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The role of syntactic transitivity in the development of Slavic syntactic structures

The general directions and mechanisms in the historical development of Slavic syntactic structures are relatively well known, but the question of their fundamental causes has rarely been discussed. The aim of this presentation is to point out that the basic driving force in restructuring Slavic syntactic systems was the development of syntactic transitivity. This development was the manifestation of a gradual typological change, which started in Proto-Indo-European and, not being finished before the disintegration of the proto-language, lasted throughout the history of the daughter languages, encompassing not only Proto-Slavic but also the history of Slavic languages. This typological change, which led to the creation of systems whose basic characteristic is syntactic transitivity, was spreading at a different rate in the various syntactic subdomains. Both the method of internal reconstruction and the comparative method confirm this, since parallel processes are witnessed in other Indo-European languages.

The development of syntactic transitivity caused sentence elements to lose their relative autonomy and led to the creation of a sentence centralized around a governing verb, thus changing an Agreement language into a Government language. This drift is manifested in the following changes, as the most important ones:

1. The development of subject-object relations

As opposed to the earlier linguistic type characterized by a basic correlation between syntactic and semantic roles, invariant forms of the subject and object, having different semantic roles, were created (subject: agent, experiencer, possessor etc., object: patient, recipient, source etc.). The nominative and the accusative were grammaticalized in these functions. The rate of this process was directly proportional to the level of verb semantic transitivity. This induced further processes: the free accusative was losing its adverbial functions, being replaced by its prepositional forms or other cases, free case forms were being lost unless expressing one of the direct participants in the event and so on. Generally, it meant the development of verb valency.

2. The loss of nominal syntactic means and the development of hypotaxis

The archaic nominal forms and constructions (participles, absolute constructions, gerunds etc.), expressing subordinate relations in the earlier type, have been lost. These relatively autonomous sentence elements, whose semantic interpretation depended almost completely upon context, were replaced by verbal structures. This further led to the gradual creation of hypotaxis, which replaced the earlier paratactic system. The development of hypotaxis occurred in several stages, in which grammaticalization, reanalysis and generalization played the crucial role, giving rise to conjunctions as formal markers of the semantic relations between sentences.