

Uhlenbeck, Sapir, and the early debate about ergativity in Native American Languages

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In 1916, C. C. Uhlenbeck argued that the objects (O) of transitive verbs in Native North American languages had properties in common with the subject (S) of intransitive verbs, excluding the transitive subjects (A). He surveyed a diverse set of languages, focusing on the Algonquian family (on which he had done fieldwork in 1911). Uhlenbeck's work on Algonquian, and his earlier research on Basque, would become preliminary steps towards the notion of ergativity in linguistics. However, Uhlenbeck did not use that term. Rather, he suggested that the transitive verb in Native American languages had a "passive character", which was "primitive" in a double sense: it was "primary" (the active being the derived form), and it was "less developed". For Uhlenbeck, North American languages represented agency as an emanation of a supernatural power, unlike the more evolved modern European languages.

In a reply, Sapir (1917) denounced Uhlenbeck for engaging more in "ethno-psychologic speculation on the basis of linguistic data" than on a strictly philological investigation. Sapir criticized Uhlenbeck's analysis in all fronts, arguing that the conclusion that O should be treated on par with S was the result of stacked overgeneralizations, and that the alleged primary status of the passive forms was not backed by diachronic evidence. Nevertheless, Sapir had to accept the morphological evidence aligning S and O pronominal affixes, but instead of agreeing with Uhlenbeck's interpretation, he proposed to treat S as an O, and the intransitive clause as a sort of impersonal construction. Needless to say, Sapir's hypothesis did not stand the test of time. But in a summary table he pointed to Chinook as a true "ergative" language (again, not his term). Chinook's importance in studies of ergativity would become evident later on, most prominently in Silverstein (1976).

As a follower of Humboldt's ideas, Uhlenbeck saw the passive character of North American languages as a reflection of the spirit of their speakers, but he could not escape Romantic ideas about the primitive (i.e. unspoiled by abstraction) nature of Native Americans' minds. Koerner (1992, 2000) has argued that Humboldtian ideas had also influenced Sapir's Relativism hypothesis. However, in agreement with Joseph (1996, 2002) I will conclude that Sapir's reaction against Uhlenbeck's views, which are consistent with Boas's teachings, raise doubts about this claim.

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