many have upheld ergativity until today (for example the languages discussed in this paper). Given how much the Indo-Iranian languages have changed in other areas of grammar in the same time period of roughly three millennia, split alignment looks hardly more “unstable” than, e.g., the phonology, the TAM system, nominal declensions or word order in any given language.

5. Conclusion

It is hoped this paper can serve as a first step towards bringing data from Nuristani languages into the broader linguistic discourse about ergativity and alignment systems. All Nuristani languages except for two show “classic” split-ergativity known from other Indo-Iranian languages, although there are minor differences in verb agreement and differential marking. The nominative-accusative alignment in the non-past tenses can not be explained away by assuming that transitive verbs of the tenses (and moods) in question are actually intransitive due to the presence of a copula or auxiliary. Therefore, Nuristani shows that recent theories about how to account for split-ergativity do not work well for many languages in the Hindukush area, and taking into account Nuristani data would help us refine current theories of (split-)ergativity.

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