

Nominative-Absolutive alignment in Cariban and Jê: Description and reconstruction

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In languages of the Cariban and Jê family, tense-aspect-mood based alignment splits include one clause type in which S and A pattern together in both morphology and syntax, creating a nominative pattern. However, in the same clause type, a second index of S patterns together morphologically with O, creating an absolutive pattern. In earlier work (e.g., Gildea 1998, 2000), I have referred to this pattern in Cariban languages as the "Partial Set II" verbal system. In more recent work, Alvez Castro (2004, 2006) describes a parallel pattern in the Jê language family, offering it the more iconic name "Nominative-Absolutive" alignment. In both families, the nominative-absolutive is conditioned by verbal inflections that require an auxiliary, and express clearly nonpast, imperfective and/or irrealis meanings. In both families, the absolutive pattern derives etymologically from obligatorily possessed nominalizations, whereas the nominative has multiple sources. If we follow Dixon (1994) in calling this a subset of the ergative type, then we have a large number of exceptions to the correlation between ergativity and past/perfective tense-aspect. Our conclusion is that, despite the absolutive cross-referencing on the verb, the nominative-absolutive should not be considered a subtype of ergative, but its own unique alignment type.