Motivations II: Discourse:
The discourse basis of ergativity

1. Basic idea

In his analysis of Sacapultec (Maya), DuBois (1987) observes two potential correlations between the macro roles of S, A and O and the discourse categories of focus and topic:

1. Focus: Arguments comprising new/inactivated information appear preferentially in the S or O roles, but not in the A role
2. The topic tends to be a noun in the roles of S and A.

Discourse structures tend to be grammaticalized into morphosyntactic patterns. Thus, NOM/ACC patterns are motivated by topic structures (S, A), ERG/ABS patterns are motivated by focus structures.

2. DuBois‘ method

On the basis of a „Pear film“ (native speakers had to tell what they saw in the film), DuBois analysed verbal arguments and the way they are expressed along the following criteria:

1. Expression format of the argument(s):
   - lexical (overt NP)
   - pronominal
   - affixal (verb agreement)

2. Inherent semantic classes of the argument(s)
   - [+human]
   - [+sentient, -human]
   - [inanimate]

3. Grammatical role of the argument(s): S, A, O, OBL, POSS

4. Information status of the argument(s) (Activation status)
   - given
   - accessible
   - new
Remarks on the structure of Sacapultec (Maya: Quichean; highlands of Guatemala):

Sacapultec is a verb-first language. Transitive verbs agree with A and O. Overt lexical mention of an argument is optional. In fact, arguments assumed to be activated are not expressed at all:

(1) Elicited sentence with two lexically expressed arguments (DuBois 1987: 817):
   \[ \text{ki-Ø-r-tix \quad kinaq’ } l \quad \text{acheng.} \]
   \[ \text{INC-ABS:3s-ERG:3s-eat \quad bean \quad ART \quad man} \]
   'The man eats beans.'

(2) On the ergative surface syntax of discourse in Sacapultec (DuBois 1987: 824):
   a. \[ \text{sh-e:-pe: \quad e: \quad isheb’ \quad al’o:m.} \]
      \[ \text{CMP-ABS:3p-come \quad PL \quad three \quad boy-PL} \]
      'Three boys came.'
   b. \[ \text{sh-Ø-a:-ki=-siky’-a’ \quad l \quad pe:ra} \]
      \[ \text{CMP-ABS:3s-MOV-ERG:3p-pick.up \quad MOV \quad ART \quad pear} \]
      '[They came] and picked up the pears,' ...

The absolutive pattern (S, O) of overt lexical argument mention forms a regular pattern in Sacapultec:

In (2a), an intransitive verb is followed by a single lexical argument mention in the S role. In (2b), a transitive verb is followed by a single lexical argument mention in the O role. ... the pattern of verb plus absolutive argument exemplified in (2) is the preferred pattern for the overt occurrence of lexical arguments in discourse. (Du Bois 1987: 824)

3. Some statistics

Frequency of clauses with zero, one, and two lexical arguments (intransitive vs. transitive clause) (DuBois 1987: 820):
What proportion of each argument position is expressed lexically?
(DuBois 1987: 822)

Frequency of clauses with zero, one, and two new arguments (intransitive vs. transitive clauses)
(DuBois 1987: 825 - 826):
Grammatical role and information status of mention (DuBois 1987: 826):

4. Explanations

1. Explanation on why new participants tend to occur in the roles of S and O:

The appearance of lexical and new mentions in the S and O roles, but not A, is ultimately related to the role of topic continuity (Givón 1983b, Nichols 1985) in the construction of narrative discourse. It is widely recognized that human protagonists tend to be the central participants in most narrative discourse, and tend to be maintained as the theme (roughly, topic) in successive clauses. As a result, they are very often definite and given. To the extent that human protagonists are likely to be agents in two place predicates, it is likely that the A role will be filled by a given mention of a thematic human protagonist—for which a pronoun or cross-referencing affix, rather than a full NP, will suffice. In the O position, by contrast, we tend to find inanimate patient arguments in much greater variety. Each is likely to be relatively ephemeral in the discourse, rarely persisting through more than a few successive clauses. The steady sequence of shifting patient referents results in the O role being filled very frequently with new, lexical mentions. (DuBois 1987: 829)

2. Explanation on why topics tend to occur in the roles of S and A:

Counterbalancing the factors that link S with O are a set of important—and, in fact, long-recognized—factors that link S with A. It is a familiar observation that mentions appearing in the {S,A} category are typically human, agentive, and topical. ... A number of linguists have argued that TOPIC, or the (proto)typical correlation of agent and topic, is the basis for gramaticizing the category of subject, in languages which have this category ... If the typical {S,A} correlations really are type-independent—if they are found in ergative as well as accusative languages—then they must be recognized as a competing motivation in discourse which could weigh against the effective influence of PAS [Preferred Argument Structure, W.B.]. (DuBois 1987: 839)

Reference: