

Object marking in Proto-Uralic

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The consensus view on Proto-Uralic was split-accusative: definite objects were marked with an accusative **-m*, indefinite objects were left unmarked (Korhonen 1996). This viewpoint is typologically eminently plausible, but I believe there are enough problem areas to warrant a closer look. In particular, I believe the following issues deserve consideration:

1. Those Uralic languages that preserve accusative **-m* or clear traces of it usually show no sign of split-accusative marking, at least not as far as the marker **-m* is concerned (Saami, Finnic, Mari). Various Samoyed languages do preserve traces of **-m* but the exact role of definiteness, or focus, in the variation between marked and unmarked objects is not entirely clear (Havas 2008: 5-6). East Mansi does clearly use **-m* to mark definite objects, but given the absence of accusative **-m* in other Ugric languages, its usage for a rather marked subset of objects in Mansi may represent a last holdout of the Uralic accusative, rather than an original state of affairs. Furthermore, I will argue that two language groups showing definiteness-based split accusativity – Mordvin and Permic – do in fact not show any certain traces of accusative **-m*. Given furthermore that all but the westernmost Uralic languages have been to some extent in contact with Turkic, which shows definiteness-based split accusativity, I believe that the evidence for such split-accusativity in Proto-Uralic is rather weak.

2. A second issue is that one could expect objects to be marked particularly if subject and object are close on an individuation scale, for instance, if the subject is 3rd person. But precisely with 3rd person verbs in Uralic languages the original dichotomy between an unmarked intransitive and a transitive marked with an object suffix **-se* was superimposed or extended by forms built with a nominalizing suffix (e.g. **-pA* in Finnic, **-jA* in Mordvin). The use of such nominalizing suffixes for 3rd person verbs is widespread enough in Uralic languages to warrant reconstruction – in some form – to Proto-Uralic, but it remains unclear what form. In what constructions was the nominalizing suffix originally used? Was that construction transitive or formally intransitive? What was its relation with accusative **-m*?

In this talk, I intend to elaborate on an earlier proposal (De Smit 2014) and sketch an alternative view which has the potential to better explain the issues above. Following a suggestion by

Künnap (2006), I will argue that the Uralic *-*m* accusative may have developed from an earlier local case. I will adduce some evidence, albeit ambiguous evidence, from within Uralic but also from comparison between Uralic and Yukaghir. While aware of the very tentative nature of such comparisons, the worthwhileness of such efforts are tested precisely by whether they can generate new hypothesis about Uralic and Yukaghir, and I will argue this to be the case. Given that, I will argue that this *-*m* locative originally grammaticized in a formally intransitive, antipassive construction with a nominalized verb form – not entirely unlike English *he was shooting at the dog* (as opposed to *he shot the dog*). This construction originally emerged alongside the more usual Uralic intransitive (with an unmarked 3rd person verb) and transitive (with a 3rd person verb marked with an object marker *-*se*). The latter may have originally been an ergative construction (Katz 1980, De Smit 2014). Subsequently, it replaced those constructions either completely (as in Finnic) or partially (as in Mordvin), while Permic and most Ugric languages show little trace of this original antipassive construction.

In the absence of strict phonological criteria such as we have in the case of the reconstructed lexicon, the reconstruction of syntactic constructions leans heavily on general typological plausibility. I will, however, argue that the hypothesis outlined above has the potential to be a kind of pattern explanation connecting a number of loose ends in the current view on Uralic object-marking.

References

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