

### Three argument hierarchies in West Circassian and how movement can explain them

Ksenia Ershova (k.ershova@ucl.ac.uk)

West Circassian (Northwest Caucasian) has been argued to display syntactic ergativity, where the absolutive theme of a transitive verb displays subject-like properties, alongside the absolutive subject of intransitive verbs and in contrast to transitive (ergative) agents. This includes being able to bind an ergative reciprocal (1a), constraints on multiple wh-agreement patterns, and asymmetries in possessor relativization (Lander 2009, 2012; Letuchiy 2010; Ershova 2019, 2021, 2023). However, the agent of a transitive verb also displays subject-like effects, such as the ability to bind reflexives (1b), be controlled PRO (Letuchiy 2010; Ershova 2019, 2023), and the requirement to precede the theme in nominalized constructions (1c; Ershova 2020).

- (1) a. tə-**zere**-λeβ<sup>w</sup>ə-β  
1PL.ABS-REC.ERG-see-PST  
‘We saw each other.’ (ABS binds ERG)
- b. **zə**-t-λeβ<sup>w</sup>ə-β  
REFL.ABS-1PL.ERG-see-PST  
‘We saw ourselves.’ (ERG binds ABS)
- c. pšeše-leβe-thač’ə-č’e-r  
girl-dish-wash-NML-ABS  
‘girls’ dish washing’ (agent(ERG) precedes theme(ABS))

A possible solution is to attribute the latter set of diagnostics to a high position in the thematic hierarchy (where agentivity correlates with prominence), whereas the subject-like properties of the absolutive argument is connected to surface subjecthood (e.g. Letuchiy 2010). This simple dichotomy, however, is challenged by the behavior of so-called inverse predicates.

Inverse predicates select of an applicative experiencer and an absolutive theme (2a). “Surface subjecthood” diagnostics, such as reciprocal binding, demonstrate that the theme is more subject-like (2b-2c). Thematic hierarchy-based diagnostics, however, do not behave uniformly. Reflexive binding suggests that the theme and experiencer are symmetrical: either argument can bind the other (2d).

- (2) a. sə-p-š’ə-β<sup>w</sup>əpša-β  
1SG.ABS-2SG.IO-LOC-forget-PST  
‘You forgot about me.’ (baseline inverse)
- b. tə-**ze**-š’ə-β<sup>w</sup>əpše-ž’ə-β  
1PL.ABS-REC.IO-LOC-forget-RE-PST
- c. \***ze**-t-š’ə-β<sup>w</sup>əpše-ž’ə-β  
REC.ABS-1PL.IO-LOC-forget-RE-PST  
‘We forgot about each other.’ (ABS binds IO)
- d. **zə**-s-š’ə-β<sup>w</sup>əpše-ž’ə-β  
REFL.ABS-1SG.IO-LOC-forget-RE-PST
- e. sə-**z**-š’ə-β<sup>w</sup>əpše-ž’ə-β  
1SG.ABS-REFL.IO-LOC-forget-RE-PST

‘I forgot about myself.’

(ABS binds IO; IO binds ABS)

In nominalizations, on the other hand, the experiencer must precede the theme, and the inverse order is not possible (3), suggesting that the experiencer outranks the theme.

- (3) a. č’ale-m Ø-jə-nene-š’ə-ɸ<sup>w</sup>əpše-n  
boy-OBL 3SG.PR-poss-grandmother-LOC-forget-NML  
‘the boy’s forgetting grandmothers’; (experiencer-theme-verb)  
not: \*‘grandmothers’ forgetting the boy’

Thus, the language displays three prominence hierarchies: (i) surface subjecthood; (ii) a strict thematic hierarchy in nominalizations, and (iii) a hierarchy where the experiencer and theme are equally ranked. The talk will argue that this is best explained in a tree-geometric, movement-based analysis. The hierarchy in (ii) corresponds to the baseline order in which arguments are introduced: themes lower than agents and experiencers. Diagnostics which follow the hierarchy in (iii) are sensitive to a structure where the theme may optionally move to a position above the experiencer (but still lower than the agent). Finally, surface subjecthood is sensitive to an even larger clause structure, where the absolutive argument has moved to a position above all other arguments, including the ergative agent.

## References

- Ershova, Ksenia. 2019. Syntactic ergativity in West Circassian. PhD diss, University of Chicago.
- Ershova, Ksenia. 2020. Two paths to polysynthesis: Evidence from West Circassian nominalizations. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 38: 425–475. doi:10.1007/s11049-019-09455-w.
- Ershova, Ksenia. 2021. 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. 2023. Syntactic ergativity and the theory of subjecthood: Evidence from anaphor binding in West Circassian. *Language* 99 (2): 193–241. doi:10.1353/lan.2023.a900086.
- Lander, Yury. 2009. Subject properties of the Adyghe absolutive: Evidence from relatives. Unpublished ms. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354052419\\_Subject\\_properties\\_of\\_the\\_Adyghe\\_absolutive\\_Evidence\\_from\\_relatives](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354052419_Subject_properties_of_the_Adyghe_absolutive_Evidence_from_relatives).
- Lander, Yury. 2012. Reljativizacija v polisintetičeskom jazyke: adyghejskie 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.
- Letuchiy, Alexander. 2010. Ergativity in the Adyghe system of valency-changing derivations. In *Ergativity, Valency and Voice*, eds. Gilles Authier and Katharina Haude, 323–353. De Gruyter.