

# Unexpected $\bar{A}$ -movement in West Circassian

Theoretical implications for syntactic ergativity

Ksenia Ershova

Stanford University

Princeton Symposium on Syntactic Theory 2022



# What is syntactic ergativity

Defined broadly (Polinsky 2017:3):

“The presence of **syntactic rules** that group S and O (the absolutive) together, to the exclusion of A (the ergative).”

S = subject of intransitive verb

O = object of transitive verb

A = subject of transitive verb

} **ABS**

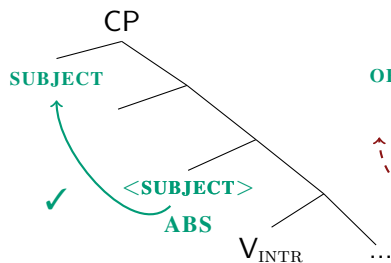
} **ERG**

# What makes a language syntactically ergative?

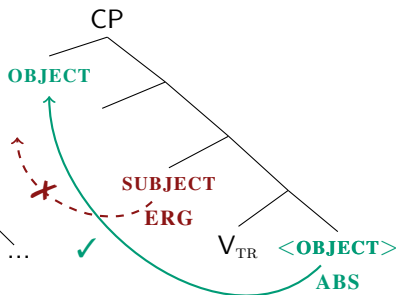
## Trademark property:

ban on wh-movement of the ergative agent

## Intransitive clause:



## Transitive clause:



Dixon (1994); Manning (1996); Aldridge (2004, 2008); Coon et al. (2014, 2021); Deal (2016); Polinsky (2016, 2017); Tollan and Clemens (2021),a.o.

## Example: ERG cannot move in Q'anjob'al (Mayan)

\* Maktxel max y-il    ERG ix    ix?  
who        PFV A3-see        CLF woman

Intended: 'Who saw the woman?'

**\*ERG WH-MOVT**

Maktxel max y-il    naq winaq ABS ?  
who        PFV A3-see CLF man

'Who did the man see?'

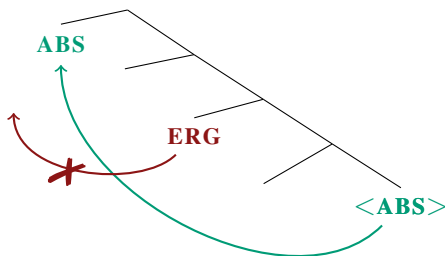
**✓ABS WH-MOVT**

(Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2021)

A class of approaches accounts for syntactic ergativity effects with **movement of ABS to a high position.**

Aldridge (2004, 2008); Coon et al. (2014, 2021); Tollan and Clemens (2021), a.o.

Raised ABS **blocks** ERG  $\bar{A}$ -movement:



# The main claim

- ▶ The ban on ergative wh-movement is taken to be the **defining property** of syntactically ergative languages.
- ▶ Under existing accounts, ABS raising alone is **insufficient** to derive blocking of ERG.

Additional assumptions or analytical tools are required.

- ▶ **This is a desirable aspect of high absolutive analyses.**

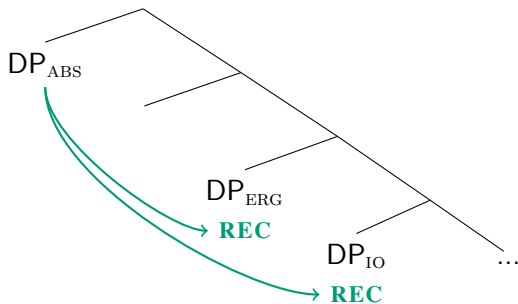
The ban on ergative extraction is not necessarily *predicted* by high absolutive syntax, nor necessarily *predicts* high absolutive syntax.

**Confirmed by West Circassian.**



# Broader syntactic ergativity in West Circassian

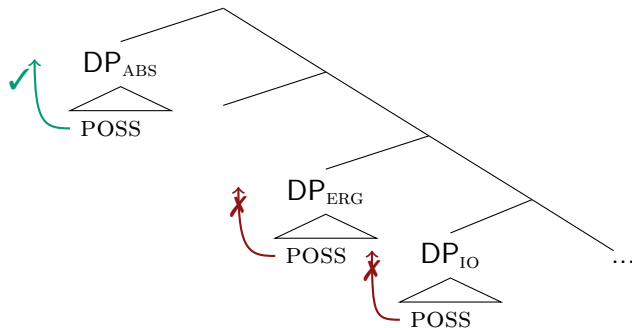
1. ABS binds ERG and IO reciprocals, and not vice versa (Ershova 2019, 2021b)





# Broader syntactic ergativity in West Circassian

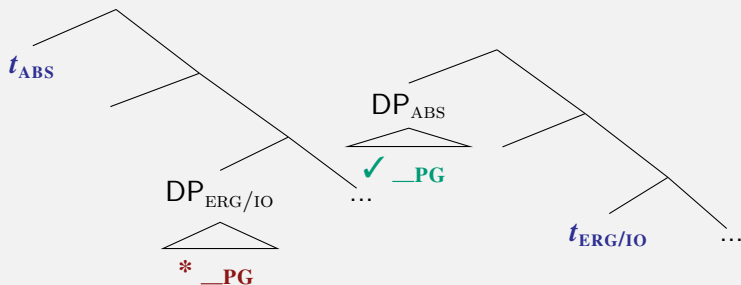
1. ABS binds ERG and IO reciprocals, and not vice versa (Ershova 2019, 2021b)
2. only ABS is transparent for possessor extraction (Ershova 2020)



# Broader syntactic ergativity in West Circassian

1. ABS binds ERG and IO reciprocals, and not vice versa (Ershova 2019, 2021b)
2. only ABS is transparent for possessor extraction (Ershova 2020)

3. anti-c-command condition: ABS trace cannot license parasitic gaps (Ershova 2019, 2021a)



# Unifying syntactic ergativity effects

- ▶ Three syntactic rules which group S and O together, to the exclusion of A
- ▶ All three require S and O to be **structurally** distinct from A
- ▶  $\Rightarrow$  S and O must **share the same position**
- ▶ This position is outside  $vP$ ,  
and c-commands ERG

**Broad syntactic ergativity** is evidence for **high absolutive** syntax.

# Expanding high absolute analyses

- ▶ **Proposals for high absolute:**

Bittner and Hale 1996; Manning 1996; Baker 1997; Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Yuan 2018; Drummond 2021, a.o.

- ▶ **Key diagnostic for high absolute:** ban on ergative wh-movement.

- ▶ **Additional reflexes of high absolute** in quantifier scope, cross-clausal coreference, word order, and agreement morphology.

## This talk

- ▶ High absolute syntax confirmed with **novel structural diagnostics**.

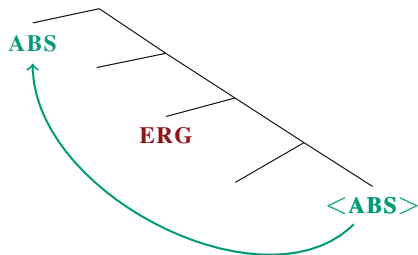
- ▶ **Counter to prior literature:** high absolute does not predict a ban on ergative wh-movement.

# Deconstructing syntactic ergativity: Roadmap

- ▶ **Predictions of high absolutive syntax**
- ▶ Background on West Circassian
- ▶ Case study: parasitic gaps
- ▶ Conclusion and implications

# High absolutive languages

In **high absolutive** languages, the ABS object raises to a position above the ERG agent:



## The raised absolutive:

- ▶ should be detectable by syntactic rules that are sensitive to structural superiority
- ▶ does not necessarily block ergative extraction

# How the high absolutive blocks ergative extraction

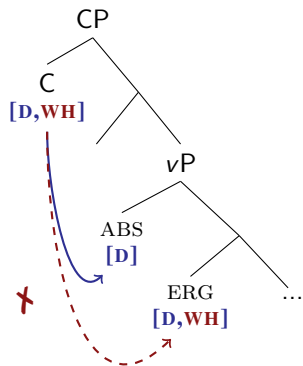
## Two prominent approaches:

1. raised ABS intervenes between wh-probe and ERG (Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon et al. 2021)
2. ERG movement over raised ABS is a violation of the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies (Tollan and Clemens 2021)

Ergative extraction is blocked by a combination of raised absolutive + additional language-specific assumptions.

# High absolute intervenes

Coon et al. (2021):



▶ ABS object raises to Spec, vP

▶ ABS intervenes for ERG wh-movement

because wh-C is *relativized* for [WH] and [D]

▶ relativized probe is **language-specific**

In most languages, the wh-probe is not relativized for [D].  
Predicts high ABS languages with no ban on ERG extraction.



# How the high absolutive blocks ergative extraction

## Two prominent approaches:

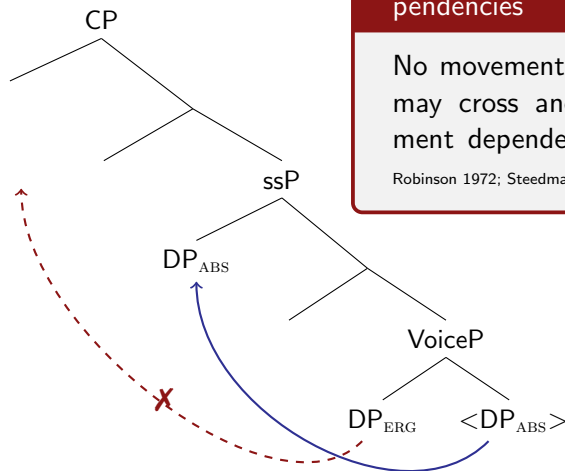
1. raised ABS intervenes between wh-probe and ERG  
(Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon et al. 2021)

Does not predict that ERG extraction constraint is necessary property of high absolutive languages.

2. ERG movement over raised ABS is a violation of the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies (Tollan and Clemens 2021)

# Constraint on Crossing Dependencies

Tollan and Clemens (2021):



Constraint on Crossing Dependencies

No movement dependency may cross another movement dependency. (Kuno and Robinson 1972; Steedman 1985, a.o.)

# Constraint on Crossing Dependencies is not universal

Tollan and Clemens (2021): there are well-known counterexamples

- ▶ Dutch clause-final verb clusters
- ▶ Bulgarian multiple wh-movement

⇒ Predicts *tendency* for high absolutive languages to display ergative extraction constraint.

Does not predict universal correlation between high absolutive and ergative extraction constraint.

Allows for possibility of high ABS language without a ban on crossing dependencies, i.e. no ban ERG extraction.

# How the high absolutive blocks ergative extraction

## Two prominent approaches:

1. raised ABS intervenes between wh-probe and ERG  
(Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon et al. 2021)

Does not predict that ERG extraction constraint is necessary property of high absolutive languages.

2. ERG movement over raised ABS is a violation of the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies (Tollan and Clemens 2021)

Predicts *tendency* for high absolutive to correlate with ergative extraction constraint.

Leaves space for counterexamples.

# High absolutive in the broader syntax

- ▶ Raised absolutive does not necessarily block ergative extraction.
- ▶ High position of ABS should affect syntactic rules which are sensitive to c-command.

**Both predictions confirmed by West Circassian.**

High absolutive diagnosed in three novel domains:

- ▶ reciprocal binding
- ▶ possessor extraction
- ▶ **parasitic gaps**

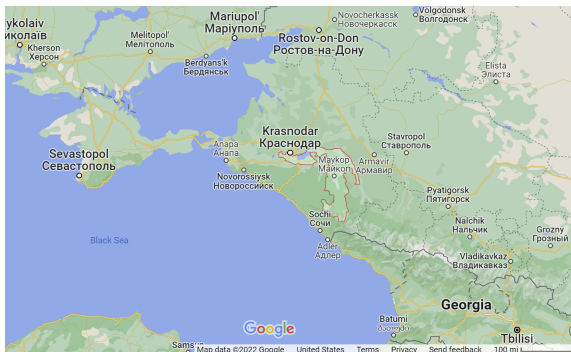
# Deconstructing syntactic ergativity: Roadmap

- ▶ Predictions of high absolutive syntax
- ▶ **Background on West Circassian**
- ▶ Case study: parasitic gaps
- ▶ Conclusion and implications

# Case Study: West Circassian

## West Circassian (or Adyghe):

- ▶ Northwest Caucasian
- ▶ primarily spoken in the Republic of Adyghea, Russia



Data from fieldwork on **Temirgoy dialect** in the Shovgenovskiy district of Adyghea, collected during three trips in 2017-2019.





# Head marking on nominals

s-            šəpχ<sup>w</sup>əxer  
**1SG.POSS-** sister.PL.ABS

‘my sisters’

**INALIENABLE**

t-            jə-            ɸ<sup>w</sup>ənɸ<sup>w</sup>əxem  
**1PL.POSS- ALIEN-** neighbor.PL.OBL

‘our neighbors’

**ALIENABLE**

# Case marking is ergative

## -r (ABS):

- ▶ subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- ▶ object of transitive verb (**O**)

mə pšaše-**r**      daxew qaš<sup>w</sup>e  
this girl-**ABS**      well      dances

‘This girl(S) dances well.’

sabəjxe-m      haxe-**r**      qaλeβ<sup>w</sup>əβ  
children-OBL dogs-**ABS** saw

‘The children(A) saw the dogs(O).’

# Case marking is ergative

## -r (ABS):

- ▶ subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- ▶ object of transitive verb (**O**)

## -m (OBL):

- ▶ subject of transitive verb (**A**)
- ▶ applied object (**IO**)

sabəjxe-m haxe-r qalɛɸ<sup>w</sup>əɸ  
children-OBL dogs-ABS saw

‘The children(A) saw the dogs(O).’

# Case marking is ergative

## -r (ABS):

- ▶ subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- ▶ object of transitive verb (**O**)

## -m (OBL):

- ▶ subject of transitive verb (**A**)
- ▶ applied object (**IO**)

žeg<sup>w</sup>ə-**m**      səqəš'əš<sup>w</sup>aβep  
wedding-**OBL** I didn't dance

'I didn't dance at the wedding(IO).'

# Case marking is ergative

## **-r (ABS):**

- ▶ subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- ▶ object of transitive verb (**O**)

## **-m (OBL):**

- ▶ subject of transitive verb (**A**)
- ▶ applied object (**IO**)
- ▶ possessor

mə š<sup>w</sup>əzə-**m** Ø-jə-pšaše  
this woman-**OBL** 3SG.POSS-ALIEN-girl

‘this woman’s daughter’

# Case marking is ergative

## -r (ABS):

- ▶ subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- ▶ object of transitive verb (**O**)

## -m (OBL):

- ▶ subject of transitive verb (**A**)
- ▶ applied object (**IO**)
- ▶ possessor
- ▶ complement of postposition

mə pšaše-**m** paje  
this girl-**OBL** for

‘for this girl’



# No ergative extraction constraint

χərbəzew [ \_\_ABS a-š' Ø- ə- bzə-βe-r ]  
watermelon that-OBL **WH.ABS-** 3SG.ERG- cut-PST-ABS

‘the watermelon that he cut’

✓**ABS WH-MOVT**

[ txələ-r \_\_IO Ø- ze- r- jə- tə-βe ] çəfə-r  
book-ABS 3ABS- **WH.IO-** DAT- 3SG.ERG- give-PST person-ABS

‘the person to whom s/he gave the book’

✓**IO WH-MOVT**

č'alew [ apč'ə-r \_\_ERG Ø- zə- q<sup>w</sup>əta-βe-m ]  
boy glass-ABS 3ABS- **WH.ERG-** break-PST-OBL

‘the boy that broke the glass’

✓**ERG WH-MOVT**

(Lander 2012:274-276)



West Circassian does not display a ban on ergative extraction.

However, West Circassian is a high absolutive language.

**Case study:** constraints on parasitic gaps

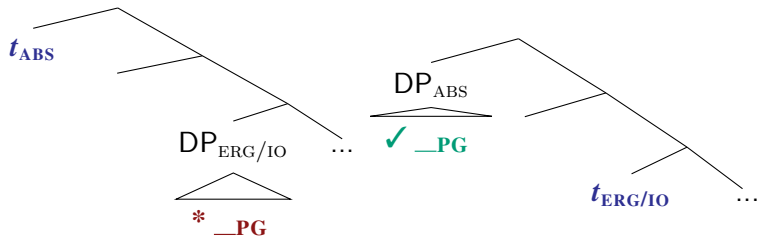
# Deconstructing syntactic ergativity: Roadmap

- ▶ Predictions of high absolutive syntax
- ▶ Background on West Circassian
- ▶ **Case study: parasitic gaps**
- ▶ Conclusion and implications

# Syntactic ergativity and parasitic gaps

## Prediction of high absolutive syntax:

An ABS trace cannot license parasitic gaps in ERG or IO, per the anti-c-command condition (Engdahl 1983).



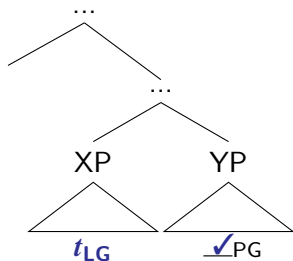
(Ershova 2019, 2021a)

# The Anti-C-Command Condition

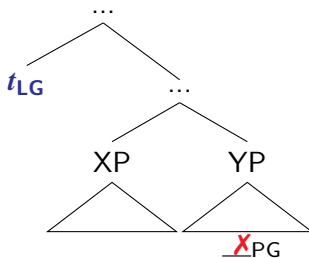
Anti-C-Command Condition (Engdahl 1983:22)

“A parasitic gap may not be c-commanded by the real gap.”

See also Aoun and Clark (1985); Chomsky (1986); Contreras (1987), a.o.



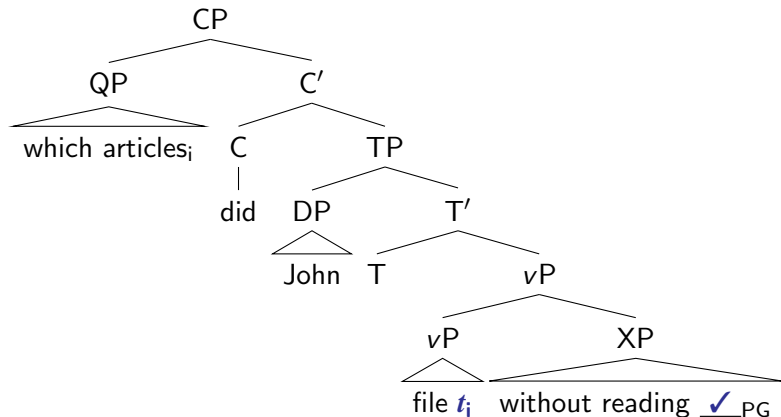
$\checkmark$  parasitic gap



$\times$  parasitic gap

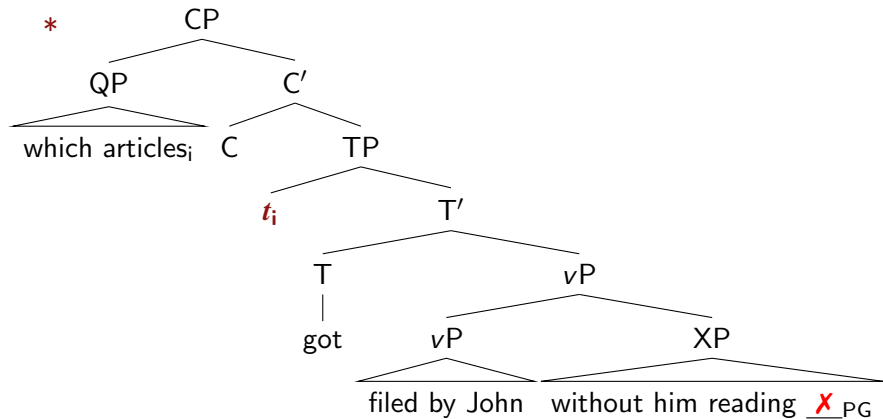
# The anti-c-command condition in English

**object** doesn't c-command adjunct  $\Rightarrow$  can license parasitic gap



# The anti-c-command condition in English

**subject** c-commands adjunct  $\Rightarrow$  cannot license parasitic gap

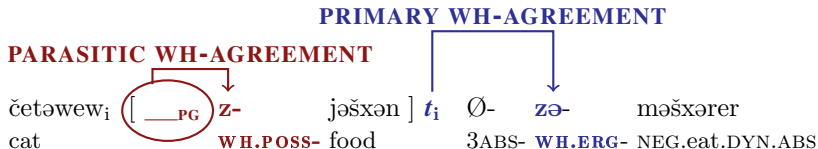




# Possessor parasitic gaps

A relativized participant may license a parasitic gap in place of a bound possessor in a clausemate DP.

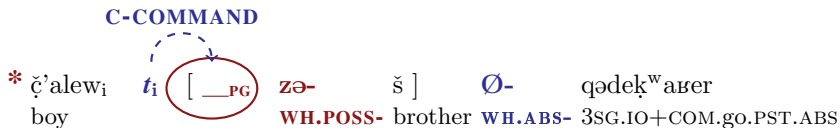
The parasitic gap triggers **parasitic possessor wh-agreement**.



‘the cat who doesn’t eat its food’



An ABS trace cannot license parasitic gaps in clausemate NPs



‘the boy who arrived together with his brother’

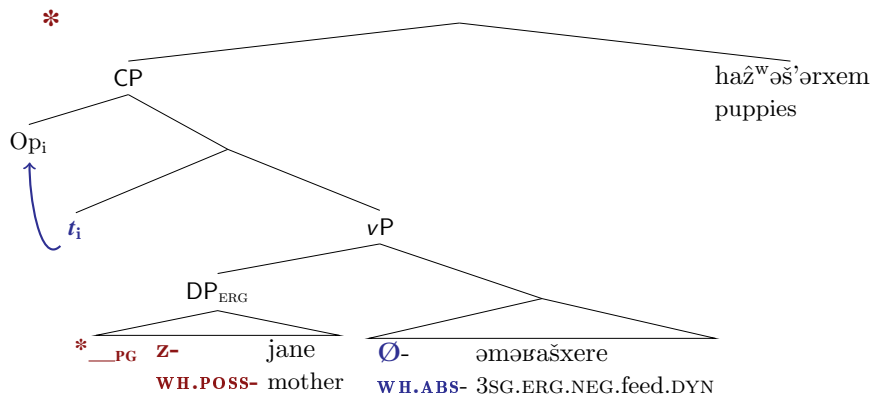
Anti-C-Command Condition (Engdahl 1983:22)

“A parasitic gap may not be c-commanded by the real gap.”

⇒ ABS c-commands the possessor

# Absolute trace cannot license parasitic gaps

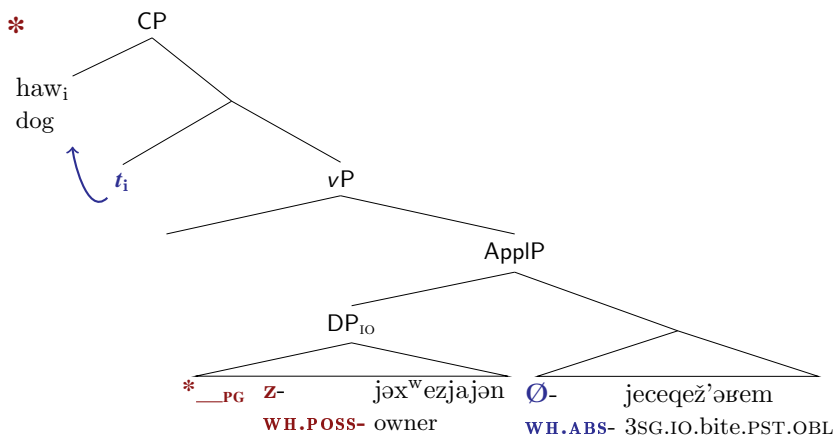
ABS theme cannot license parasitic gap in ERG DP:



Intended: 'the puppies whom their mother doesn't feed'

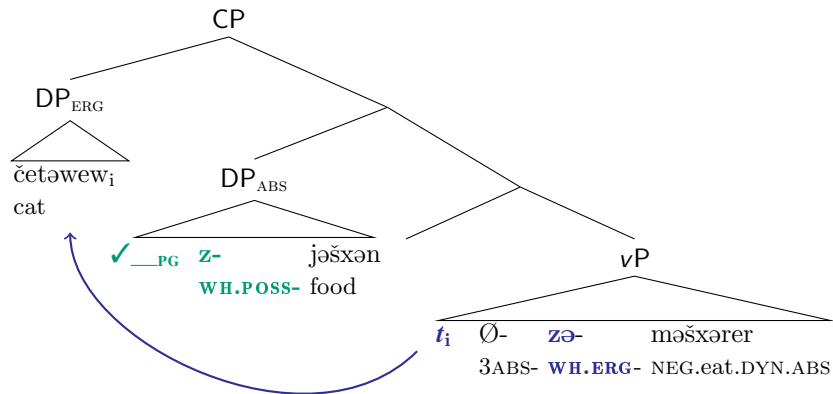
# Absolute trace cannot license parasitic gaps

ABS agent cannot license parasitic gap in IO DP:



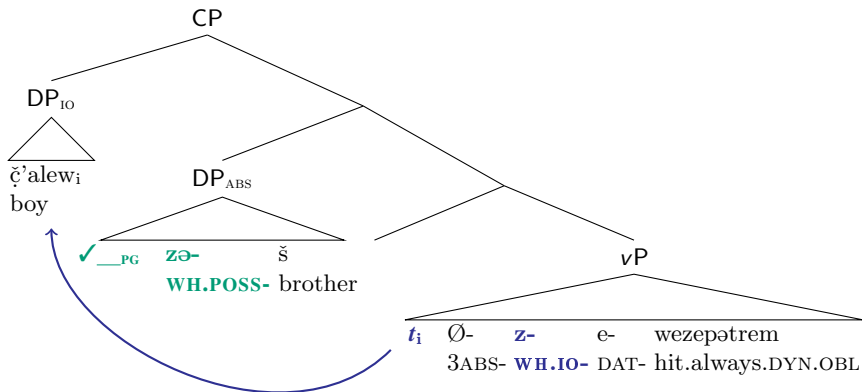
Intended: 'the dog that bit its owner'

# ERG trace licenses parasitic gap in ABS DP



‘the cat who doesn’t eat its food’

# IO trace licenses parasitic gap in ABS DP



'the boy whom his brother always hits'

## Summary: parasitic gaps and syntactic ergativity

- ▶ a pronoun that is bound by a relativized participant may be replaced by a **parasitic gap**
- ▶ the parasitic gap triggers **parasitic wh-agreement**
- ▶ **ERG** or **IO** trace can license parasitic gaps in **ABS**
- ▶ **ABS** trace cannot license parasitic gaps in **ERG** or **IO** DPs
- ▶ Per the anti-c-command condition  
⇒ **ABS** c-commands **ERG** and **IO**

Parasitic gaps provide evidence for a high absolutive syntax.

# Deconstructing syntactic ergativity: Roadmap

- ▶ Predictions of high absolutive syntax
- ▶ Background on West Circassian
- ▶ Case study: parasitic gaps
- ▶ **Conclusion and implications**

# Fitting parasitic gaps into the bigger picture

Syntactic ergativity effect in parasitic gap licensing:

The ABS trace cannot license parasitic gaps in IO or ERG due to the **anti-c-command condition**.

Other syntactic ergativity effects:

- ▶ possessor extraction is only possible from ABS, not ERG or IO
- ▶ ABS binds ERG and IO reciprocals, not vice versa

**Taken together**, these generalizations form a unified picture:

The absolutive DP moves high.

**But no ergative extraction constraint!**



## Ergative Extraction Constraint (Aissen 2017; Coon et al. 2021)

ERG may not undergo  $\bar{A}$ -movement.

\*See also Aldridge (2004, 2008); Coon et al. (2014, 2021); Deal (2016); Polinsky (2016, 2017); Tollan and Clemens (2021), a.o.

### Q'ANKOB'AL (MAYAN):

\* Maktxel max y-il —ERG ix ix?  
who PFV A3-see CLF woman

Intended: 'Who saw the woman?'  
(Coon et al. 2021)

**\*ERG WH-MOVT**

**The status quo:** the ergative extraction constraint is a trademark property of high absolutive languages

**&** high absolutive syntax is **required** to derive the ergative extraction constraint

(but see Otsuka 2006, 2017; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016)

## This talk

The ergative extraction constraint is not necessarily *predicted* by high absolutive syntax, nor necessarily *predicts* high absolutive syntax.

# High absolute $\nRightarrow$ ergative extraction constraint

The movement of ABS to a position higher than ERG does not straightforwardly predict the ergative extraction constraint.

Additional assumptions are required:

- ▶ relativized wh-probe (Coon et al. 2021)
- ▶ constraint on crossing dependencies (Tollan and Clemens 2021)

**This is a desirable prediction.**

West Circassian is a high absolute language without an ergative extraction constraint.

# Ergative extraction constraint $\nRightarrow$ high absolutive

Raised ABS is not the only way to derive the ban on ergative wh-movement.

## Approaches based on properties of ERG:

- ▶ ERG cannot move because of case or structural position
- ▶ ABS remains low and does not interact with ergative extraction

(Otsuka 2006, 2017; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016)

### The main takeaway

- ▶ The Ergative Extraction Constraint is possible in low absolutive languages.
- ▶ High absolutive syntax does not predict the Ergative Extraction Constraint.

# Thank you!

- ▶ West Circassian consultants: Svetlana K. Alishaeva, Saida Gisheva, Susana K. Khatkova, and Zarema Meretukova
- ▶ Karlos Arregi, Cleo Condoravdi, Itamar Francez, Vera Gribanova, Boris Harizanov, Ana Ilievska, Paul Kiparsky, Yury Lander, Beth Levin, Jason Merchant, and Yakov G. Testelet
- ▶ Funding sources:
  - ▶ Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS-1749299)
  - ▶ Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Dissertation Research Grant
  - ▶ Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Scholars in the Humanities at Stanford University

- Aissen, Judith. 2017. Correlates of ergativity in mayan. In *The Oxford handbook of ergativity*, eds. Jessica Coon, Diane Massam, and Lisa deMena Travis Travis, 737–758. Oxford University Press.
- Aldridge, Edith. 2004. Ergativity and word order in Austronesian languages. PhD diss, Cornell University.
- Aldridge, Edith. 2008. Generative approaches to syntactic ergativity. *Language and Linguistics Compass: Syntax and Morphology* 2.5: 966–995.
- Aoun, Joseph, and Robin Clark. 1985. On non-overt operators. *Southern California occasional papers in linguistics* 10: 17–36.
- Baker, Mark C. 1997. Thematic roles and syntactic structure. In *Elements of grammar: Handbook in generative syntax*, ed. Liliane Haegeman, 73–137. Springer.
- Bittner, Maria, and Kenneth Hale. 1996. The structural determination of case and agreement. *Linguistic Inquiry* 27: 1–68.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1986. *Barriers*. MIT Press.
- Contreras, Heles. 1987. Parasitic chains and binding. In *Studies in Romance languages*, eds. Carol Niede and R. A. Cedeno, 61–78. Foris.

## References (cont.)

- Coon, Jessica, Nico Baier, and Theodore Levin. 2021. Mayan agent focus and the ergative extraction constraint: Facts and fictions revisited. *Language* 97 (2): 269–332.
- Coon, Jessica, Mateo Mateo Pedro, and Omer Preminger. 2014. The role of case in A-bar extraction asymmetries: Evidence from Mayan. *Linguistic Variation* 14(2): 179–242.
- Deal, Amy Rose. 2016. Syntactic ergativity: Analysis and identification. *Annual Review of Linguistics*.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 1994. *Ergativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Drummond, Emily. 2021. Abstract case without morphological case. Presented at NELS 52.
- Engdahl, Elisabet. 1983. Parasitic gaps. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 6: 5–34.
- Ershova, Ksenia. 2019. Syntactic ergativity in West Circassian. PhD diss, University of Chicago.
- Ershova, Ksenia. 2020. Phasehood as defective intervention: Possessor extraction and selective DP islandhood in West Circassian. Ms. <https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/005469>.

## References (cont.)

- Ershova, Ksenia. 2021a. Diagnosing clause structure in a polysynthetic language: Wh-agreement and parasitic gaps in West Circassian. *Linguistic Inquiry* 52 (1): 1–38. doi:10.1162/ling\_a00371.
- Ershova, Ksenia. 2021b. Syntactic ergativity and the theory of subjecthood: Evidence from anaphor binding in West Circassian. Ms. <https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/005168>.
- Korotkova, Natalia, and Yury Lander. 2010. Deriving affix ordering in polysynthesis: Evidence from Adyghe. *Morphology* 20: 299–319.
- Kuno, Susumu, and Jane J. Robinson. 1972. Multiple wh questions. *Linguistic Inquiry* 3: 463–487.
- Lander, Yury. 2012. Reljativizacija v polisintetičeskom jazyke: adygejskie odnositel'nye konstrukcii v tipologičeskoj perspektive [Relativization in a polysynthetic language: Adyghe relative clauses in a typological perspective]. PhD diss, Russian State University for the Humanities.
- Manning, Christopher D. 1996. *Ergativity: Argument structure and grammatical relations*. Cambridge University Press.



## References (cont.)

- Otsuka, Yuko. 2006. Syntactic ergativity in Tongan. In *Ergativity: Emerging issues*, eds. Alana Johns, Diane Massam, and Juvenal Ndayiragije, 79–107. Springer.
- Otsuka, Yuko. 2017. Ergative-absolutive patterns in Tongan: An overview. In *The Oxford handbook of ergativity*, eds. Jessica Coon, Diane Massam, and Lisa Demena Travis.
- Polinsky, Maria. 2016. *Deconstructing ergativity: Two types of ergative languages and their features*. Oxford University Press.
- Polinsky, Maria. 2017. Syntactic ergativity, 2nd edn. In *The Wiley blackwell Companion to Syntax*, eds. Martin Everaert and Henk van Riemsdijk. Wiley.
- Steedman, Mark. 1985. Dependency and coordination in the grammar of Dutch and English. *Language* 61: 523–568.
- Tollan, Rebecca, and Lauren Clemens. 2021. Syntactic ergativity as a constraint on crossing dependencies: The perspective from Mayan. *Linguistic Inquiry* Early Access. doi:10.1162/ling\_a00421.
- Yuan, Michelle. 2018. Dimensions of ergativity in Inuit: Theory and microvariation. PhD diss, MIT.