The PIE Ergativity Myth: A Less Speculative Analysis

Once upon a time (sometime during the last century, to be more precise), Indo-Europeanists have come to notice that while they classify most of their precious major Indo-European languages as nominative/accusative as opposed to ergative/absolutive, some of their features may point to an ergative/absolutive ancestor. First, I shall briefly summarize and assess the remarks and theories of some Indo-Europeanists such as Uhlenbeck, Vaillant, and Kuryłowicz, who argued that Proto-Indo-European could have been at some point in time ergative/absolutive, or at least, split ergative. They did so by pointing out the fact that in most major Indo-European daughter languages, masculine and feminine nouns appear to have nominative/accusative morphology since they distinguish these two cases from one another with different markers, whereas neuter nouns appear to have absolutive morphology in that they have the same marker or lack thereof whether they appear in subject or direct object position. Following that, I shall propose a slightly different but less speculative analysis of this apparent split between the masculines and feminines and the neuter by appealing to semantic features.

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