Revisiting Split Ergativity in Q'anjob'al (Maya)

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Abstract

Q'anjob'al typically makes a rigid distinction between transitive and intransitive verb inflections. Transitive verbs mark their subjects with an ergative prefix while intransitive verbs mark their subjects with an absolutive prefix. Transitive verbs have one set of status suffixes, while intransitive verbs have a different set of status suffixes. An exception to this division occurs in embedded clauses that lack aspect marking. Two phenomena are found in this context: split ergativity and syntactic dependency. In split ergativity, intransitive verbs are marked with ergative morphemes instead of absolutive morphemes. In syntactic dependency, transitive verbs bear the suffix *-on* but continue to mark the subject and object with ergative and absolutive morphemes. Studies on split ergativity and syntactic dependency in Q'anjob'al (Francisco-Pascual, 2007; Mateo-Toledo, 2004a, 2008) do not provide a unified explanation for the fact that both intransitive and transitive verbs occur in embedded clauses that lack an aspect marker.

In this talk I propose that split ergativity and syntactic dependency in Q'anjob'al can be explained by assuming a nominalization hypothesis (c.f. Larsen & Norman, 1979; Bricker, 1981, Coon, to appear). I will present data on verb types that have taken into account for split ergativity in Mayan language with special focus on the argument that split ergativity is conditioned by a matrix clause that has undergone grammaticalization (Bricker, 1981; Larsen & Norman, 1979; Mora Morán, 2000). The nominalization hypothesis will explain why split ergative intransitive verb stems follow the regular pattern of ergative possessor marking on nouns. The nominalization hypothesis also explains why transitive verbs undergo intransitivization before nominalization in Q'anjob'al.

The nominalization hypothesis rejects the idea that embedded transitive verbs continue to cross-reference both subjects and objects after undergoing intransitivization. I will focus on intransitive and transitive verbs in embedded clauses in Q'anjob'al although I introduce data from other Mayan languages to support my analysis of nominalization in Q'anjob'al. I will show that nominalization in Q'anjob'al follows the intransitivization constraint found in Mayan languages. Further contexts of intransitivization in embedded clauses such as wh-questions, relativization, negation, and focus also support the intransitivization constraint in Q'anjob'al.