In stimulating work on deep genetic relations, Nichols (1990, 1992) has proposed that the categorization of core arguments has high genetic stability over time. It should serve, accordingly, as a useful guide in solving 'problems of detecting affinity at great time depths and describing early linguistic prehistory' (Nichols 1992:1). Examples certainly abound of such stability within certain language families. Numerous examples can also be found, however, of shifts at relatively shallow time depths. Here we will examine shifts to various types of patterns, some widely known (Nominative/Accusative, Ergative/Absolutive), and others less familiar (Agent/Patient, Hierarchical Inverse). It will be seen that both language-internal and language-external factors may stimulate and facilitate the shifts, often acting in concert. The fluidity of these systems suggests that the codification of grammatical relations and argument structure may not be a reliable indicator of deep genetic relationship after all. It may, to the contrary, suggest the influence of contact.

Diachronic shifts to Nominative/Accusative and Ergative/Absolutive patterns may be brought about by several different mechanisms. Among them are the generalization of passive or antipassive constructions, the reanalysis of instrumental constructions, and the extension of possessed nominalized clauses to main clause status. Since such processes have already been discussed elsewhere, shifts of this type will be surveyed briefly.

The next type of shift to be discussed is to the Agent/Patient type. Though not as common as some others, such systems have been observed in most areas of the world. In North America they cover a wide, contiguous area of the Northeast, Southeast, and Great Plains, but they appear in only a few small points elsewhere. One of these is the Yuki language of Northern California. Yuki has traditionally been classified as remotely related to just one other language, Wappo, though that relationship remains controversial. Wappo distinguishes Subject and Object categories, but Yuki has grammaticalized Agent and Patient categories, distinguished in pronoun shape and case endings on nouns referring to humans. Semantic agents of verbs like 'run', 'eat', or 'hit', for example, are categorized as grammatical Agents, while participants affected by such events as 'hit', 'fall', or 'die', or by such states as 'fear', 'be tired', or 'be in pain' are categorized as grammatical Patients. The crucial features underlying the categorization are not aspect (as in Active/Stative systems), nor instigation or performance (as in some other Agent/Patient systems), but control and affectedness. Verbs like 'hiccup' or 'vomit', performed but uncontrolled, appear with grammatical Patients. The distinction is made only for humans, and in some cases not even for them, particularly for third persons. A system with just these characteristics is rare cross-linguistically, but it is found in the immediately adjacent languages of the Pomoan family. All seven Pomoan languages share precisely these features, though the forms involved show no similarity whatsoever. No genetic relationship has ever been seriously considered between Yuki and Pomoan. There has, however, been longstanding, extensive intermarriage among Yuki and Pomoan speakers, with a strong tradition of multilingualism, suggesting that the system came into being through contact. The abstract pattern was apparently borrowed but not on the markers themselves. The mechanism underlying the shift is easy to reconstruct. In Yuki, as in Pomoan, pronouns are independent words rather than affixes, but third persons are not normally identified at all if their reference is clear. A sentence like '(It) tires me' could thus be rendered with just a verb and Patient pronoun 'me'. Transitivity is not marked on verbs, so it would be an easy matter to reanalyze the indigenous transitive '(It) tires me' (1.patient tired) as an intransitive 'I am tired'. The original object pronoun 'me' could be reinterpreted as a Patient pronoun. There are few syntactic constructions that distinguish a subject relation in either language. Yuki contains no passives, for example, though there are derivational suffixes that can be used to form new verb stems for specifically deliberate or involuntary actions. The Pomoan languages contain a derivational detransitivizer that affects argument structure, eliminating an Agent argument from transitive verb stems, but the remaining argument shows no change in grammatical status: it is still a grammatical Patient. The Yuki case provides a good example of a system shift stimulated and shaped by contact, but developed through language-internal reanalysis.

The last shifts to be examined are to Hierarchical systems. In the systems considered here, core arguments are identified on verbs by pronominal affixes. In intransitive clauses, the single core argument is always specified pronominally. In transitive clauses, only one of the two arguments is represented. The choice of argument to represent is determined primarily by person, though other factors may be in play as well.
Typically in clauses with a first or second person acting on a third (1/3, 2/3), only the first or second person is represented (1 or 2). In clauses with a third person acting on a first or second, again it is the first or second person that is represented, usually with some indication of the role of that argument (1-x or 2-x). Such systems occur in various parts of the world, though they are comparatively rare. A concentration of such systems can be found, however, in a set of areally contiguous languages in Northern California. Among them are the closely-related Yanan languages, the isolate Chimariko, the isolate Karuk, the Yurok language of the Algic family, and to a lesser extent the neighboring Palaihnihan and Shasta languages. One might be tempted to suggest that the similarities reflect a very deep genetic relationship, deeper than one retrievable through the comparative method. The development of the systems can be seen to be relatively recent in each of the languages, however. Furthermore, they can be seen to have evolved from slightly different kinds of systems through slightly different mechanisms. The Yanan systems, for example, can be seen to have arisen relatively recently in several stages from a Nominative/Accusative system, through an increase in passivization. The Chimariko system can be seen to have arisen from an Agent/Patient system, facilitated by the lack of affixes representing third persons. Each of the systems and their histories will be described. The situation suggests that the development of the systems was originally stimulated by contact in an area known for long-term, heavy multilingualism, but that the particular pathways by which each evolved was dependent on different circumstances in each language.

In the end, the fluidity of each of these system types suggests that the codification of grammatical relations and argument structure should not be taken prematurely as an indication of deep genetic relationship.

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