

“On the origins of the ergative marker *wã* in the Viceitic languages of the Chibchan family”

Abstract

Bribri and Cabécar are Chibchan languages spoken in Costa Rica in contiguous territories. Both languages display the quite rare phenomenon of differential, i.e. non allomorphic, ergative marking (McGregor 2009: 497). In particular, the ergative marker *wã* coexists with the canonical, more widespread ergative marker, namely *tö* in Bribri and *të* in Cabécar. The ergative marker *wã* is found, among others, in the Perfect Construction (i.e. a tense/aspect construction also known as “anterior”, cf. English *I have read a book*). The ergative marker *wã* also constitutes, in these two Chibchan languages, an instance of case syncretism with the possessor in Possessive Predications. Typologically, other case markers are among the most widely attested sources of ergative case markers, followed by demonstratives and pronouns (McGregor 2009: 499). In particular, possessor markers are the third most-widely attested source for ergative markers (Palancar 2002: 41). This is true for languages in the Eskimo-Aleutian, Tibeto-Burman, Mayan and, peripherally, Caucasian language families.

In light of such considerations, this talk has two main objectives. First, I show, by means of internal reconstruction, that the diachronic source of the ergative marker *wã* in the Perfect Construction in Bribri and Cabécar is the possessor marker found in Possessive Predications. Arguments for directionality of change will be provided. Second, I trace the presence of the possessor marker *wã* in Possessive Predications in other Chibchan languages within and outside the branch to which Bribri and Cabécar belong. This will reveal that the source of the possessor marker *wã*, later reanalyzed as an ergative marker in some of the languages, can be traced back to a Proto-Chibchan word meaning ‘thing’. The comparative method will be used to show evidence of cognacy between the proto-form and the putative reflexes in different Chibchan languages.

References

MCGREGOR, WILLIAM B. 2009. A typology of ergativity. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 3/1: 480–508.

PALANCAR, ENRIQUE L. 2002. *The origins of Agent markers*. *Studia typologica*, vol. 5: Sprachtypologie and Universalienforschung. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.