

Why are stative-active languages uncommon in Eurasia? Typological and geographical considerations

Johanna Nichols, UC Berkeley

Is it true that stative-active languages are found chiefly in the Americas and the Pacific? If so, what explains this geography? This paper surveys a fixed list of 20 verb glosses culled in part from Merlan (1985) and Bossong (1998) across a dense Eurasian and thinner worldwide sample of languages, to collect systematic figures on whether subjects are coded the same as A, O, D (indirect or second object; mnemonically, D ' Dative), possessor, or other. This abstract reports results from the pilot study. Conventions used here: Sa "active", So "stative"; Sd ' S coded the same as D.

An appropriate typological analysis needs to refer not just to semantic parameters but also to several more lexical and/or grammatical properties: deponent transitivity of various kinds (where "deponent" is defined following the Surrey Morphology Group; s.a. Tuite 2003); object-coded S (i.e. So and/or Sd, a broader category than the traditional "stative" which is So); object coding as one type of oblique marking of core arguments; whether object-coded S is So or Sd can be viewed as a matter of direct/indirect vs. primary/secondary object properties.

The more general property of object-coded S yields a much clearer cross-linguistic picture (with a surprisingly neat cline and neat segmentability into ergative, stative-active, and accusative) than traditional Sa/So. A plot of Sa vs. So/Sd gives a quick clear classification.

Object-coded S is not infrequent in Eurasia and is quite frequent in southern Eurasia—but in Eurasia the object-coded S is most often Sd and less often So.

Just as a few languages are fluid Sa~So (e.g. Acehnese, Batsbi), so a few are fluid Sa~Sd (Russian is the clearest case).

While canonical stative-active languages with Sa/So rarely also have an Aa/Ao split, Sd normally cooccurs with an Aa/Ad split (found so far in all Sd languages surveyed). Even in strongly ergative languages, D-like coding of core arguments follows an accusative pattern: Ad and Sd. In a few (e.g. Ingush) there is fluid AS/AdSd marking.

Grammatical factors favoring So over Sd as object-coded intransitivity include head marking; primary/secondary object type (itself a frequent concomitant of head marking); low valence (few three-argument verbs).

The main factor favoring semantically arbitrary split intransitivity is high frequency of denominal (and other derived) verbs, and this is common in Eurasia.

In Eurasia, split intransitivity is found chiefly in the Himalayan and Caucasus enclaves (for enclaves see Bickel and Nichols 2003, in press). This is another respect in which language spreading from interior Eurasia (Indo-European, Uralic, Turkic, etc.) has impoverished the typological profile of the continent.

Stative/active has mostly been viewed as a matter of clause syntax and semantics (agent vs. patient status of subjects) influencing the lexicon (valence frames of verbs) and getting frozen in over time, eventually yielding split subject marking. In contrast, this paper is in the vein of lexical typology and assumes that lexical properties (such as derivational and inflectional morphology of verbs, lexical classes of verbs) also influence clause morphosyntax.