

Dative/Accusative syncretism in New Indo-Aryan

Ashwini Deo (Yale University), Christin Schätzle (University of Konstanz), and Miriam Butt (University of Konstanz)

The rich inflectional case system of Old Indo-Aryan was lost during Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA), but many of the New Indo-Aryan (NIA) languages developed new case markers. These case-systems are characterized by three properties: a) (split-)ergativity; b) differential object marking (DOM); c) syncretism between accusative and dative case marking: a pattern in which the affected patients/themes in canonical transitive verbs occur with the same case clitic as experiencers, possessors, recipients, and goals.

The MIA system has nominative/accusative syncretism (except in the pronominal paradigms) and dative/genitive syncretism but does not exhibit accusative/dative syncretism. Nor is there any evidence of DOM. To date, there is no definitive understanding of when the system characterized by these properties emerges in Indo-Aryan.

We show that the diachronic record of Early NIA is crucial for achieving this understanding. We investigate the case-marking system of Old and Middle Marathi via a close corpus-based study (digital texts of the Dnyaneshwari (~1290 CE) and Lilacharitra (~1286CE)). We show that, at the early NIA stage for at least one language — Old Marathi, there is a clear morphosyntactic distinction between accusative and dative cases: -teM marks canonically "accusative" cases while -sI is used for possessors and goals. Moreover, -teM marking in perfective transitive clauses with ergative subjects is significantly less frequent than in imperfective clauses, indicating a diachronic development in which DOM gradually extends from imperfective to perfective clauses. At a later stage, Middle Marathi (Dasabodha 1654 CE), we observe that the dative case clitic of Old Marathi (-sI) is extended to marking the arguments of the transitive verbs, while the original accusative case clitic -teM, is significantly reduced in distribution. Our findings are significant as they suggest a primarily semantic explanation for the dative/accusative syncretism, rather than morphological erosion and the concomitant gradual collapse of case distinctions that are usually adduced in language change. Indo-Aryan is a language family which has seen both the erosion and the reconstitution of case systems and our research shows that in particular, MIA and NIA are crucial for developing a deeper understanding of case.