

The Dative/Ergative Connection

Miriam Butt

University of Konstanz

The analysis of ergative languages remains problematic within linguistic theorizing. That is, although quite a bit has been written on ergativity and ergative languages, no really satisfactory analysis of ergativity seems to exist. This talk contends that this is so precisely because the ergative is treated as an "exceptional" construction, rather than being analyzed on a par with other non-nominative subject phenomena in the language. That is, no attempt is usually made to find an explanation that licenses both ergative and dative subjects, for example. But synchronic and diachronic data from Urdu/Hindi suggest precisely this approach. Synchronically, the ergative patterns just like other non-nominative subjects (also with respect to quantification, for example) and it regularly alternates with the dative on subjects to produce modal "can" vs. "must" readings. Historically, the ergative seems to be calqued on a dative subject construction (not the Sanskrit instrumental, as is usually assumed).

These data suggest a deep connection between datives and ergatives and after a discussion of the data, the talk presents a new view of case that explores the connection between datives and ergatives (and non-nominative subjects in general).

