

## Syntactic ergativity without ‘syntactic ergativity’

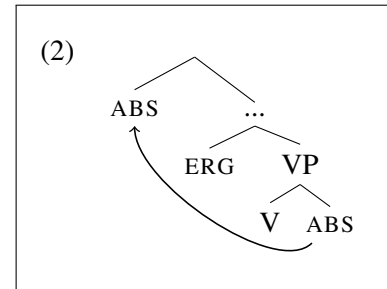
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**Introduction.** A subset of morphologically ergative languages have been claimed to display syntactic rules which are sensitive to the distinction between ergative (A) and absolutive (S and O) participants—*syntactic ergativity*. The most robustly attested syntactic ergativity effect concerns asymmetries in  $\bar{A}$ -movement: while absolutive arguments may undergo extraction (1a), the ergative argument may not (= the Ergative Extraction Constraint, or EEC; Aissen 2017) (1b).

- (1) a. Aree le ichaj<sub>ABS</sub> k-Ø-u-tij  $t_{ABS}$  le al Mari’y.  
 FOC DET vegetables INCL-3SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-eat:TV DET HON Maria  
 ‘Maria will eat [the vegetables]<sub>FOC</sub>’
- b. \*Aree le al Mari’y<sub>ERG</sub> k-Ø-u-tij le ichaj  $t_{ERG}$ .  
 FOC DET HON Maria INCL-3SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-eat:TV DET vegetables  
 Intended: ‘[Maria]<sub>FOC</sub> will eat the vegetables.’ (K’iche’; Tollan and Clemens 2022:466)

The ubiquity of this effect has led to a broadly accepted conflation of the term *syntactic ergativity* with the EEC (Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon et al. 2014; Coon et al. 2021; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016, 2017, a.m.o.) and an implicational hierarchy: if a language is to display any syntactic ergativity effects, it will display the EEC (Kazenin 1994; Aldridge 2008; Deal 2016). This talk argues that a universal correlation between syntactic ergativity and the EEC is theoretically unexpected and empirically incorrect, based on evidence from West Circassian—a language which displays a range of syntactic ergativity effects, but not the EEC.

**Why can’t the ergative move?** A robust line of work has connected the presence of syntactic ergativity effects with *high absolutive* syntax (Coon et al.’s (2014) term): the absolutive theme of a transitive verb moves to a position above the ergative agent (2). In addition to the EEC, this correlates with definiteness restrictions and obligatory wide scope for the absolutive argument (see Bittner 1994; Bittner and Hale 1996; Yuan 2022 on Inuit and Aldridge 2004, 2008, 2012 on Tagalog and Seediq), high absolutive agreement (Coon et al. 2014; Coon et al. 2021) and obviation of Condition C effects in Mayan (Royer 2023).



**High absolutive syntax**  $\Rightarrow$  **EEC**. Analyses which connect the EEC to high ABS syntax require additional ingredients which must parametrically apply only to a subset of languages. For example, Coon et al. (2021) propose that ABS intervenes for ERG  $\bar{A}$ -movement in Mayan because the  $\bar{A}$ -probe on  $C^0$  is relativized for an additional feature (D), and ABS, by virtue of bearing this feature, triggers defective intervention (3).

- (3) [CP  $C_{[\bar{A}+D]}$  ... [<sub>vP</sub> ABS<sub>[D]</sub> ERG<sub>[D, \bar{A}]</sub> v [<sub>VP</sub> V <ABS> ...
- 

This type of relativized probe bears no direct connection to the presence of high absolutive syntax, and indeed, Branan and Erlewine (2024) argue that it appears in nominative-accusative languages as well.

Similarly, Tollan and Clemens (2022) derive the EEC from high ABS syntax by proposing that syntactically ergative languages have a grammaticalized processing constraint banning crossed movement dependencies:  $\bar{A}$ -movement of the ergative argument is ungrammatical because it crosses the movement path of the high absolutive argument (4). Like the relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe, this constraint is not universal, with systematic violations attested e.g. in Norwegian and Icelandic (Maling and Zaenen 1982).

- (4) [CP ERG ... [<sub>vP</sub> ABS <ERG> v [<sub>VP</sub> V <ABS> ...
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The EEC is thus derived through a *combination* of high absolutive syntax and another independent parameter. These accounts thus fail to derive the implicational hierarchy which states that syntactically ergative languages universally display the EEC: high absolutive syntax may plausibly exist in the absence of a rela-

tivized  $\bar{A}$ -probe or a grammaticalized constraint on crossing dependencies. Far from being a drawback, this result is empirically correct: West Circassian is a high absolutive language which does not display the EEC. **Syntactic ergativity in West Circassian.** Ershova (2019, 2021, 2023, 2024) discusses several syntactic ergativity effects in West Circassian, including parasitic gap licensing and possessor extraction (not discussed here) and reciprocal binding. Reciprocals are primarily expressed through morphology on the predicate which Ershova (2023) extensively argues to be the expression of agreement with a covert anaphor, rather than a valency-changing operator: it does not affect the agreement and case-assigning properties of the predicate and the position of the reciprocal morphology co-varies with the grammatical role of the bound anaphor. Based on the position of this agreement morphology, we can observe that reciprocals (i) are generally bound by a c-commanding antecedent—e.g. an applied object is bound by ERG, and not vice versa (5); and (ii) provide evidence for the ABS theme c-commanding ERG: in a transitive clause, ABS binds ERG and not vice versa (6; see also Letuchiy 2010).

- (5) a. te wəne-xe-r    Ø-    ze-    fe-    [t-]    šə -ž'ə -ɸ    [ERG] binds IO  
 we house-PL-ABS    3ABS- REC.IO- BEN- 1PL.ERG- do -RE -PST
- b. \*te wəne-xe-r    Ø-    [t-]    fe-    ze-    šə -ž'ə -ɸ    [IO] cannot bind ERG  
 we house-PL-ABS    3ABS- 1PL.IO- BEN- REC.ERG- do -RE -PST  
 ‘We built houses for each other.’ (Ershova 2023:213)
- (6) a. [te-]    zere-    λeɸ<sup>w</sup>ə -ɸ    [ABS] binds ERG  
 1PL.ABS- REC.ERG- see    -PST
- b. \*ze(re)-    [t-]    λeɸ<sup>w</sup>ə -ɸ    [ERG] cannot bind ABS  
 REC.ABS- 1PL.ERG- see    -PST  
 ‘We saw each other’ (*ibid.*:214)

West Circassian is thus a high ABS language: ABS raises to a position above ERG, from which it may bind a reciprocal in the ERG position. However, the language does not display the EEC: ergatives can move. **Ergatives can move.** ERG arguments may be relativized in the same manner as other participants: relative clauses are formed through  $\bar{A}$ -movement of a null relative operator and *wh*-agreement, which replaces regular  $\phi$ -agreement with the relativized participant (7; Lander 2009, 2012; Caponigro and Polinsky 2011).

- (7) [<sub>RC</sub> Op<sub>i</sub> deɸ<sup>w</sup>-ew    wered    t<sub>i</sub>(ERG)    Ø-qe-zə-ɾ<sup>w</sup>e-xe-re-r    ]  
 beautiful-ADV song    3ABS-DIR-WH.ERG-say-PL-PRS-ABS  
 ‘those who sing well’

ERG relativization displays typical movement-related properties. It displays weak and strong crossover effects (to be discussed in the talk) and is island sensitive: similarly to ABS and IO (not shown here), relativization of ERG from a factive complement is ungrammatical (8).

- (8) \* [<sub>RC</sub> Op<sub>i</sub> se Ø-s-še-re-r    [<sub>CP</sub> t<sub>i</sub>(ERG) deɸ<sup>w</sup>-ew    wered  
 I    3ABS-1SG.ERG-know-PRS-ABS    good-ADV song  
 Ø-qə-zere-zə-ɾ<sup>w</sup>e-re-r ] ]  
 3ABS-DIR-FACT-WH.ERG-say-PRS-ABS    Intended: ‘the one who I know [ \_\_ sings well ]’

West Circassian thus provides evidence for syntactic ergativity in the absence of the EEC.

**Implications.** The connection between high ABS syntax and EEC is at best indirect. Based on this result, one must be cautious in equating syntactic ergativity with EEC—a concern which is further confirmed by the possibility of EEC without high ABS syntax (e.g. Otsuka 2006; Legate 2012; Polinsky 2016; Deal 2016). **Select references.** •Branan & Erlewine 2024. *LI*. •Caponigro & Polinsky 2011. *NLLT*. •Coon et al. 2021. *Language*. •Ershova 2019. UChicago diss. •Ershova 2023. *Language*. •Kazenin 1994. *STUF*. •Lander 2012. RSUH diss. •Otsuka 2006. In *Ergativity*. •Royer 2023. *LI*. •Tollan & Clemens 2022. *LI*.