

Alignment, case and subjecthood in Indo-Aryan and Germanic

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This paper presents a comparative study of the relationship between alignment and subject morphosyntax in Vedic Sanskrit (Indo-Aryan) and Old English (Germanic). These languages have been selected because they belong to different branches of the same linguistic family (Indo-European), one of which is rather early attested, while the other is attested at a comparably late time. We argue that they present an ideal case for a contrastive exploration of alignment features and subjecthood properties, representing two different stages of the development of argument morphosyntax. On one hand, they share some general properties, for instance predominantly nominative-accusative alignment in nominal and verbal morphosyntax, as would be expected for genetically related languages. On the other hand, there are several important differences between them, concerning, for instance, the number of morphological case categories (8 in Vedic Sanskrit, 4 in Old English) and the presence/absence of split ergativity (present in Vedic Sanskrit, absent in Old English). It remains to be explored, however, to what extent and in what respects the two languages differ on a more detailed level, particularly regarding alignment features and subjecthood properties.

Drawing on Cotticelli and Dahl (2022) and Dahl (2023), the present paper aims to arrive at a more precise understanding of the small-scale differences between Vedic Sanskrit and Old English in these morphosyntactic domains. Methodologically, it employs a framework inspired by multivariate typology (e.g., Bickel 2015), which allows for breaking down language phenomena on any level into fine-grained descriptive features which serve as variables in analysis. Although this approach has primarily been developed for typological comparison involving genetically and geographically varied language samples, this paper aims to show that it also provides a fruitful model for exploring typologically interesting differences between genetically related languages. In the multivariate framework developed in this paper, alignment features are analysed according to the criteria outlined in Dahl (2022), while the selection of subjecthood properties are based on the survey in Falk (2006). Along the lines of Van Valin (2005) and Witzlack-Makarevich (2018), a given construction type is regarded as a subjecthood property if and only if it is restricted to the only argument of one-place predicates and the first argument of two- and three-place predicates.

The pertinent data from Vedic Sanskrit and Old English indicate that Vedic Sanskrit has fewer constructions that qualify as subjecthood properties than Old English. For instance, control and raising constructions involving infinitives represent subjecthood features in Old English but not in Vedic Sanskrit. Moreover, word order seemingly may count as a subject property in Old English but less clearly so in Vedic Sanskrit, although this issue remains controversial. The present paper explores these and related problems, examining several other construction types and their behavior in the two languages.

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