

What it means for a language to be syntactically ergative

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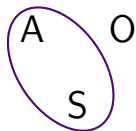
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What is ergativity?

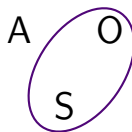
- ▶ 3 basic types of arguments:
 - A** subject of a transitive verb
 - S** subject of an intransitive verb
 - O** object of a transitive verb
- ▶ **Alignment** = how these arguments are grouped
- ▶ **Morphology**: case and agreement

accusative



nominative

ergative



absolutive

Ergativity: toy example

Toy example: “fake English”

I saw them. A = **ergative**

They saw **me**. O = **absolute**

Me arrived. S = **absolute**

Ergativity: real example

Real example: Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan)

(Dixon 1994:10)

yabu **ɲuma-ɲgu** buran
mother(ABS) **father-ERG** saw

'Father saw mother.'

A = **ergative**

ɲuma yabu-ɲgu buran
father(ABS) mother-ERG saw

'Mother saw father.'

O = **absolute**

ɲuma banagan^yu
father(ABS) returned

'Father returned.'

S = **absolute**

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).”

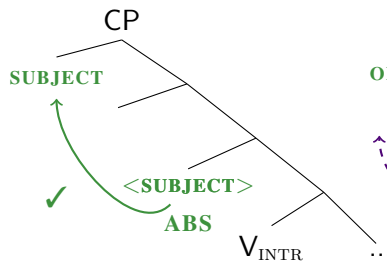
S = subject of intransitive verb	}	ABS
O = object of transitive verb		
A = subject of transitive verb	}	ERG

The Ergative Extraction Constraint

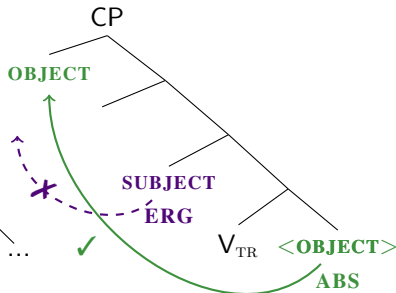
Trademark syntactic ergativity effect:
ban on the displacement of the ergative agent

* displacement = relativization, question formation, topicalization, clefting,
focus fronting, etc. = \bar{A} -movement

Intransitive clause:



Transitive clause:



Dixon (1994); Manning (1996); Aldridge (2004, 2008a); Coon et al. (2014, 2021); Deal (2016); Polinsky (2016, 2017); Tollan and Clemens (2022), 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-MOVEMENT**

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

'Who did the man see?'

✓ABS(O) WH-MOVEMENT

Maktxel max way-i __ABS ?
who PFV sleep-ITV

'Who slept?'

✓ABS(S) WH-MOVEMENT

(Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022)

What does it mean to be syntactically ergative?

► **Implicational universal:**

If a language displays **any** syntactic ergativity effects, it displays the **ergative extraction constraint**.

(Kazenin 1994; Aldridge 2008a; Deal 2016)

syntactic ergativity \Leftrightarrow **ergative extraction constraint**

► **This talk:**

This universal is

- theoretically unexpected
- empirically incorrect

syntactic ergativity \nLeftrightarrow **ergative extraction constraint**

West Circassian: syntactically ergative, but no EEC!

The syntax of syntactic ergativity

West Circassian

Background

Syntactic ergativity

No Ergative Extraction Constraint

Conclusion

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Syntactic ergativity results from object raising

A prominent proposal:

syntactically ergative languages are **high absolutive**

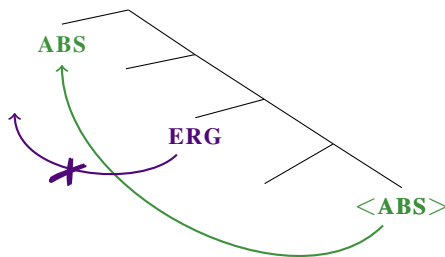
(Aldridge 2004, 2008a; Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022, a.o.)

- ▶ The absolutive DP (O) **moves** to a position above the ergative DP (A)
- ▶ Syntactic ergativity results from ABS c-commanding ERG

Ergative Extraction Constraint: high ABS blocks ERG movement

High absolutive blocks ergative extraction

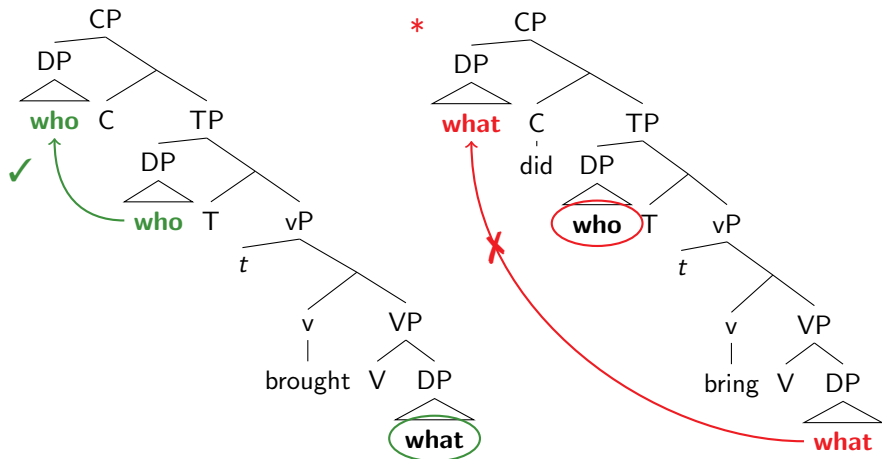
- ▶ ABS object is selected by the verb below ERG subject.
- ▶ In surface syntax, ABS occupies high position above ERG.
- ▶ high ABS intervenes for ERG movement.



(Aldridge 2004, 2008b; Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022)

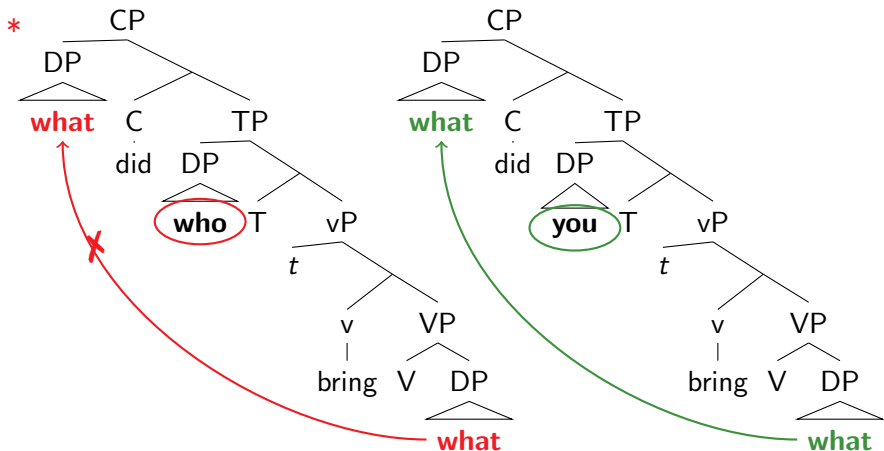
What does it mean to intervene for movement?

- ▶ Agreement and movement are constrained by **locality**.
- ▶ Example: C attracts the **highest wh-phrase** to Spec,CP.



Not everything intervenes

- ▶ A wh-phrase cannot move over another wh-phrase.
- ▶ But a wh-phrase **can** move over another DP that is **not** a wh-phrase.



Why would high absolute block ergative extraction?

- ▶ By default, a higher DP does not block wh-movement of a lower DP.
- ▶ Additional ingredients are needed to explain the Ergative Extraction Constraint.
- ▶ Example: Coon et al. (2021) propose **relativized probing**

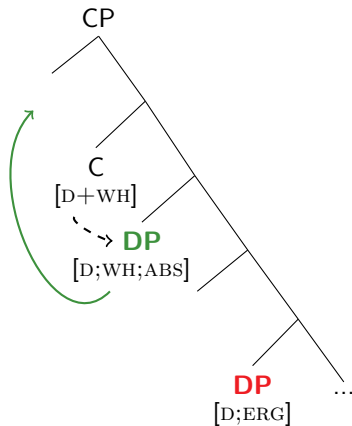
2 ingredients combine to create the Ergative Extraction Constraint:

1. high absolutive DP c-commands the ergative DP
2. C probes for **a DP with a wh-feature**: [D+WH]
(relativized probing)

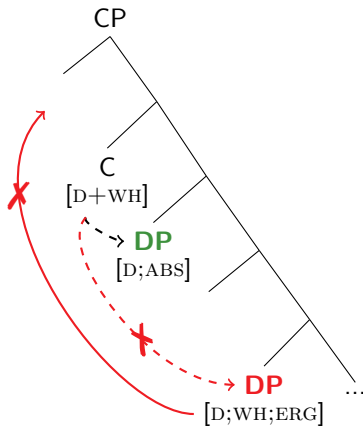
Result: Any DP (even without a wh-feature!) intervenes.

Relativized probing in Q'anjob'al

✓ ABS wh-movement



* ERG wh-movement



Ergative Extraction Constraint = high ABS + relativized probe

Relativized probe is

- ▶ not universal! (cf. English)
- ▶ completely independent of high ABS syntax

Prediction:

high ABS syntax is possible without relativized probing

⇒ Implicational universal (EEC \Leftrightarrow synt erg) is not derived!

Confirmed by West Circassian!

The syntax of syntactic ergativity

West Circassian

- Background

- Syntactic ergativity

- No Ergative Extraction Constraint

Conclusion

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West Circassian (or Adyghe):

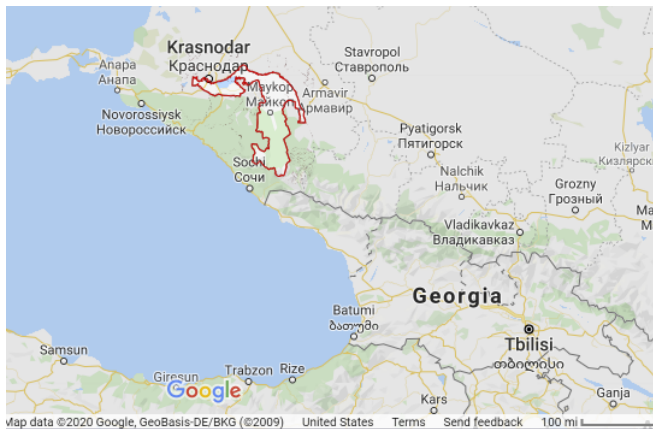
- ▶ Northwest Caucasian language family, related to East Circassian, Abaza, Abkhaz, and Ubykh
- ▶ Northwest Caucasian is one of three indigenous language families in the Caucasus Mountains
- ▶ primarily spoken in the Republic of Adyghea, Russia

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

Republic of Adygea



Republic of Adygea



Data collection

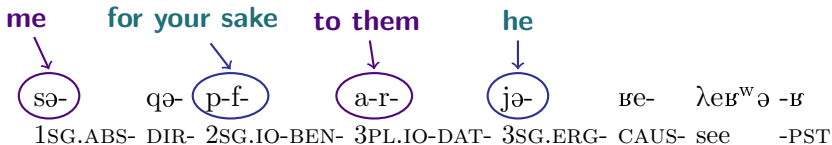


- ▶ very large consonant inventory (≈ 60), three vowels
- ▶ complex morphology
- ▶ free word order
- ▶ ergative-absolutive case and verbal agreement

West Circassian is polysynthetic

Head marking and pro-drop:

səqəpfarjəβeləβ^wəβ



'He showed me to them for your sake.'

(Korotkova and Lander 2010:301)

Agreement order: **ABS-** **IO+APPL-** **ERG-**

Case marking is ergative

S

mə pšaše-**r** daxew qaš^we
this girl-**ABS** well dances

‘This girl dances well.’

A

O

sabəjxe-**m** haxe-**r** qaλeβ^wəβ
children-**ERG** dogs-**ABS** saw

‘The children saw the dogs.’

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Syntactic ergativity in West Circassian

West Circassian displays **several syntactic ergativity effects**:

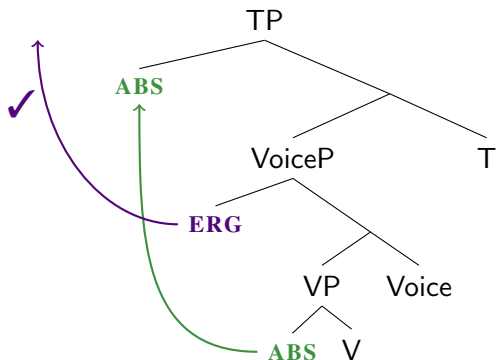
- ▶ **reciprocal binding** (Ershova 2023)
- ▶ parasitic gaps (Ershova 2021)
- ▶ possessor relativization (Ershova 2024b)

But it does **not** display the Ergative Extraction Constraint!

The EEC is not universal for syntactically ergative languages!

Syntactic ergativity without the EEC

The proposal: ABS object obligatorily raises to Spec,TP.



C is **not** a relativized probe

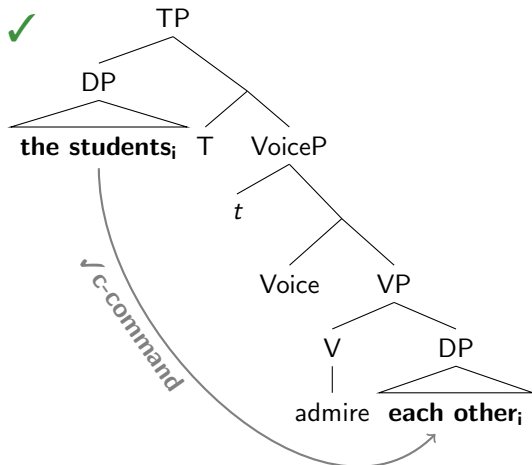
⇒ wh-movement can skip other DPs, like in English

Result: Syntactic ergativity, but no Ergative Extraction Constraint!

Reciprocals as a structural diagnostic

Reciprocals are **anaphors**

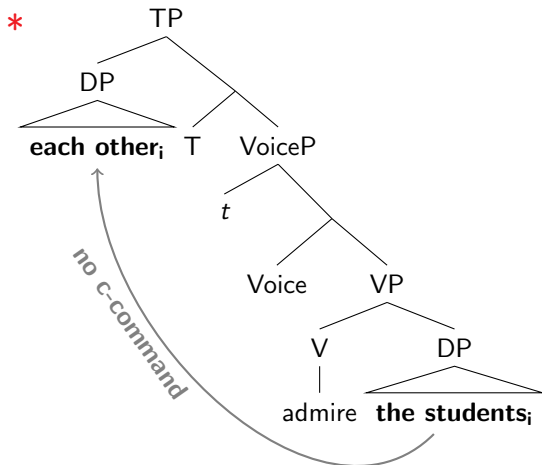
= require a **local c-commanding antecedent**



Reciprocals as a structural diagnostic

Reciprocals are **anaphors**

= require a **local c-commanding antecedent**



Reciprocals are covert and trigger **reciprocal agreement** on the predicate:

- ▶ correlates with syntactic position of the reciprocal
- ▶ does not affect transitivity \Rightarrow not a de-transitivizing operator

Reciprocals are subject to Condition A

= must be bound by a local c-commanding antecedent

(Ershova 2019, 2023)

Reciprocal agreement

ABS external argument binds **IO**

⇒ REC replaces IO agreement

you

↓
š^wə-

2PL.ABS-

with us

qə-

↓
d-

DIR-

1PL.IO-

de-

COM-

š^weš't

dance.FUT

BASELINE

'You(pl) will dance with us'

Reciprocal agreement

ABS external argument binds **IO**

⇒ REC replaces IO agreement

you

with each other

↓
š^wə-

qə-

↓
ze-

de-

š^weš't

2PL.ABS- DIR- REC.IO- COM- dance.FUT

RECIPROCAL

'You(pl) will dance with each other'

Reciprocal agreement does not affect transitivity

ERG binds IO

- ▶ REC replaces IO agreement
- ▶ ERG antecedent bears ERG case

axe-me ?eg^wəb^ze-r Ø- ze- r- a- təʒ'ə
that.PL-ERG cup-ABS 3ABS- REC.IO- DAT- 3PL.ERG- give

'They pass the cup to each other.'

(<http://adyghe.web-corpora.net/>)

Reciprocal agreement does not affect transitivity

ABS binds IO

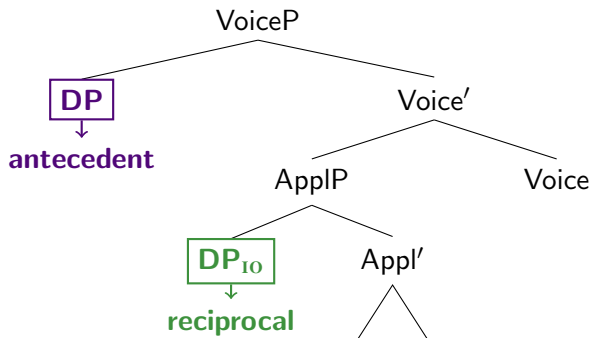
- ▶ REC replaces IO agreement
- ▶ ABS antecedent bears ABS case

sabəjxe-**r** Ø- **z-** e- pλəž'əx
child.PL-**ABS** 3ABS- **REC.IO-** DAT- look.PL

'The children are looking at each other.'

Reciprocal binding is established via c-command

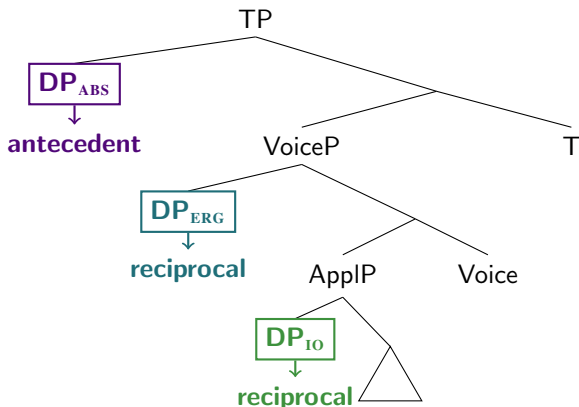
ABS/ERG external argument binds **IO**:



Syntactic ergativity in reciprocal binding

Reciprocals provide evidence for high absolutive syntax:

- ▶ reciprocals are bound by a c-commanding antecedent
- ▶ **ABS** binds **ERG** and **IO** ⇒ **ABS** c-commands **ERG** and **IO**



High ABS binds IO

us each other
↓ ↓
tə- ze- f- jə- š'aɞ
1PL.ABS- REC.IO- BEN- 3SG.ERG- bring.PST

'S/he brought us together (= to each other).'

Literally: 'S/he brought each other us.'

High ABS binds IO

each other

us

↓
*ze-

↓
t-

f-

jə-

š'aB

REC.ABS-

1PL.IO-

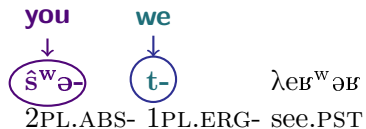
BEN-

3SG.ERG-

bring.PST

Literally: 'S/he brought us each other.'

High ABS binds ERG



BASELINE

'We saw you(pl).'

High ABS binds ERG

we **each other**
↓ ↓
tə- **zere-** λeɸ^wəɸ
1PL.ABS- REC.ERG- see.PST

'We saw each other.'

RECIPROCAL

Obligatory high ABS: ERG cannot bind ABS

each other we

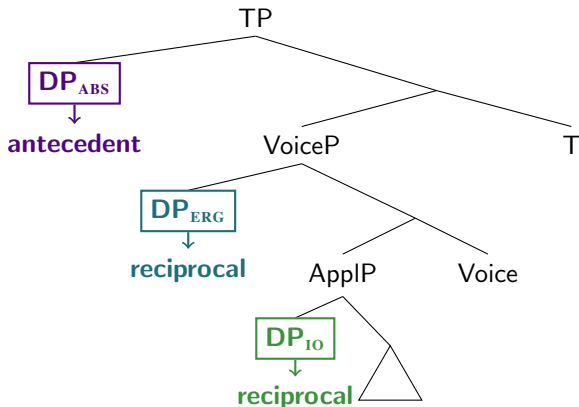
*zere- t- $\lambda e_B^w \theta_B$
REC.ABS- 1PL.ERG- see.PST

*ABS = REC

Intended: 'We saw each other.'

Reciprocals: summary

West Circassian displays syntactic ergativity in reciprocal binding:
ABS binds ERG and IO \Rightarrow **ABS c-commands ERG and IO**



But high ABS **does not** block ergative extraction!

The syntax of syntactic ergativity

West Circassian

Background

Syntactic ergativity

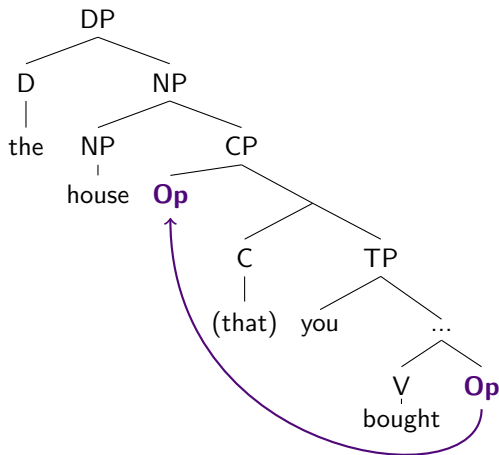
No Ergative Extraction Constraint

Conclusion

Relativization

Only type of wh-movement in West Circassian = **relativization**.

I viewed the house [\emptyset (that) you bought __]. (English)



Relativization in West Circassian


(Caponigro and Polinsky 2011; Lander 2012; Ershova 2021)

Finite clause:

a-š' txələ-r [mə çəfə-m]
that-ERG book-ABS this person-OBL
∅- ∅- r- jə- tə-ɸ
3ABS- 3SG.IO- DAT- 3SG.ERG- give-PST

'S/he gave a book to this person.'

Relative clause:


[Op txələ-r ∅- ze- r- jə- tə-ɸe]
 book-ABS 3ABS- WH.IO- DAT- 3SG.ERG- give-PST
çəfə-r
person-ABS

'the person to whom s/he gave the book' (Lander 2012:276)

No ergative extraction constraint

χərbəzew [__ABS a-š' Ø- ə- bʒə-βe-r]
watermelon that-ERG **WH.ABS-** 3SG.ERG- cut-PST-ABS

'the watermelon that he cut'

✓ABS REL

[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 REL

č'aləw [apč'ə-r __ERG Ø- zə- q^wətə-βe-m]
boy glass-ABS 3ABS- **WH.ERG-** break-PST-OBL

'the boy that broke the glass'

✓ERG REL

(Lander 2012:274-276)

How do we know that ERG moves?

Relativization displays properties of movement:

- ▶ **islandhood effects**
- ▶ crossover effects

Wh-movement cannot escape syntactic islands

✓ *I viewed the house [\emptyset (that) you bought __].*

✓ *I viewed the house [\emptyset (that) you thought [that I bought __]].*

* *I viewed the house [\emptyset (that) you were upset
[despite me buying __]].*


Relativization in West Circassian cannot escape islands

Factive complements = islands

se seşe [mə pşêşežəje-r daxew
I I-know this girl-ABS beautifully
Ø-qə-zera-ş^werer]
3ABS-DIR-FACT-dance.DYN.ABS

'I know [that this girl dances beautifully].'

BASELINE

*  **Op_i** [**t_i** daxew Ø-qə-zera-ş^werer]
beautifully **WH.ABS-DIR-FACT-dance.DYN.ABS**
pşərer
that-you-know

Intended: 'the one [**Op** that you know [that __ dances well]]'

***ABS RELATIVIZATION**

ERG relativization cannot escape islands

[mə ç'ale-m deβ^wew wered
 this boy-ERG well song
 Ø- qə- zer- jə- ʔ^wərer] seşe
 3ABS- DIR- FACT- 3SG.ERG- say.DYN.ABS I-know

'I know [that this boy sings well].'

BASELINE

* Op_i se sşerer [t deβ^wew wered
 I that-I-know well song
 Ø- qə- zere- zə- ʔ^wərer]
 3ABS- DIR- FACT- WH.ERG- say.DYN.ABS

Intended: 'the one [Op that I know [that __ sings songs well]]'

***ERG RELATIVIZATION**

Why movement diagnostics are important

The term **syntactic ergativity** is often used to describe patterns of **morphological markedness**:

If ERG wh-movement is **different from / more marked than** ABS wh-movement in language X,
language X is syntactically ergative.

Correlation between markedness and syntactic ergativity

Example: Tongan (Polynesian) is classified as syntactically ergative (Otsuka 2006; Polinsky 2016)

ABS is relativized with a gap:

e 'anga_i ['oku _i muimui 'i he vaka]
the shark PRS follow LOC the boat
'the shark that is following the boat'

ERG is relativized with a resumptive pronoun:

e faiako_i ['oku **ne_i** ako'i 'a e leo faka-Tonga]
the teacher PRS **s/he** teach ABS the language Tongan
'the teacher who is teaching/teaches the Tongan language'

(Polinsky 2016:236-237)

ERG relativization in West Circassian is more marked

ABS wh-agreement = \emptyset -

$\chi\text{ərbəzew}$ [$__\text{ABS}$ a-š' \emptyset - ə- bzə- bē-r]
watermelon that-ERG **WH.ABS-** 3SG.ERG- cut-PST-ABS

'the watermelon that he cut'

✓ABS REL

ERG wh-agreement = zə-

č'alew [apč'ə-r $__\text{ERG}$ \emptyset - zə- q^wətə- bē-m]
boy glass-ABS 3ABS- **WH.ERG-** break-PST-OBL

'the boy that broke the glass'

✓ERG REL

Markedness \neq syntactic ergativity

- ▶ ERG relativization is morphologically **more marked**
- ▶ Both ABS and ERG relativization **display movement properties**

Importance of movement diagnostics

Morphological markedness is not sufficient evidence for the ergative extraction constraint.

In West Circassian, ERG movement is more marked, but possible.

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West Circassian

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No Ergative Extraction Constraint

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Starting point:

Implicational universal

If a language displays **any syntactic ergativity effects**, it displays the Ergative Extraction Constraint.

What I argued today: this universal is

- ▶ theoretically unexpected
- ▶ empirically incorrect

High absolutive syntax does not predict the EEC

- ▶ In syntactically ergative languages, ABS is higher than ERG.
- ▶ This **may** result in the Ergative Extraction Constraint, with the addition of another ingredient (= relativized probing).
- ▶ Without relativized probing, we predict syntactic ergativity, but no Ergative Extraction Constraint.

West Circassian provides evidence against the universal correlation between the Ergative Extraction Constraint and syntactic ergativity:

- ▶ Several syntactic ergativity effects (reciprocal binding, parasitic gaps, possessor relativization)
- ▶ No Ergative Extraction Constraint: ERG can wh-move!

Importance of syntactic diagnostics

- ▶ Morphological markedness is not sufficient evidence for syntactic ergativity.
- ▶ ERG wh-movement may be possible, even if more marked (as in West Circassian).
- ▶ Syntactic diagnostics are necessary (e.g. island sensitivity).

What does it mean for a language to be syntactically ergative?

NOT:

- ▶ morphological markedness of ergative wh-movement
- ▶ impossibility of ergative wh-movement

INSTEAD:

- ▶ Evidence that ABS c-commands ERG
- ▶ **Example:** binding of anaphors

Thank you!

- ▶ West Circassian consultants: Svetlana K. Alishaeva, Saida Gisheva, Susana K. Khatkova, Zarema Meretukova
- ▶ Karlos Arregi, Danny Fox, Itamar Francez, Vera Griбанова, David Pesetsky, Norvin Richards, and Adam Singerman
- ▶ Audiences at MIT, Harvard University, Rutgers University, University of Washington, University of Maryland, the Leibniz-Center for General Linguistics in Berlin, University College London, Leipzig University, and the Princeton Symposium on Syntactic Theory

**For more details see manuscript: Ershova 2024a

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