

## Ergativity in the syntax without syntactic ergativity

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**Abstract.** A subset of morphologically ergative languages have been claimed to display syntactic rules which are sensitive to the distinction between ergative and absolutive arguments—syntactic ergativity. The most robustly attested syntactic ergativity effect concerns the accessibility of the ergative argument for displacement (relativization, topicalization, focus fronting, question formation, etc.). Researchers have explicitly or implicitly assumed that there are no syntactically ergative languages which do not display a constraint on ergative displacement, and as a result, the term SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY has largely come to be synonymous with this constraint. Using data from West Circassian (Northwest Caucasian) and Samoan (Polynesian), this paper challenges this position on two counts. Firstly, it argues that a universal correlation between syntactic ergativity and a ban on ergative displacement is theoretically unexpected and empirically incorrect. Secondly, it challenges the use of morphological markedness in displacement dependencies as a metric for determining the presence of syntactic ergativity in the domain of ergative extraction.

**Keywords:** relativization, focus fronting, ergativity, reciprocal, parasitic gaps, crossover effects, syntactic islands, resumptive, West Circassian, Samoan

**1. INTRODUCTION.** A subset of languages which display ergative-absolutive alignment in the morphology have been claimed to display some degree of ergativity in the syntax as well.<sup>1</sup> Since at least Dixon 1994; Kazenin 1994; Bittner and Hale 1996; Manning 1996, the trademark property of a syntactically ergative language has been taken to be a contrast in accessibility for relativization, focus fronting, wh-question formation or other types of displacement: absolutive, but not ergative, arguments may be displaced. Subsequent work has overwhelmingly taken accessibility for extraction to be the litmus test for determining whether a language should be labeled as syntactically ergative, and the term SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY has largely come to be equated with the constraint on ergative displacement (see e.g. Aldridge 2004, 2008; Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016, 2017; Tollan 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022; Yuan 2022; Drummond 2023; Branan and Erlewine 2024; Brodtkin and Royer 2024). Furthermore, the constraint on ergative displacement is overwhelmingly diagnosed by appealing to notions of markedness: a language is claimed to display syntactic ergativity if ergative displacement is in

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some sense more marked than absolutive displacement—for example, if it is accompanied by a resumptive pronoun or additional morphology on the predicate, which is not involved in cases of absolutive displacement. For example, Tongan has been classified as syntactically ergative due to ergative relativization (and other types of fronting) being accompanied by obligatory resumption (1a), whereas absolutive arguments are relativized with a gap (1b) (Otsuka 2006; Polinsky 2016, 2017).

- (1) a. e faiako<sub>i</sub> [‘oku \*(ne<sub>i</sub>) ako‘i ‘a e leo faka-Tonga]  
 DET teacher PRS 3SG.CL teach ABS DET language Tongan  
 ‘the teacher who is teaching/teaches the Tongan language’
- b. e ‘anga<sub>i</sub> [‘oku (\*ne<sub>i</sub>) muimui ‘i he vaka]  
 DET shark PRS 3SG.CL follow LOC DET boat  
 ‘the shark that is following the boat’ (Tongan; Polinsky 2016:236-237)

While other syntactic ergativity effects have been occasionally discussed, such as pro-drop in coordinate structures and the ability to be controlled PRO (Dixon 1994; Aldridge 2004, 2008; Deal 2016),<sup>2</sup> these have been claimed to appear only in languages which also display the constraint on ergative extraction, leading to an implicational hierarchy: if a language is to display any syntactic ergativity effect, it will display the constraint on ergative displacement (Kazenin 1994; Aldridge 2008; Deal 2016).

A robust line of research has argued that the constraint on ergative extraction arises as a consequence of a syntactically ergative clause structure, wherein the absolutive theme moves to a higher position than the ergative, effectively trapping the ergative in its base position (Bittner and Hale 1996; Aldridge 2004, 2008, 2012; Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022; Yuan 2022; Branan and Erlewine 2024; Brodtkin and Royer 2024). This type of HIGH ABSOLUTIVE—in Coon, Mateo, and Preminger’s (2014) terms—clause structure is then expected to tightly correlate with the unavailability of ergative extraction: if a language has high absolutive syntax, it will also display syntactic ergativity in configurations involving the displacement of the ergative argument.

This paper challenges the existing view of syntactic ergativity from two angles. On the one hand, I argue that the implicational hierarchy which equates syntactically ergative syntax with a ban on ergative displacement is empirically incorrect: West Circassian, a Northwest Caucasian language, displays syntactic ergativity in a number of domains including anaphor binding (Ershova 2023), parasitic gap licensing (Ershova 2021), and subextraction asymmetries (Ershova 2024),

<sup>2</sup>See Legate 2008 for an alternative assessment of the evidence from Dyrbal, which has been a primary example of a language displaying multiple syntactic ergativity effects.

but it does not display a ban on ergative extraction. This suggests that high absolutive syntax should not be necessarily associated with a restriction on ergative movement. On the other hand, I demonstrate that this is an entirely desirable conclusion for syntactic theory: there is nothing that intrinsically derives the ban on ergative displacement from high absolutive syntax, and indeed, existing analyses in this vein allow parametric space for high absolutive languages which do not display this restriction.

Finally, I address the efficacy of appealing to surface markedness as a diagnostic for syntactic ergativity. In West Circassian, relativization of the ergative involves an overt relativizing prefix, whereas absolutes are relativized with an ‘unmarked’ strategy (Lander 2009a, 2012; Lander and Daniel 2019). Despite a contrast in surface markedness, both ergatives and absolutes are equally accessible for relativization and correspondingly pass typical diagnostics for displacement dependencies such as island sensitivity, parasitic gap licensing, and crossover effects. I demonstrate the same point for Samoan, which has similarly been claimed to display syntactic ergativity based on the appearance of a verbal suffix in cases of ergative displacement (Polinsky 2016; Hopperditzel 2020; Hopperditzel and Alexiadou to appear): as in West Circassian, the morphological markedness, while clearly demonstrating that ergative extraction has an effect on the surface morphosyntax, is not a reliable diagnostic for the inability of the ergative argument to move.

The imperfect correlation between surface markedness and a bone fide ban on ergative extraction suggests that the former should not be considered a syntactic ergativity effect without additional structural diagnostics. Furthermore, the possibility of high absolutive syntax without any effect on ergative movement suggests that syntactic ergativity should not be equated with the ban on ergative extraction and syntactically ergative languages should not be expected to universally display the corresponding constraint. The term syntactic ergativity would then be better utilized to refer to an underlyingly ergative clause structure wherein the absolutive argument occupies a structurally privileged, subject-like position.

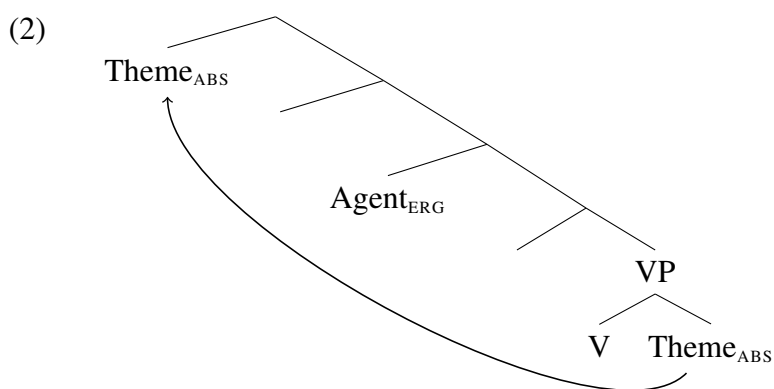
The rest of the paper is structured as follows: §2 discusses the connection between high absolutive syntax and syntactic ergativity; §3 presents evidence from West Circassian that syntactic ergativity does not necessarily correlate with a ban on ergative extraction; §4 explores the connection between morphological markedness and constraints on ergative extraction through the prism of Samoan, and §5 concludes.

## **2. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY AND HIGH ABSOLUTIVE SYNTAX.**

There are broadly two strands of approaches to accounting for syntactic ergativity in the narrow sense, i.e. the ban on ergative displacement (see Deal 2016; Polinsky 2017 for a comprehensive overview). One line of research derives the impossibility of ergative extraction from the mor-

phosyntactic properties of the ergative argument, such as its case marking (Otsuka 2006; Legate 2012; Deal 2016) or its status as an adpositional phrase (Polinsky 2016). Under this approach, ergativity effects in the syntax (in this case—in displacement dependencies) do not correlate with an underlyingly ergative syntax: languages which display syntactic ergativity underlyingly display the same basic clause structure, thematic relations and argument asymmetries as nominative-accusative languages.

The other line of research argues that syntactic ergativity effects arise as a consequence of the absolutive argument occupying a position that is structurally higher than the ergative—in effect, a syntactically ergative clause structure. With the exception of early proposals in Levin 1983; Marantz 1984, this high position of the absolutive is taken to be derived, at least in transitive clauses, where the corresponding argument is merged VP-internally as a theme and subsequently moves to a position above the ergative external argument (2) (Bittner 1994; Bittner and Hale 1996; Aldridge 2004, 2008, 2012; Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021; Tollan 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022; Yuan 2022; Brodtkin and Royer 2024). This derived status of the absolutive argument reconciles high absolutive analyses with standard assumptions about the universal correlation between thematic roles and syntactic positions—formalized, for example, as the Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (Baker 1988, 1997)—as well as the observation that the ergative argument generally continues to display typical subjecthood properties, such as the ability to bind anaphors, be controlled PRO or denote the addressee in imperatives (see e.g. Anderson 1976 and Dixon 1994:111-142 on universal subjecthood properties of the ergative).



In addition to the ban on ergative extraction, high absolutive syntax has been taken to correlate 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). In Mayan languages, high absolutive syntax has also been associated with high absolutive agreement (Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021) and obviation of

Condition C effects (Royer 2023).

In the remainder of this section I argue that, while the connection between high absolutive syntax and the constraint on ergative extraction appears to be present in some languages, these analyses rely on language-specific idiosyncracies which are not generalizable to systems which do not display comparable extraction restrictions. Furthermore, these analyses do not derive the implicational hierarchy proposed by Kazenin (1994); Aldridge (2008); Deal (2016) which states that if a language will display any syntactic ergativity effects, it will display a ban on ergative extraction: a derivation involving a high position for the absolutive argument does not and cannot universally block ergative displacement. Despite appearing to be a drawback of these analyses, the following section presents evidence that a dissociation between high absolutive syntax and a ban on ergative displacement is a welcome result: the universal correlation between syntactic ergativity and constraints on ergative displacement is empirically incorrect.

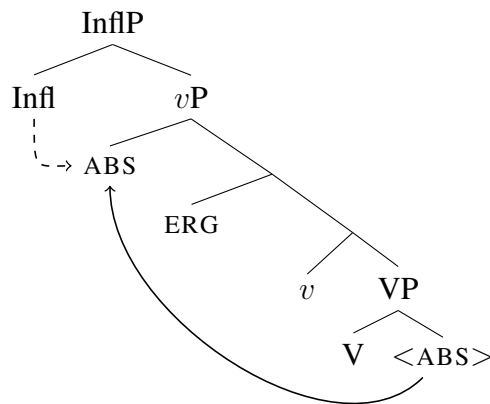
I focus on two types of proposals which connect high absolutive syntax with the constraint on ergative extraction: (i) an intervention-based approach, wherein the absolutive argument blocks ergative displacement by virtue of its higher position (Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021—henceforth CBL2021; see also Aldridge 2004, 2008, 2012; Branan and Erlewine 2024) and (ii) an analysis which appeals to the grammaticalization of a processing constraint against crossing dependencies, thus ruling out the movement of the ergative agent because it would cross the movement dependency between the high and low positions of the absolutive argument (Tollan and Clemens 2022).

The evidence for both CBL2021 and Tollan and Clemens (2022) comes from Mayan languages, a subset of which do not allow displacement of the ergative agent with a gap, in contrast to absolutive arguments. For example, focus constructions in K'iche' involve the fronting of the focused constituent to preverbal position (the unmarked word order is VOS). While both an absolutive subject of an intransitive verb (3a) and an absolutive internal argument of a transitive verb (3b) may be focus fronted with a gap, an ergative agent may not (3c).

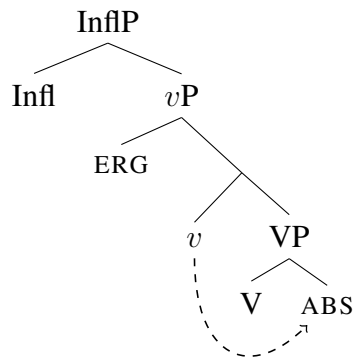
- (3) a. Aree le al Mari'y x-tze'n-ik \_\_\_\_i.  
 FOC DET HON Maria CPL-laugh-SS  
 '[Maria]<sub>FOC</sub> laughed.'
- b. Aree le ichaj<sub>i</sub> k-Ø-u-tij \_\_\_\_i le al Mari'y.  
 FOC DET vegetables INCL-3SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-eat:TV DET HON Maria  
 'Maria will eat [the vegetables]<sub>FOC</sub>.'
- c. \* Aree le al Mari'y<sub>i</sub> k-Ø-u-tij le ichaj \_\_\_\_i.  
 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)

In the Mayan languages, the impossibility of ergative displacement with a gap broadly correlates with the position of absolutive agreement (originally observed by Tada 1993): in languages which disallow ergative displacement absolutive agreement appears to the left of the verbal stem, whereas in languages which do not display extraction asymmetries absolutive agreement is exponed postverbally. Following Coon, Mateo, and Preminger (2014), both CBL2021 and Tollan and Clemens (2022) connect the position of the absolutive agreement marker to the position of the corresponding argument: if the agreement is to the left of the verb, the absolutive argument moves to a position that is local enough for agreement with  $\text{Infl}^0$  (4a). On the other hand, if the agreement is low, the absolutive argument remains VP-internal and agrees with  $v^0$  (4b).<sup>3</sup>

(4) a. High absolutive



b. Low absolutive



Focus fronting of a transitive subject triggers specialized morphology on the verb: the so-called agent focus suffix, which is accompanied by an intransitive status suffix and the absence of

<sup>3</sup>The two accounts differ in assumptions about the landing site of the high absolutive argument: CBL2021 propose that the absolutive object moves to outer Spec, $vP$  whereas Tollan and Clemens (2022) place the derived position in Spec,ssP (a projection associated with the status suffix). Both accounts agree that this position is above the ergative external argument.

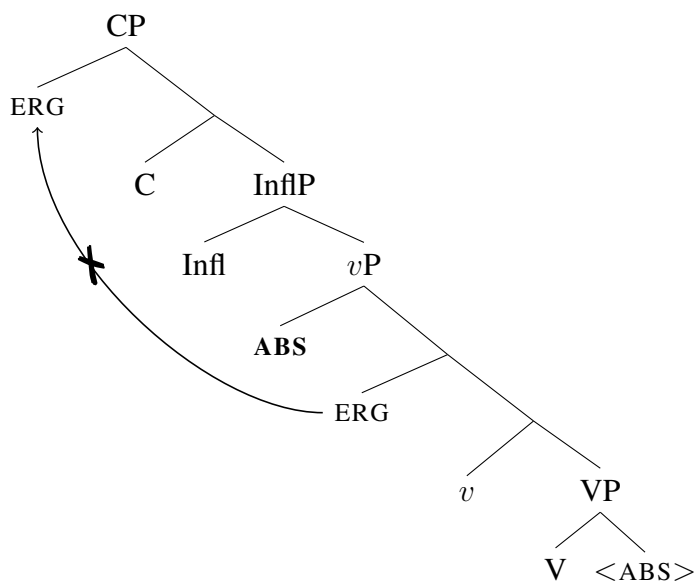
the ergative cross-reference prefix (5).

- (5) Aree ri a Xwaan<sub>i</sub> x-in-to'w-ik —i.  
 FOC DET CL Juan CPL-1SG.ABS-help:AF-SS  
 '[Juan]<sub>FOC</sub> helped (me).' (K'iche'; Velleman 2014:21 *via* Tollan and Clemens 2022:466)

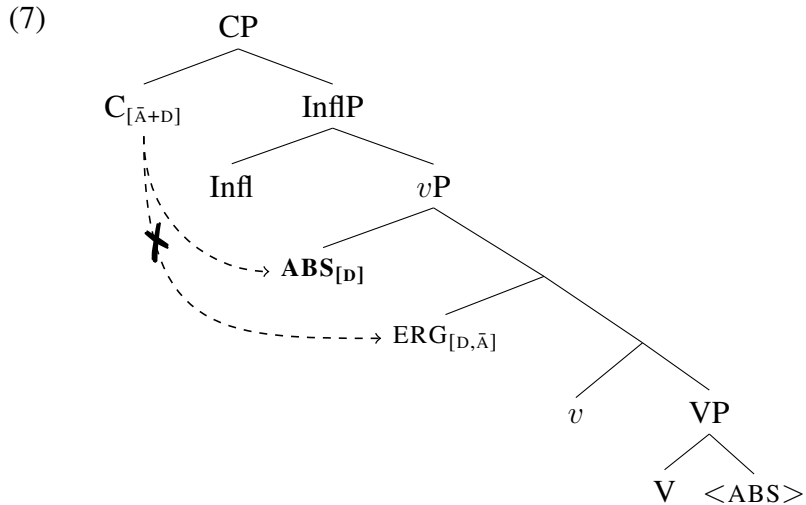
Under a high absolutive analysis, agent focus involves a derivation which exceptionally allows the internal argument to remain low, either because it detransitivizes the predicate and licenses the object in situ, akin to an antipassive (Aissen 2011; Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Tollan and Clemens 2022), or simply lacks the feature which would trigger the raising of the absolutive argument (CBL2021).

The constraint on ergative extraction thus arises in cases of high absolutive syntax: if the absolutive argument moves to a position above the ergative, the ergative argument cannot then undergo subsequent  $\bar{A}$ -movement (6).

- (6) The high absolutive intervenes for extraction of the ergative:



CBL2021 derive this blocking effect by appealing to intervention: in Mayan languages with high absolutive syntax,  $C^0$  hosts a relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe which is “bundled to search for  $[\bar{A}]$  and  $[D]$  features” (CBL2021:287). The absolutive argument then, by virtue of bearing a  $[D]$  feature, will intervene between the  $\bar{A}$ -probe on  $C^0$  and the lower ergative DP (7).

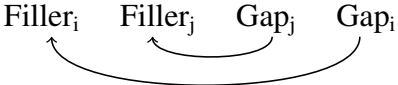
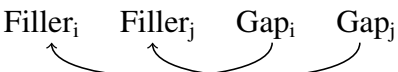


This type of relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe generates a languages which only allows the highest DP to  $\bar{A}$ -move and versions of this account have been used to explain pivot-only extraction restrictions in Austronesian languages (Aldridge 2008, 2012). Under this account, the ban on ergative extraction is derived from a combination of two ingredients: (i) raising of the absolutive argument to a position above the ergative and (ii) an  $\bar{A}$ -probe that is relativized to search for both an  $\bar{A}$ -feature and a D-feature. Since there appears to be no logical connection between these two parameters, we might expect to find languages which display one of these, but not the other. Regarding the relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe, Branan and Erlewine (2024) have indeed argued that it is attested in a small set of nominative-accusative languages.<sup>4</sup> By extension, one might also expect to find a language which displays high absolutive syntax but has a generalized  $\bar{A}$ -probe. Thus, if the ban on ergative extraction is a fundamental property of syntactically ergative systems, this connection remains wholly mysterious under this analysis: whether there is a movement-triggering feature on  $v^0$  cannot influence whether a language has a relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe on  $C^0$ .

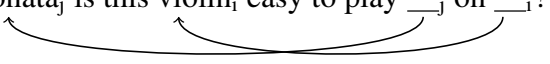
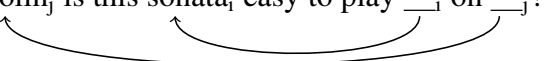
Tollan and Clemens (2022) similarly derive the ban on ergative extraction from the high position of the absolutive DP. However, instead of appealing to a relativized  $\bar{A}$ -probe, they attribute the ungrammaticality of ergative extraction over the derived position of the absolutive argument to a violation of a Constraint on Crossing Dependencies: “no movement dependency may cross another movement dependency” (Tollan and Clemens 2022:469). As the authors discuss, this constraint reflects a general tendency for languages to prefer nesting dependencies (8a) to crossing dependencies (8b), and processing and production studies indeed confirm that nesting dependencies are considerably more common cross-linguistically (see references in Tollan and Clemens 2022:471).

<sup>4</sup>Although see Newman 2023 for arguments that the data in Branan and Erlewine 2024 involves A-movement, rather than  $\bar{A}$ -movement.



- (8) a. Nesting dependency  
 Filler<sub>i</sub> Filler<sub>j</sub> Gap<sub>j</sub> Gap<sub>i</sub>  

- b. Crossing dependency  
 Filler<sub>i</sub> Filler<sub>j</sub> Gap<sub>i</sub> Gap<sub>j</sub>  


English, for example, disallows crossing dependencies in configurations which involve wh-fronting and tough-movement (9a), whereas nesting dependencies are perfectly licit (9b).

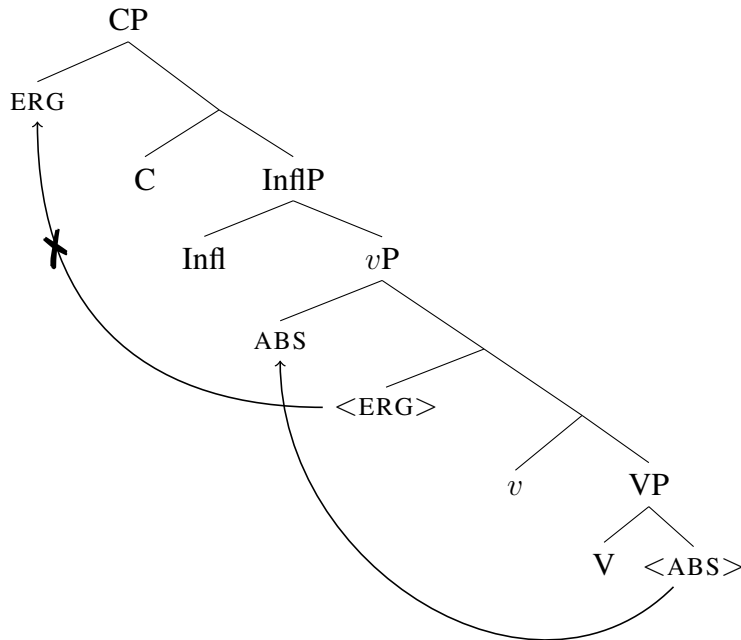
- (9) a. \* Which sonata<sub>j</sub> is this violin<sub>i</sub> easy to play \_\_\_<sub>j</sub> on \_\_\_<sub>i</sub>?  

- b. Which violin<sub>j</sub> is this sonata<sub>i</sub> easy to play \_\_\_<sub>i</sub> on \_\_\_<sub>j</sub>?  


(Steedman 1985:35 *via* Tollan and Clemens 2022:471)

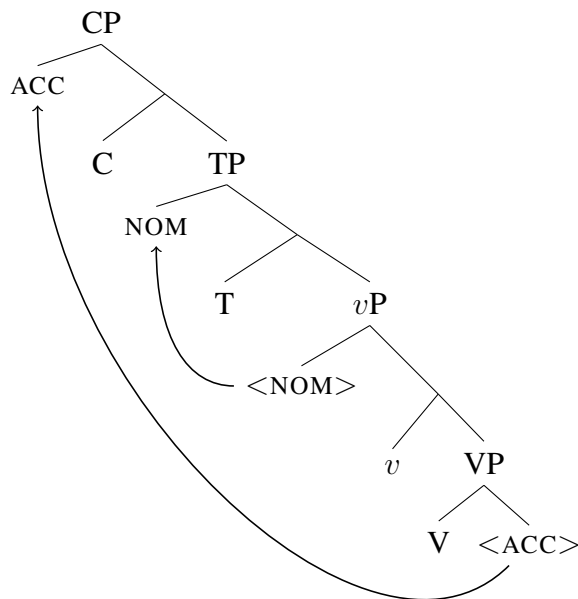
Under this approach, the ban on ergative extraction arises from a combination of (i) absolute raising to a position above the ergative and (ii) the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies. For example, the illicit extraction of an ergative agent in 3c arises due to the  $\bar{A}$ -movement of the agent crossing the A-movement path of the raised absolute (10). In contrast, nominative-accusative languages allow for the extraction of the accusative object over the derived subject position because this extraction would result in nested dependencies with the A-movement of the subject (11).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Note that this is only true if we discard the standard assumption that  $\bar{A}$ -movement of the internal argument must proceed successive-cyclically through the *v*P edge, stopping in a position above the external argument (Chomsky 2001 *et seq.*).

(10) Ergative extraction violates the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies:



(11) Accusative extraction results in nested dependencies:



It has been noted since the advent of research on crossing dependencies that languages differ in their degree of tolerance towards such constructions. For example, Maling and Zaenen (1982) observe that while Swedish disallows structures with crossing dependencies, analogous sentences

are grammatical in Norwegian and Icelandic (12). Tollan and Clemens (2022) mention a number of other counterexamples to the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies, including clause-final verb clusters in Dutch (Bach et al. 1986) and multiple *wh*-movement constructions in Bulgarian (Rudin 1988; Richards 1997; Bošković 2002) and Basque (Ortiz de Urbina 1989; Jeong 2007).

(12) Licit crossing dependency in Norwegian:

Denne gaven<sub>i</sub> her vil du ikke gjette hvem<sub>j</sub> jeg fikk \_\_\_<sub>i</sub> fra \_\_\_<sub>j</sub>.  
 this gift here will you not guess who I got from

‘This gift, you cannot guess who I got \_\_\_ from \_\_\_.’ (Norwegian; Maling and Zaenen 1982:236 *via* Dalrymple and King 2013:140)

The Constraint on Crossing Dependencies thus cannot be a universal structural constraint: there are languages for which it is not operative. As a result, Tollan and Clemens’s (2022) account, similarly to CBL2021, predicts the possibility of a language that displays high absolutive syntax without a ban on ergative extraction—this would simply be a language like Norwegian or Bulgarian, where crossing dependencies are tolerated, with the addition of an EPP feature on  $v^0$ . This analysis then similarly fails to derive the implicational relationship between syntactic ergativity and ergative extraction: a language may have high absolutive syntax, and correspondingly display syntactic ergativity effects, without barring the extraction of the ergative.

To conclude this section, analyses which connect the ban on ergative extraction with high absolutive syntax require an additional ingredient to derive the ban: in an intervention-based account, the probe triggering  $\bar{A}$ -movement must be relativized so that the high absolutive DP intervenes for ergative extraction; an account which appeals to the Constraint on Crossing Dependencies must invoke a constraint which is not universally operative, meaning that, once again, the ban on ergative displacement is derived through the combination of high absolutive syntax and another, independently variable, parameter. This predicts that high absolutive syntax should be attested in the absence of a ban on ergative extraction, in contradiction with the implicational hierarchy assumed in most literature on syntactic ergativity. The following section demonstrates that this is indeed a desirable prediction: West Circassian is a high absolutive language which displays a number of syntactic ergativity effects, but allows for ergative displacement.

**3. WEST CIRCASSIAN: ERGATIVITY IN THE SYNTAX WITHOUT SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY.** This section demonstrates that a language may display high absolutive syntax without a ban on ergative displacement, based on data from West Circassian. In West Circassian, a number of syntactic rules treat absolutive arguments differently from ergatives (and applied arguments): (i) constraints on

reciprocal binding; (ii) conditions on parasitic gap licensing; and (iii) patterns of possessor subextraction (Ershova 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024; see also Lander 2009b, 2012; Letuchiy 2010). The most parsimonious solution to this disparate set of syntactic ergativity effects is to posit a high absolutive syntax wherein absolutive arguments (both subjects of intransitives and themes of transitive verbs) move to a dedicated position which c-commands the position of the ergative agent. However, this movement does not have an effect on ergative extraction: ergatives may be displaced similarly to other arguments.

**3.1. BACKGROUND.** West Circassian (also known as Adyghe) is a Northwest Caucasian language primarily spoken in the Republic of Adyghe in Russia and diaspora communities in Turkey and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> West Circassian is polysynthetic, with multiple arguments indexed on the predicate, free word order, and pronominal arguments frequently left unexpressed outside of the verbal indexing (see e.g. Arkadiev et al. 2009; Lander and Testelets 2017; Ershova 2019; Arkadiev 2023). For example, the predicate in 13 indexes four participants, and the pronouns referring to the first and second person participants are not expressed independently of the cross-reference morphology.

- (13) w-jə-čəle.β<sup>w</sup>ə-me                      salam  
 2SG.PR-POSS-fellow.villager-PL.OBL        greeting  
 Ø-    qə-   p-fə-                      s-                      a-                      βe-    hə   -ž'ə-β  
 3ABS- DIR- 2SG.IO-BEN- 1SG.IO+DAT- 3SG.ERG- CAUS- carry -RE -PST  
 'Your fellow villagers had me bring you greetings.' (AC)

West Circassian displays ergative alignment in both verbal indexing and case marking. In the domain of verbal indexing, the theme of a transitive verb and the sole argument of an intransitive verb are both indexed by the leftmost (absolutive) cross-reference prefix (e.g. the first person in 14a-14b), prefixes referring to applied arguments (of which there may be several) appear to the right of the absolutive prefix (e.g. the second and first person participants in 13), and the prefix indexing the external argument of a transitive verb—the third person plural causer in 13—appears closest to the verbal root, as shown schematically in 15.

- (14) a. sə-                      q-    jə-                      š'a    -β  
          1SG.ABS- DIR- 3SG.ERG- bring -PST  
          'S/he brought me'

<sup>6</sup>This paper relies on data from published sources, the Adyghe Language Corpus (AC) designed by Timofey Arkhangelskiy, Irina Bagirokova, Yury Lander and Anna Lander (<http://adyghe.web-corpora.net/>), and the author's fieldwork data, collected between 2017-2019 in the Shovgenovsky district of the Republic of Adyghe in Russia. Unless otherwise indicated, all examples are in the Temirgoy dialect or the literary standard, which is based on the Temirgoy dialect.

b. sə-            qe-    ḳ<sup>w</sup>a -ɸ  
 1SG.ABS- DIR- go -PST

‘I went’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:137-138 *via* Ershova 2023:202-203)

(15) Order of cross-reference prefixes: ABS- IO+APPL- ERG-

In the domain of case marking, the absolutive suffix *-r* appears on nominals referring to the sole argument of an intransitive verb (16) and the theme of a transitive verb (17), whereas the oblique suffix *-m* appears on nominals referring to the ergative agent and applied arguments: for example, it appears on both the agent and the locative applied argument in 17. The oblique case marker is also used to mark possessors (18) and complements of postpositions (19).

(16) mə p̄saše-**r**    Ø-jane            paje    Ø-qa-š<sup>w</sup>e  
 this girl-**ABS** 3SG.PR-mother for    3ABS-DIR-dance

‘This girl is dancing for her mother.’

(17) p̄saše-**m**    məž<sup>w</sup>e-**r**    psə-**m**    Ø-Ø-x-jə-za-ɸ  
 girl-**OBL**    stone-**ABS** water-**OBL** 3ABS-3SG.IO-LOC-throw-PST

‘The girl threw the stone into the water.’

(18) č’ale-**m**    ə-š-xe-m  
 boy-**OBL** 3SG.PR-brother-PL-**OBL**

‘the boy’s brothers’

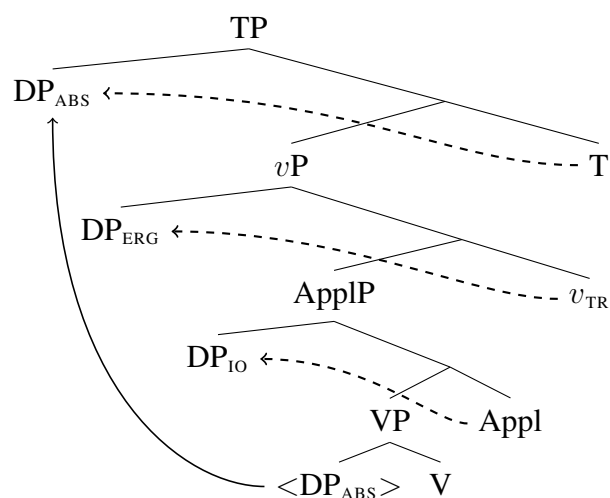
(19) dəše-pcežəje-**m** paje  
 gold-fish-**OBL** for

‘for/about the golden fish’

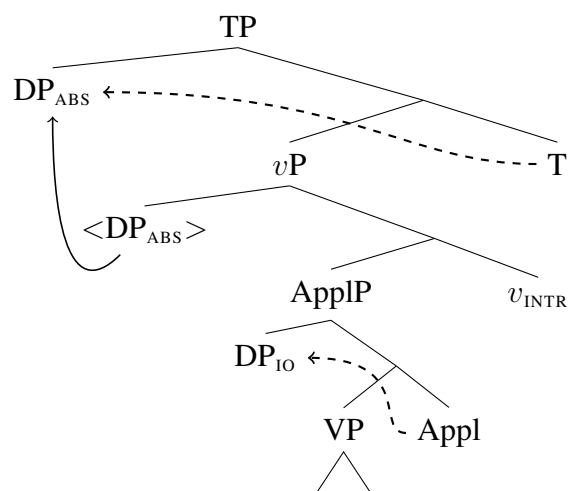
Personal pronouns, proper nouns, possessed nouns in the singular, and indefinite noun phrases are usually unmarked for case, as illustrated with the indefinite absolutive theme in 13 and the possessed nominal in 16 (Arkadiev et al. 2009:51-52, Arkadiev and Testelefs 2019).

Ershova (2019, 2021, 2023, 2024) argues that West Circassian is a high absolutive language: the absolutive argument in both transitive and intransitive clauses moves to a position c-commanding the ergative agent and all other verbal arguments. Following the cited works, I assume that this movement is driven by a case licensing requirement: while the ergative and applied arguments are licensed in situ by inherent case (assigned by transitive  $v^0$  and Appl<sup>0</sup> respectively), the absolutive argument is assigned case by T<sup>0</sup> and correspondingly moves to Spec,TP. This is illustrated for a ditransitive predicate in 20 and an intransitive predicate in 21.

(20) High absolutive syntax with ditransitive predicate



(21) High absolutive syntax with intransitive predicate with applicative



The following subsections briefly illustrate the evidence for high absolutive syntax, which comes from several disparate syntactic phenomena: patterns of anaphor binding, conditions on parasitic gap licensing, and constraints on possessor subextraction. The last part of this section demonstrates that, despite the high position of the absolutive argument, the ergative argument is accessible for relativization, thus confirming the disassociation of syntactic ergativity from constraints on ergative extraction.

**3.2. ERGATIVITY IN ANAPHOR BINDING.** Anaphor binding in West Circassian is discussed in detail in Ershova 2023 (see also Letuchiy 2010). This paper only discusses reciprocal binding, which provides evidence for a high absolutive syntax; see Ershova 2023 for discussion of reflexive binding and why it fails to follow a syntactically ergative pattern.

Reciprocal binding is primarily expressed in the morphology—with the use of a specialized reciprocal morpheme *ze(re)-*. This morpheme replaces agreement with one of the coindexed participants without affecting the valency of the corresponding predicate, surfacing as *ze-* in the applied argument position (22) and *zere-* in the position indexing the ergative argument (23) or transitive causee (24) (the final vowel /e/ is dropped if immediately followed by a vowel or glide).

- (22) tə- qə- **ze-** d- e- š<sup>w</sup>e  
 1PL.ABS- DIR- **RECP.IO-** COM- DYN- dance  
 ‘We are dancing with each other.’ (Ershova 2023:206)
- (23) Ø- Ø- š’ə- **zere-** ʁe- čefə -x  
 3ABS- 3SG.IO- LOC- **RECP.ERG-** CAUS- rejoice -PL  
 ‘They enjoyed themselves with each other (lit. made each other rejoice) [at the weddings].’  
 (*ibid.*:207)
- (24) senehat-xe-r Ø- **zer-** a- ʁe- ʁ<sup>w</sup>etə -ʁe -x  
 profession-PL-ABS 3ABS- **RECP.IO-** 3PL.ERG- CAUS- obtain -PST -PL  
 ‘They let/helped each other obtain professions.’ (*ibid.*:204)

The correlation between the position of the reciprocal morpheme and the grammatical role of the bound argument suggests that this morpheme tracks agreement with a covert reciprocal anaphor and is not the spellout of a detransitivizing operator. Further support for this view comes from the absence of any effect on the case frame of the predicate it combines with: for example, the noun phrase referring to the ergative antecedent of the reciprocal applied object in 25 is marked with oblique case and triggers ergative indexing on the predicate, exactly as it would have in the absence of the reciprocal morphology.

- (25) (...) a-xe-**me** zanč’-ew zewəže  
 that-PL-**PL.OBL** direct-ADV all  
 Ø- **ze-** r- a- ʔ<sup>w</sup>ete -ž’ə -š’tə -ʁe  
 3ABS- **RECP.IO-** DAT- 3PL.ERG- tell -RE -IPF -PST  
 ‘They certainly told the whole truth to each other.’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:274 *via*  
 Ershova 2023:209)

Reciprocal co-indexation is sensitive to argument prominence, as expected if the reciprocal pronoun is an anaphor subject to Condition A. Thus, if an ergative agent is co-indexed with a benefactive applied object, the reciprocal morpheme may appear in the position indexing the applied object (26a), but may not appear in the position referring to the ergative agent (26b).





(29) Absolutive theme binds applied argument:

- a. **Theme(ABS)- IO- Agent(ERG)-**  
 tə-            **ze-**            f-    jə-            š'a    -B  
 1PL.ABS-        **RECP.IO-** BEN- 3SG.ERG-    bring -PST
- b. \* **ze-**            t-            f-    jə-            š'a    -B  
**RECP.ABS-** 1PL.IO- BEN- 3SG.ERG- bring -PST  
 ‘S/he brought us together (lit. to each other).’ (*ibid.*:215)

The observed binding patterns provide evidence for the promotion of the absolutive theme to a position above the ergative agent and applied argument, as shown in 20. Based on this diagnostic, West Circassian has a syntactically ergative clause structure, with the absolutive argument occupying a high position.

**3.3. ERGATIVITY IN PARASITIC GAP LICENSING.** In addition to reciprocal binding, West Circassian displays syntactic ergativity in the domain of relativization, albeit not in the sense that is traditionally described in the literature. Lander (2009a,b, 2012) first observed that strategies of relativization in West Circassian appeared to differentiate between the absolutive argument and all other types of relativized participants. Relative clauses in West Circassian involve the appearance of specialized relativizing morphology in place of the cross-reference marker referring to the relativized participant (Lander 2009a, 2012; Caponigro and Polinsky 2011; Ershova 2021, 2024). For example, in order to relativize the dative applied object in 30a, the noun phrase referring to the relativized participant no longer appears in its clause-internal position and the corresponding cross-reference prefix is replaced with *ze*<sup>7</sup> (30b). The head of the relative clause either appears at the left edge and is marked with the adverbial suffix *-ew*, as in 30b, or appears on the right edge with the case suffix associated with its position in the matrix clause, as can be seen in 33. Relative clauses may also be headless, as in 42.

- (30) a. **mə č'ale-m(IO)**            ə-š                            velosjoped  
**this boy-OBL**                    3SG.PR-brother        bicycle  
 Ø-    qə-    Ø-            r-    jə-            tə    -B  
 3ABS- DIR- **3SG.IO-** DAT- 3SG.ERG- give -PST  
 ‘His brother gave a bicycle to this boy.’
- b. marə    [č'al-ew<sub>i</sub>            t<sub>i</sub>(IO)    ə-š                            velosjoped  
 here    **boy-ADV**                            3SG.PR-brother        bicycle  
 Ø-    qə-    **ze-**            r-    jə-            tə    -Bɛ] -r  
 3ABS- DIR- **WH.IO-** DAT- 3SG.ERG- give -PST -ABS  
 ‘Here is the boy to whom his brother gave a bicycle.’ (Ershova 2021:9)

<sup>7</sup>This morpheme also surfaces as *zə-* or *z-* in accordance with regular phonological rules.

The syntactic ergativity effect concerns cases of what Lander (2009a,b, 2012) terms ‘multiple relativization’: if the relativized argument is co-indexed with another participant in the clause, that participant may also trigger relativizing morphology, analogously to the relativized argument. For example, if the possessor of the ergative argument in 30b is bound by the relativized applied object, the possessor cross-reference marker on the corresponding noun phrase may be replaced by an additional relativizing morpheme *zə-*, resulting in two instances of relativizing morphology in the same clause (31).

- (31) marə [č'al-ew<sub>i</sub> t<sub>i</sub>(IO) [pro<sub>i</sub> zə-š ] velosjəped  
 here boy-ADV WH.PR-brother bicycle  
 Ø- qə- ze- r- jə- tə -be] -r  
 3ABS- DIR- WH.IO- DAT- 3SG.ERG- give -PST -ABS  
 lit. ‘Here is the boy to whom<sub>i</sub> his<sub>i</sub> brother gave a bicycle.’<sup>8</sup>

However, the prefix referring to a bound possessor may not be replaced by the relativizing morpheme if the other relativized participant is an absolutive argument: this is true both for absolutive external arguments (32) and themes of transitive verbs (33).

- (32) se sə-Ø-š'e-š'əne [RC ha-w<sub>i</sub> t<sub>i</sub>(ABS) [ pro<sub>i</sub>  
 I 1SG.ABS-3SG.IO-LOC-fear dog-ADV  
 Ø / \*z-jə-x<sup>w</sup>ezjajən](IO) Ø- Ø- je- ceqe -ž'ə -be] -m  
 3SG/\*WH.PR-POSS-owner WH.ABS- 3SG.IO- DAT- bite -RE -PST -OBL  
 ‘I fear the dog that bit its owner.’ (Ershova 2021:25)
- (33) [RC t<sub>i</sub>(ABS) [ pro<sub>i</sub> Ø / \*z-jane](ERG) Ø- mə- ɸa- šxe -re]  
 3SG/\*WH.PR-mother WH.ABS- NEG- CAUS- eat -DYN  
 haž<sup>w</sup>əš'ər-xe-m<sub>i</sub> sə-g<sup>w</sup> Ø-a-fe-wəzə  
 puppy-PL-OBL 1SG.PR-heart 3ABS-3PL.IO-BEN-ache  
 ‘My heart aches for the puppies whom their mother doesn’t feed.’ (*ibid.*:26)

Ershova (2021) argues, following O’Herin’s (2002) analysis of similar morphology in Abaza, that the relativizing morphology which replaces agreement with the relativized participant is an instance of *wh*-agreement: the relativized participant bears a [WH] feature which triggers impoverishment of  $\phi$ -features on the corresponding agreement probe, resulting in a morpheme that is neutralized for person and number (see Baier 2018 on *wh*-agreement as a result of morphological feature impoverishment). Configurations where agreement with a bound pronoun is replaced with *wh*-agreement, resulting in multiple instances of the relativizing marker in the same clause, can

<sup>8</sup>The English translation is degraded due to a Weak Crossover violation. In West Circassian, however, Weak Crossover effects are not observed in cases of clausebound relativization: thus, 30b is likewise compatible with a bound interpretation of the possessor pronoun. See Ershova 2021:30-33 for details.

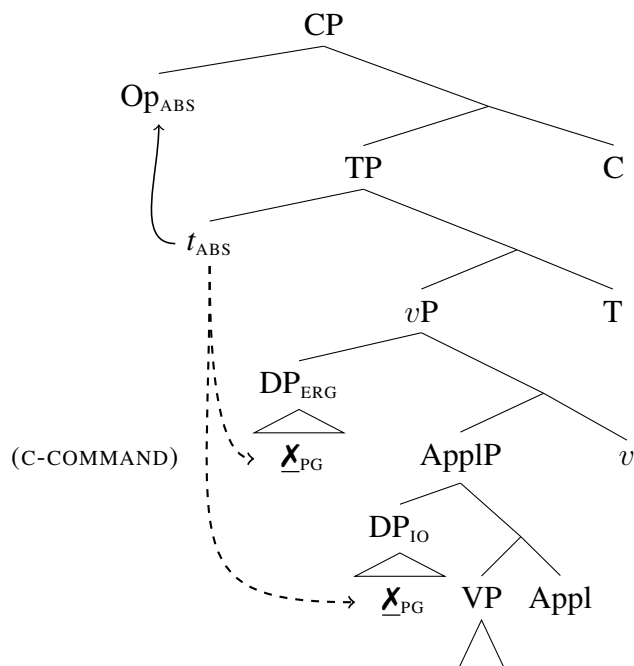
then be analyzed as the surface manifestation of a parasitic gap dependency, where one of the instances of *wh*-agreement is triggered by a parasitic *wh*-trace. These constructions are then akin to parasitic gap configurations like 34 in English.

(34) Which student<sub>i</sub> did [your attempt to talk to \_\_<sub>pg</sub> ] scare \_\_ to death? (Engdahl 1983:16)

Based on this interpretation of the data, possessor *wh*-agreement in 31 is triggered by a parasitic gap in the possessor position, whereas *wh*-agreement with the applied object is triggered by the primary (licensing) gap. Ershova (2021) provides evidence that the additional instance of *wh*-agreement in these constructions displays the full set of properties associated with parasitic gaps cross-linguistically: (i) they may appear inside islands; (ii) they may not be separated from the licensing gap by more than one island boundary; (iii) they may not be licensed by a relativized PP, and (iv) they almost always freely alternate with pronouns (see Kayne 1983; Chomsky 1986; Engdahl 1983, 1985; Cinque 1990; Postal 1993, 1998; Nissenbaum 2000; Hornstein 2001; Kennedy 2003; Nunes 2004, among many others).

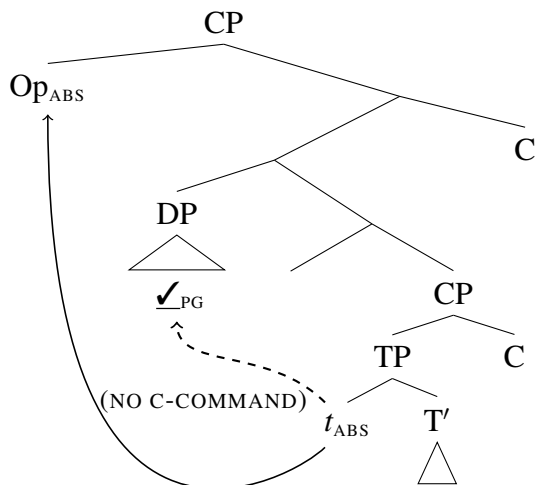
Under the parasitic gap analysis, the impossibility of multiple *wh*-agreement with a relativized absolutive argument (32-33) can be derived from the sensitivity of parasitic gaps to c-command: a parasitic gap may not be c-commanded by the licensing gap (=ANTI-C-COMMAND CONDITION; Engdahl 1983). If absolutive arguments raise to a position above both the ergative and the applied arguments, this means that an absolutive gap would c-command any potential parasitic gap site within the other argument DPs. This in turn means that a relativized absolutive argument would not be able to license a parasitic gap in those positions, deriving the impossibility of multiple *wh*-agreement in 32-33—this is schematically shown in 35.

- (35) Relativization of an absolutive argument cannot license parasitic gaps in clausemate DPs  
 (Op = relative operator):

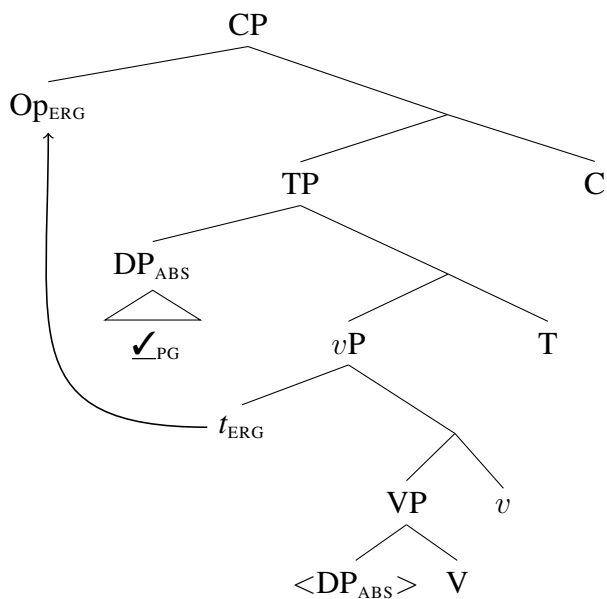


This analysis correctly predicts (i) that an absolutive trace may be able to license a parasitic gap that it does not c-command, for example, in cases of cross-clausal relativization (36), and (ii) that ergative and applied argument traces can successfully license a parasitic gap within the absolutive DP, since neither type of argument c-commands the derived high position of the absolutive argument (37).

- (36) Prediction (i): cross-clausal absolutive relativization can license a parasitic gap inside an argument in the matrix clause.



- (37) Prediction (ii): ergative (and applied argument) trace can license a parasitic gap inside an absolutive DP.



Confirmation of prediction (i) is presented in 38: relativization of the absolutive theme from the embedded CP is able to license a parasitic gap in place of the possessor in the ergative DP in the matrix clause. The parasitic status of the relative morpheme on the possessed nominal is confirmed by the observation that ergative DPs generally disallow possessor relativization, as shown in 39 (this is discussed in more detail in §3.4)—this means that the absolutive trace is necessary in 38 to

license the parasitic gap in the matrix clause.

- (38) marə [RC sabəj-ew<sub>i</sub> [DP \_\_<sub>PG</sub> z-jane(ERG) [CP t<sub>i</sub>  
 here child-ADV WH.PR-mother  
 Ø-ə-βe-šxe-n-ew ] Ø-ə-wəbla-βe]-r  
 WH.ABS-3SG.ERG-CAUS-eat-MOD-ADV 3ABS-3SG.ERG-begin-PST-ABS  
 lit. ‘Here is the child whom [ the mother of \_\_ ] began to feed \_\_.’
- (39) \* mwarə [RC š<sup>w</sup>əz-ew<sub>i</sub> [DP t<sub>i</sub> z-jə-λ wəne-xe-r  
 here woman-ADV WH.PR-POSS-man house-PL-ABS  
 Ø-ə-šə-re]-r  
 3ABS-3ERG.SG-do-DYN-ABS  
 Intended: ‘Here is the woman whose husband builds houses.’

Prediction (ii)—that relativization of an ergative or applied argument may license a parasitic gap within an absolutive DP—is demonstrated in 40-41. In 40 the relativized ergative agent is able to license a parasitic gap within the absolutive theme DP, and in 41 relativization of the applied argument licenses a parasitic gap within the absolutive external argument.

- (40) marə [RC četəw-ew<sub>i</sub> [DP pro<sub>i</sub> / \_\_<sub>PG</sub>(PR) Ø / z-jə-šxəŋ](ABS) t<sub>i</sub>(ERG)  
 here cat-ADV 3SG/WH.PR-POSS-food  
 Ø- zə- mə- šxə-re] -r  
 3ABS- WH.ERG- NEG- eat -DYN -ABS  
 ‘Here is the cat that doesn’t eat its food.’ (Ershova 2021:28)
- (41) marə [RC č’ele-čəḱ<sup>w</sup>-ew<sub>i</sub> [DP pro<sub>i</sub> / \_\_<sub>PG</sub>(PR) Ø / z-jane](ABS) t<sub>i</sub>(IO)  
 here boy-small-ADV 3SG/WH.PR-mother  
 Ø- zə- fe- g<sup>w</sup>əbž -zəpətə-re] -r  
 3ABS- WH.IO- BEN- be.angry -always -DYN -ABS  
 ‘Here is the boy at whom his mother is always angry.’ (*ibid.*:28)

The behavior of parasitic gaps thus confirms that the absolutive argument raises to a position above both the ergative and applied argument DPs—this derivation correctly predicts that an absolutive trace cannot license parasitic gaps in clausemate arguments. Note that even if we were to discard the parasitic gap analysis of the multiple relativization patterns, they would still qualify as a syntactic ergativity effect, as noted by Lander (2009b): multiple occurrences of a relative marker are possible if the primary relative marker is triggered by relativization of an ergative argument (A) and is not possible if the relative marker is referencing a related absolutive theme (O) or external argument (S). Taken together with the data on reciprocal binding, these patterns provide strong support for a structure where absolutive arguments occupy a high position in the clause.

**3.4. ERGATIVITY IN POSSESSOR RELATIVIZATION.** The final syntactic ergativity effect concerns constraints on possessor relativization. A subset of West Circassian dialects disallow possessor relativization from ergative and applied argument DPs, whereas absolutive DPs are transparent for subextraction (see Lander 2009b, Lander 2012:359-361 on the Shapsug dialect and Ershova 2024 on the Temirgoy dialect).

Possessor relativization involves the replacement of the corresponding possessive cross-reference marker on the possessed nominal with the relative morpheme *zə-*; 42 demonstrates that this is grammatical for the possessor of an absolutive theme.

- (42) *mə bzəlfəbe-r arə* [<sub>RC</sub> Op<sub>i</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> *t<sub>i</sub>(PR)* **z-jə-č'ale-xe-r**](ABS) *bedzerə-m*  
 this woman-ABS PRED **WH.PR-POSS-boy-PL-ABS** market-OBL  
 Ø-Ø-š'ə-s-*leβ<sup>w</sup>ə-xe*] -r  
 3ABS-3SG.IO-LOC-1SG.ERG-see-PL -ABS  
 'This woman is the one whose sons I saw at the marketplace.' (Ershova 2024:15)

The possessor of an absolutive external argument may likewise be successfully relativized (43).

- (43) *marə* [<sub>RC</sub> *š<sup>w</sup>əz-ew<sub>i</sub>* [<sub>DP</sub> *t<sub>i</sub>* **z-jə-č'ale-xe-r**](ABS) *dax-ew*  
 here woman-ADV **WH.PR-POSS-boy-PL-ABS** beautiful-ADV  
 Ø-qa-*š<sup>w</sup>e-re*]-r  
 3ABS-DIR-dance-DYN-ABS  
 'Here is the woman whose sons dance beautifully.'

In contrast to absolutive DPs, ergative and applied arguments do not allow for possessor relativization. This is shown for the possessor of an ergative argument in 39: the possessor may not be relativized directly. The repair for this type of relativization involves a pseudocleft: the ergative argument is relativized itself and consequently promoted to the absolutive position of the copular clause; the possessor is then relativized from the absolutive argument (44).

- (44) *mwarə* [<sub>RC</sub> *š<sup>w</sup>əz-ew<sub>i</sub>* [<sub>DP</sub> *t<sub>i</sub>* **z-jə-λ**]<sub>j</sub> [<sub>RC</sub> *t<sub>j</sub>(ERG)* *wəne-xe-r*  
 here woman-ADV **WH.PR-POSS-man** house-PL-ABS  
 Ø-**zə-š<sup>w</sup>ə-re**]-r  
 3ABS-**WH.ERG**-do-DYN -ABS  
 lit. 'Here is the woman whose husband is the one who builds houses.'

A similar pattern is observed with possessor relativization from an applied argument DP: direct relativization is ungrammatical (45a); instead, the applied argument is promoted to absolutive position through the pseudocleft repair (45b).

- (45) a. \* marə [RC  $\hat{s}^w\text{-}\text{əz-ew}_i$  [DP  $t_i$  **z-jə-č'ale** ](IO) wered  
 here woman-ADV **WH.PR-POSS-boy** song  
 $\emptyset$ -qə- $\emptyset$ -fe-s- $\hat{I}^w$ a- $\text{æ}$ e ] -r  
 3ABS-DIR-3SG.IO-BEN-1SG.ERG-say-PST -ABS  
 Intended: ‘Here is the woman for whose son I sang.’
- b. marə [RC  $\hat{s}^w\text{-}\text{əz-ew}_i$  [DP  $t_i$  **z-jə-č'ale** ]<sub>j</sub> [RC  $t_j$ (IO) wered  
 here woman-ADV **WH.PR-POSS-boy** song  
 $\emptyset$ -qe-**zə**-fe-s- $\hat{I}^w$ a- $\text{æ}$ e-r ] ]  
 3ABS-DIR-**WH.IO**-BEN-1SG.ERG-say-PST-ABS  
 lit. ‘Here is the woman whose son is the one for whom I sang.’

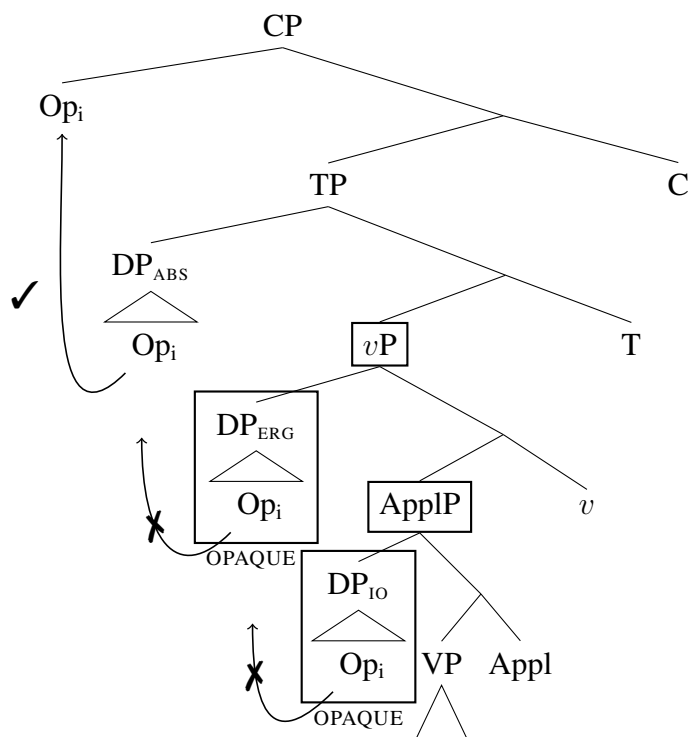
Ershova (2024) argues that the constructions in 44 and 45b are indeed pseudoclefts based on case marking patterns: while absolutive DPs with a relativized possessor may be marked with overt absolutive case (42-43), the possessed nominals in the pseudocleft constructions are incompatible with both absolutive and oblique case—Ershova (2024) connects this to case connectivity effects which are a typical property of specificational pseudocleft constructions (Akmajian 1979; Higgins 1979; Declerck 1988; Heycock and Kroch 1999; den Dikken et al. 2000; Heller 2002, a.o.).

Ershova (2024) connects the impossibility of possessor relativization from ergative and applied argument DPs to their syntactic positions: both types of arguments are introduced as specifiers of syntactic locality domains, i.e. phases: *v*P and ApplP (Chomsky 2000, 2001, *et seq.* on *v*P; McGinnis 2000, 2001 on ApplP). One of the fundamental properties of phases is that they restrict extraction both from within their complements and their specifiers (opacity of the latter has been called the Edge Condition by Gallego and Uriagereka 2007).<sup>9</sup> The high position of the absolutive argument, on the other hand, is not associated with a phase edge, and the absolutive DP is correspondingly transparent for subextraction (46).

<sup>9</sup>The specifier itself can move; subextraction from within the specifier is impossible.



- (46) Ergative and applied arguments are opaque for subextraction; the absolutive argument is not.



The proposed analysis, which connects the position of a corresponding nominal with the possibility of possessor relativization, fits straightforwardly into a picture of West Circassian as a high absolutive language: the uniformly high position of the absolutive DP ensures that this type of argument is not at a phase edge and correspondingly never opaque for possessor relativization. Similarly to the parasitic gap data in the previous section, patterns of possessor relativization, regardless of analysis, still qualify as a syntactic ergativity effect: once again, intransitive subjects (S) and themes of transitive verbs (O) pattern together to the exclusion of the external argument of transitive verbs (A).

The previous subsections have outlined three syntactic phenomena which display an ergative pattern: reciprocal binding, conditions on parasitic gap licensing, and possessor relativization. According to the standard typology of ergative languages, West Circassian is then expected to display syntactic ergativity in relation to ergative displacement—the most robustly attested syntactic ergativity effect. This is not confirmed: ergative arguments may be relativized in the same fashion as absolutes. Examples of ergative relativization have already been presented in this paper, e.g. in 40 and 44; the following subsection presents evidence that ergative relativization indeed displays properties typical of a displacement dependency, analogous to other types of arguments, further confirming that ergative arguments do not behave differently from absolutes in this regard.

**3.5. ERGATIVE EXTRACTION.** This subsection demonstrates that relativization of all types of arguments, including both absolutes and ergatives, displays properties that are associated with movement dependencies: it is island-sensitive, it licenses parasitic gaps (discussed in §3.3), and it displays crossover effects. This confirms that West Circassian does not display a ban on ergative displacement, despite displaying a number of other syntactic ergativity effects.

Firstly, relativization is island-sensitive (also noted in Caponigro and Polinsky 2011:86 and Lander 2012:285-287). For example, relativization is ungrammatical out of factive complements marked with *zere-*. Clauses with the prefix *zere-* display properties of headless relatives and have been analyzed as involving relativization of an unpronounced factive operator (Gerasimov and Lander 2008; Caponigro and Polinsky 2011; Lander 2012:296-309); correspondingly, the islandhood of these constituents may be attributed to their status as relative clauses (Ross 1967, *et seq.*).

Relativization from *zere-*complements is ungrammatical for all types of arguments. Thus, the absolute external argument in 47a may not be relativized (47b).

- (47) a. se Ø-s-e-ŕe [CP **mə pŕeŕe.žəje-r** dax-ew  
I 3ABS-1SG.ERG-know **this girl-ABS** beautiful-ADV  
Ø-qə-zera-ŕe-r]  
**3ABS-DIR-WH.FACT-dance-DYN-ABS**  
'I know that this girl dances well.'
- b. \* xet-a [RC [CP *t*(ABS) dax-ew Ø-qə-zera-ŕe-r]  
who-Q beautiful-ADV **WH.ABS-DIR-WH.FACT-dance-DYN-ABS**  
Ø-p-ŕe-r ]  
3ABS-2SG.ERG-know-DYN-ABS  
Intended: 'Who is the one that you know [ \_ dances well ]?'

Similarly, an applied argument such as the dative indirect object in 48a may not be relativized from the factive complement (48b).

- (48) a. [CP **mə č'ale-m** zə-par-jə Ø-zer-Ø-je-mə-wa-ŕe-r]  
**this boy-OBL** one-nobody-ADD 3ABS-WH.FACT-**3SG.IO-DAT-NEG-hit-PST-ABS**  
Ø-s-e-ŕe  
3ABS-1SG.ERG-DYN-know  
'I know that no one hit this boy.'
- b. \* marə [RC č'al-ew [CP *t*(IO) zə-par-jə  
here boy-ADV one-nobody-ADD  
Ø-zere-**z-e-mə-wa-ŕe-r** ] Ø-s-ŕe-r]  
3ABS-WH.FACT-**WH.IO-DAT-NEG-hit-PST-ABS** 3ABS-1SG.ERG-know-DYN-ABS  
Intended: 'Here is the boy whom I know [ nobody hit \_ ].'

Relativization of the ergative argument is island-sensitive in the same way: thus, the ergative agent in 49a may not be relativized from the *zere*-complement (49b).

- (49) a. [CP mə ɟ'ale-m deɾ<sup>w</sup>-ew wered Ø-qə-zer-**jə-ʔ<sup>w</sup>e-re-r** ]  
 this boy-OBL good-ADV song 3ABS-DIR-WH.FACT-**3SG.ERG**-say-DYN-ABS  
 Ø-s-e-ɟe  
 3ABS-1SG.ERG-DYN-know  
 'I know that this boy sings (lit. says songs) well.'
- b. \* mə ɟ'ale-r arə [RC se Ø-s-ɟe-re-r [CP t(ERG)  
 this boy-ABS PRED I 3ABS-1SG.ERG-know-DYN-ABS  
 deɾ<sup>w</sup>-ew wered Ø-qə-zere-**zə-ʔ<sup>w</sup>e-re-r** ] ]  
 good-ADV song 3ABS-DIR-WH.FACT-**WH.ERG**-say-DYN-ABS  
 Intended: 'This boy is the one I know [ \_ sings well ].'

Relativization also licenses parasitic gaps (discussed in §3.3)—a property that is typical of movement dependencies (Engdahl 1983; Nissenbaum 2000; Culicover 2001, a.o.). This is similarly true for all types of relativized participants: absolute arguments (38), applied arguments (41), and ergative agents (40).

Finally, relativization displays both Strong and Weak Crossover effects (Postal 1971 *et seq.*). A Strong Crossover configuration involves displacement of a relative or *wh*-operator over a co-indexed pronominal (50), whereas Weak Crossover involves operator displacement over a constituent containing a co-indexed pronoun (51).

- (50) \* Who<sub>i</sub> does Mary think he<sub>i</sub> hurt \_<sub>i</sub>? (Postal 1971:74)
- (51) \* The pudding<sub>i</sub> which [ the man who ordered it<sub>i</sub> ] said \_<sub>i</sub> would be tasty was a horror show. (Ross 1967:131 *via* Postal 1971:87)

West Circassian relativization is sensitive to crossover, as expected of a displacement dependency. Thus, the applied argument of the complement clause of *jə-ɟ'ase* 'favorite' may not be relativized over the co-indexed applied argument in the matrix clause (52); instead, the applied argument itself must be relativized, with the option of a parasitic gap in the embedded clause (53).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Parasitic gaps which are embedded in complement CPs in West Circassian systematically violate the anti-c-command condition; Ershova (2021:34) suggests that this may have to do with a general lack of Condition C effects in cross-clausal contexts. See also Testelefs 2009 on Condition C violations in West Circassian and Contreras 1987; Horvath 1992, among others, on cross-clausal violations of the anti-c-command condition.

- (52) \* xet-a [RC Op<sub>i</sub> *pro*<sub>i</sub>(IO) Ø-jə-mə-ç'ase-r [CP š<sup>w</sup>əhaftən-xe-r  
 who-Q 3SG.IO-POSS-NEG-favorite-ABS gift-PL-ABS  
 t<sub>i</sub>(IO) Ø-qə-ze-r-a-tə-n-ew ] ]  
 3ABS-DIR-WH.IO-DAT-3PL.ERG-give-MOD-ADV  
 lit. 'Who<sub>i</sub> is it that they<sub>i</sub> dislike for them to give   <sub>i</sub> presents.'
- (53) xet-a [RC Op<sub>i</sub> t<sub>i</sub>(IO) z-jə-mə-ç'ase-r [CP š<sup>w</sup>əhaftən-xe-r  
 who-Q WH.IO-POSS-NEG-favorite-ABS gift-PL-ABS  
*pro*<sub>i</sub> /   <sub>i</sub>(IO) Ø-qə-{Ø-,ze-}r-a-tə-n-ew ] ]  
 3ABS-DIR-{3SG.IO-,WH.IO-}DAT-3PL.ERG-give-MOD-ADV  
 'Who is it that   <sub>i</sub> dislikes for them to give them<sub>i</sub> presents.'

Ergative arguments display a similar effect: for example, the ergative agent of the embedded complement clause of *wəxəŋ* 'finish' may not be relativized over the co-indexed ergative agent in the matrix clause (54). To express the relevant meaning, the matrix participant must be relativized, with the option of a parasitic gap in place of the ergative participant in the embedded clause (55).

- (54) \* marə [RC š<sup>w</sup>əz-ew<sub>i</sub> *pro*<sub>i</sub>(ERG) [CP Ø-jə-sabjəj-xe-r t<sub>i</sub>(ERG)  
 here woman-ADV 3SG.PR-POSS-child-PL-ABS  
 Ø-zə-fepe-n-ew ] Ø-ə-wəxə-βe-r ] ]  
 3ABS-WH.ERG-dress-MOD-ADV 3ABS-3SG.ERG-finish-ABS  
 lit. 'Here is the woman who she<sub>i</sub> finished [   <sub>i</sub> dressing her children ].
- (55) marə [RC š<sup>w</sup>əz-ew<sub>i</sub> t<sub>i</sub>(ERG) [CP Ø-jə-sabjəj-xe-r *pro*<sub>i</sub> /   <sub>i</sub>(ERG)  
 here woman-ADV 3SG.PR-POSS-child-PL-ABS  
 Ø-{ə-,zə-}fepe-n-ew ] Ø-zə-wəxə-βe-r ] ]  
 3ABS-{3SG.ERG-,WH.ERG-}dress-MOD-ADV 3ABS-WH.ERG-finish-PST-ABS  
 'Here is the woman who   <sub>i</sub> finished dressing her children.'

West Circassian relativization also displays weak crossover effects: a relativized participant may not cross over a constituent containing a co-indexed pronoun (see also Ershova 2021:32-33). Thus, the absolutive external argument of the embedded complement clause of *fejen* 'want' may not be relativized over a co-indexed pronoun in the absolutive argument of the matrix predicate—a parasitic gap must be used instead (56).

- (56) marə [RC pšeše.žəj-ew<sub>i</sub> [   <sub>pg</sub>/\**pro*<sub>i</sub> z-/\*Ø-jane Ø-Ø-fa.je-r  
 here girl-ADV WH.PR-/\*3SG.PR-mother 3ABS-3SG.IO-want-ABS  
 [CP t<sub>i</sub>(ABS) kwencertə-m Ø-qə-Ø-š'ə-š<sup>w</sup>e-n-ew ] ]  
 concert-OBL WH.ABS-DIR-3SG.IO-LOC-dance-MOD-ADV  
 'Here is the girl who<sub>i</sub> [ the mother of   <sub>pg</sub>/\*her<sub>i</sub> ] wants [   <sub>i</sub> to dance at the concert ].'

The same effect is observed with relativization of an ergative argument: the ergative agent in 57 may not be relativized over the co-indexed pronoun in the matrix absolutive DP; instead, a parasitic gap must appear in place of the co-indexed possessor.

- (57) mə pšaše-r arə [RC Op<sub>i</sub> [ \_\_<sub>pg</sub> / \*pro<sub>i</sub> z-/\*Ø-jane ]  
 this girl-ABS PRED WH.PR-/\*3SG.PR-mother  
 Ø-Ø-fa.je-r [CP t<sub>i</sub>(ERG) kwencertə-m wered  
 3ABS-3SG.IO-want-ABS concert-OBL song  
 Ø-qə-Ø-š'ə-zə-ɽ<sup>w</sup>e-n-ew ] ]  
 3ABS-DIR-3SG.IO-LOC-WH.ERG-say-MOD-ADV  
 'This girl is the one who<sub>i</sub> [ the mother of \_\_<sub>pg</sub>/\*her<sub>i</sub> ] wants [ \_\_<sub>i</sub> to sing (lit. say songs) at  
 the concert ].'

To conclude this subsection, relativization in West Circassian displays properties typically associated with movement dependencies: it is island-sensitive, it licenses parasitic gaps, and it triggers crossover effects. Ergative arguments are relativized in the same fashion as other types of participants, including the absolutive argument, thus confirming that West Circassian does not display a ban on ergative displacement.

**3.6. SUMMARY: SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY IN WEST CIRCASSIAN.** The main claim of this paper is that a language with a syntactically ergative clause structure wherein the absolutive argument occupies a privileged position in the clause *need not* display a constraint on ergative displacement, counter to existing typologies of syntactically ergative languages. To support this claim, this section has presented evidence that West Circassian is a language with a broad range of syntactic ergativity effects which are manifested in conditions on reciprocal binding, parasitic gap licensing, and possessor relativization. However, ergative arguments may be displaced in West Circassian, similarly to absolutive and applied arguments, and the corresponding displacement dependencies display all the properties associated with movement dependencies cross-linguistically.

The movement-related tests presented in this section are particularly important because ergative relativization in West Circassian is morphologically *more marked* than absolutive relativization: while *wh*-agreement with a relativized absolutive argument is unpronounced, as can be seen in 56 and elsewhere, ergative relativization involves the use of an overt *wh*-agreement marker *zə* (e.g. 57). Indeed, this contrast in markedness has occasionally been labeled as a syntactic ergativity effect, implying that this is the surface manifestation of a *syntactic rule* which discriminates between absolutive and ergative arguments (see e.g. Lander 2009b; Lander and Daniel 2019:1258; Polinsky 2016:151-154). However, this section has demonstrated that relativization of absolutive and ergative arguments has a uniform profile and passes the same set of diagnostics for syntactic

displacement. This suggests that morphological markedness cannot be used as a reliable diagnostic for the presence of a syntactic rule, such as the impossibility of ergative displacement. The following section further explores the connection between morphological markedness and syntactic constraints on movement through the example of another language which has been claimed to display a ban on ergative displacement—Samoan (Polinsky 2016; Hopperdietzel 2020; Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou to appear).

**4. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MORPHOLOGICAL ERGATIVITY AND SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY.** Traditionally, the main diagnostic for identifying the presence of syntactic ergativity in the domain of ergative displacement is the use of morphology which is not used in cases of absolutive extraction. For example, while an absolutive theme in Kalaallisut may be relativized with a gap (58a), relativization of an ergative agent in this manner is ungrammatical (58b). In order to relativize the transitive agent, the predicate must be marked with an antipassive suffix, which additionally correlates with the theme receiving an oblique (modalis) case and the verb displaying intransitive agreement with the agent (58c).

- (58) a. miiqqat [RC Juuna-p \_ paari-sai ]  
 child.PL.ABS Juuna-ERG (ABS) look.after-PART.3SG.S/3PL.O  
 ‘the children that Juuna is looking after’
- b. \* angut [RC \_ aallaat tigu-sima-saa ]  
 man.ABS (ERG) gun.ABS take-PFV-PART.3SG.S/3SG.O  
 Intended: ‘the man who took the gun’
- c. angut [RC \_ aalaam-mik tigu-si-sima-suq ]  
 man.ABS (ABS) gun-MOD take-ANTIP-PFV-PART.3SG.S  
 ‘the man who took the gun’ (Kalaallisut; Bittner 1994:55,58 *via* Yuan 2022:518)

This antipassive construction is grammatical in the absence of relativization, and the transitive subject in this construction is correspondingly marked with absolutive case (59). The different morphological form of the verb in cases of agent relativization thus clearly correlates with detransitivization: the relativized argument is absolutive, rather than ergative case-marked. This confirms that Kalaallisut does indeed display a ban on relativization of the ergative argument.

- (59) suli **Juuna** atuakka-mik ataatsi-mik tigu-**si**-sima-nngi-laq  
 still **Juuna**.ABS book-MOD one-MOD get-ANTIP-PFV-NEG-3SG.S  
 ‘Juuna hasn’t received (even) one book yet.’ (Kalaallisut; Bittner 1994:35 *via* Yuan 2022:515)

However, for many of the languages which are traditionally classified as syntactically ergative, the correlation between morphological markedness and the impossibility of ergative movement is

less straightforward. For example, the agent focus construction which is used in cases of agent displacement in Mayan languages (5) is not attested outside of displacement contexts, which has led some researchers to treat this marker as a morphological reflex of ergative displacement rather than a repair strategy which re-configures the argument alignment of the clause (Stiebels 2006; Newman 2021, 2024). Similarly, the previous section has demonstrated that ergative relativization in West Circassian employs a different morphological form to absolutive relativization, but this distinction in markedness is a surface phenomenon and does not correlate with a syntactic constraint on ergative extraction. This section further emphasizes the danger of equating morphological markedness with the presence of a syntactic rule through the example of Samoan, a Polynesian language which has been claimed to display syntactic ergativity in the domain of ergative displacement (Polinsky 2016; Hopperdietzel 2020; Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou to appear).

**4.1. BACKGROUND.** Samoan is a Polynesian language primarily spoken in Samoa, American Samoa, and diaspora communities in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.<sup>11</sup> The language displays verb initial word order and ergative alignment in case marking and agreement (Chung 1978; Mosel 1985; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992; Collins 2017; Tollan 2018; Tollan and Massam 2022; Hopperdietzel 2020; Yu 2021, a.o.).<sup>12</sup> Thus, the agent of a transitive predicate is marked with the particle *e*, whereas the absolutive theme is not marked with overt segmental morphology (60).<sup>13</sup> In accordance with ergative alignment, subjects of intransitive predicates are unmarked, similarly to the theme of a transitive verb (61).

(60) Na fusi [**e** Talia](**ERG**) [le tama'i maile](**ABS**).  
 PST hug **ERG** Talia the small dog  
 'Talia hugged the puppy.'

(61) E aliali **ma'a**(**ABS**) pe-'a pē le tai.  
 PRES appear rock Q-FUT low the tide  
 'The rocks show when the tide goes down.'

Many two-place predicates select for an absolutive agent and an oblique case-marked theme; these are traditionally called semi-transitive or middle verbs and are generally associated with less agentive external argument roles, such as the experiencer in 62 (Chung 1978:46-65; Seiter 1978; Mosel 1985:104-108; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992:723; Tollan 2018).

<sup>11</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, the Samoan data has been acquired by the author through fieldwork with one speaker from Apia, Samoa, who currently resides in the United States.

<sup>12</sup>A small number of predicates agree with the absolutive argument in number; given the rather limited nature of the pattern and its irrelevance to the main claim of the paper, I do not discuss it further.

<sup>13</sup>Yu (2021) argues that absolutive case in Samoan is marked by a high edge tone. Since absolutive arguments may also be distinguished from other participants by the absence of an overt case particle, I do not include the tonal marking in this paper, in accordance with Samoan orthography.

- (62) E alofa [le fafine](ABS) [i l-a-na tama teine](OBL).  
 PRES love the woman OBL the-GEN-3SG child girl  
 ‘The woman loves her daughter.’

Tollan (2018); Tollan and Massam (2022) analyze the oblique case on themes of semi-transitive verbs as accusative; since it is homophonous with oblique case on goals of ditransitives (63) as well as genuine adjuncts (64), I label the corresponding particle as OBLIQUE throughout.<sup>14</sup> I remain agnostic in regards to the sources of case assignment in the language, since the choice bears no significance for this paper.

- (63) Na ave e Talia [i l-a-na tama teine] le tusi.  
 PST take ERG Talia OBL the-GEN-3SG child girl the book  
 ‘Talia gave her daughter the book.’
- (64) Na ou sau [i le vaiaso ua te’a].  
 PST 1SG arrive OBL the week PRV leave  
 ‘I arrived last week.’

Finally, ergative agents and absolutive arguments of intransitive and semi-transitive predicates may be expressed as a preverbal clitic, which usually appears between the clause-initial TAM particle and the verb, as shown for the absolutive argument in 64 and the ergative argument in 65.

- (65) Na e(ERG) aumai-a l-a-’u tusi.  
 PST 2SG bring-INA the-GEN-1SG book  
 ‘You brought my book.’

The following subsection discusses the basic patterns of displacement and how they have been used as motivation for labeling Samoan as a syntactically ergative language.

**4.2. THE MORPHOLOGY OF ERGATIVE DISPLACEMENT.** Focusing primarily on phrasal fronting with the focus particle *o* (glossed as ALT following Hohaus and Howell 2015), Hopperditzel (2020) characterizes Samoan as displaying syntactic ergativity in regards to ergative displacement. This is motivated by the appearance of the suffix *-ina* (which alternates freely with the allomorph *-a*) in cases when an ergative argument has been fronted (66), and the absence of this suffix when an absolutive argument—both transitive theme (67) and external argument (68)—undergoes fronting.

<sup>14</sup>Chung (1978) distinguishes between *i* ‘at’ and *i* ‘to’. The two particles are homophonous and speakers do not reliably differentiate between them. I follow Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992 in transcribing all instances of the oblique particle as *i*.



- (66) O Natia(ERG) na ave-**a** l-o-'u nofoa?  
 ALT Natia PST take-**INA** the-GEN-1sg chair  
 'Is it Natia who took my chair?'
- (67) O [le nofoa](ABS) na ave e Talia.  
 ALT the chair PST take ERG Talia  
 'It's the chair that Talia took.'
- (68) O a'u(ABS) e alofa i l-a-'u fānau.  
 ALT I PRES love OBL the-GEN-1SG children  
 'It's me who loves my children.'

The suffix *-ina*, which is frequently called *-Cia* to account for its full range of allomorphs, has been notoriously difficult to characterize in research on Samoan, so much so that it has been labeled the “mysterious transitive suffix” (Chung 1978; Cook 1978; Mosel 1985). Researchers disagree whether the suffix *-ina* which attaches to transitive predicates as in 66 should be distinguished from other, more typically passive-like usages, which for many predicates correspond to a distinct allomorph (see e.g. Chung 1978; Cook 1996 on arguments for distinguishing the two usages and Cook 1978; Mosel 1985; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992 for considerations against this view).

Hopperdietzel (2020:156-162) suggests that *-ina* is the realization of a resumptive pronoun in the position of the ergative agent, akin to the resumptive clitic observed in cases of displacement in Tongan (1a), which has likewise been characterized as syntactically ergative (Otsuka 2006; Polinsky 2016, 2017). The author also mentions that the same suffix surfaces when the ergative argument is expressed as a preverbal clitic (65) and suggests that the ergative agent cannot undergo displacement of any type, including cliticization, due to being a PP, following Polinsky's (2016) analysis of similar syntactic ergativity effects.

The association between *-ina* and ergative displacement is indeed robust: the same suffix is used in relative clauses with a relativized ergative, as well as *wh*-questions where the fronted *wh*-element corresponds to the ergative agent (Chung 1978:81-94; Mosel 1985:62-98; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992:741-763). However, this suffix has been historically challenging to analyze because its use is not limited to displacement contexts. For example, Chung (1978:90-91) observes that *-ina* is preferred in negative sentences marked with *le'i* ‘not’ and required in negative imperatives and generic negative statements with *lē* ‘not’ (70-71), even in the absence of ergative displacement, as demonstrated by the post-verbal ergative noun phrase in 69 and 71.

- (69) Sā le'i meli-**a** e le falemeli le tusi.  
 PST not mail-**ina** ERG the post office the letter  
 'The post office didn't deliver the letter.' (Chung 1978:90)

- (70) 'Aua lē lafo\*(-**ina**) 'i ai se tusi.  
 IMPV not send-**INA** OBL it.OBL a letter  
 'Don't send them a letter.' (Chung 1978:91)
- (71) E lē loka\*(-**ina**) e leoleo tagata gaoi.  
 PRES not lock-**INA** ERG police person steal  
 'Policemen do not arrest burglars.' (*ibid.*)

The appearance of *-ina* in negative contexts, especially in the presence of an overt ergative noun phrase (69, 71) casts doubt on the interpretation of *-ina* as a resumptive. However, there remains a possibility that the surface form *-ina* is the result of several unrelated syntactic triggers, and one of its uses is as a resumptive pronoun in cases of ergative displacement. Even if such an interpretation is correct, the following subsection further challenges the association between resumption and the impossibility of displacement by arguing that constructions with *-ina* display properties associated with displacement dependencies: even if *-ina* is a resumptive, it is nevertheless derived through movement.

**4.3. ERGATIVE DISPLACEMENT AND RESUMPTION.** Cross-linguistically, dependencies involving resumptive pronouns differ in their sensitivity to displacement diagnostics. For example, while resumptive pronouns may appear inside syntactic islands in languages like English and Irish, suggesting that they are used to 'repair' otherwise illicit displacement dependencies (see e.g. Borer 1984; McCloskey 1990; Erteschik-Shir 1992), it has long been observed that resumptives also appear in constructions involving bona fide displacement, which can be diagnosed based on island sensitivity and reconstruction effects (Zaenen et al. 1981; Koopman 1982, 1984; Engdahl 1985; Pesetsky 1998; Aoun et al. 2001; Sichel 2014; van Urk 2018; Georgi and Amaechi 2022).

For example, resumptive pronouns in Swedish display the full range of properties associated with movement dependencies (Zaenen et al. 1981; Engdahl 1985). Thus, they may license parasitic gaps (72) and are island-sensitive (73).

- (72) Vilken fånge<sub>i</sub> var det läkarna inte kunde avgöra om **han**<sub>i</sub> verkligen var sjuk  
 which prisoner was it the-doctors not could decide if **he** really was ill  
 utan att tala med \_\_<sub>PG</sub> personlingen?  
 without to talk with in person  
 'Which prisoner was it the doctors couldn't determine if he really was ill without talking to in person?' (Swedish; Engdahl 1985:8)

- (73) ?\* Vilken bil<sub>i</sub> åt du lunch med [<sub>NP</sub> någon<sub>i</sub> [<sub>RC</sub> that  $t_i$  körde  $t_j$  / \*den?  
 which car ate your lunch with someone that drove it  
 Intended: ‘Which car did you have lunch with someone who drove it?’ (Swedish;  
*ibid.*:10)

The situation is similar with *-ina* in Samoan: while it is indeed obligatory in cases of ergative extraction, it is sensitive to movement-related diagnostics, suggesting that constructions with *-ina* display properties of a movement dependency. Furthermore, some instances of illicit ergative fronting may be repaired with the insertion of a resumptive pronoun, which appears *in addition* to *-ina*, thus solidifying the contrast between the suffix and base-generated resumption.

Firstly, a fronted noun phrase which is interpreted as the ergative participant may not be separated from the predicate marked with *-ina* by an island boundary: focus fronting of the ergative agent from the reason clause in 74 is ungrammatical despite the presence of *-ina* on the embedded predicate (75).

- (74) Na ave atu e Talia [ona sā **ou** ta’u-a iā te ia o l-o-u aso  
 PST take thither ERG Talia COMP PST **I** tell-INA OBL s/he PRED the-GEN-2SG day  
 fānau lenēi.  
 born today  
 ‘Talia gave it [=the present] to you because I told her that it’s your birthday today.’
- (75) \*O a’u na ave atu e Talia le mealofa [ona sā ta’u-a iā te ia  
 ALT I PST give thither ERG Talia the gift COMP PST give-INA OBL s/he  
 o l-o-u aso fānau lenēi.  
 PRED the-GEN 2SG day born today  
 Intended: ‘It’s me, Talia gave the present to you because I told her that it’s your birthday today.’

Furthermore, ergative displacement displays crossover effects. Thus, 76 is grammatical under the interpretation where the possessor in the matrix clause is coreferent with the ergative noun phrase in the embedded clause, but 77, where the ergative argument has been fronted with *-ina* on the embedded predicate, is judged as an unacceptable way of describing a scenario where the ergative argument and the possessor are coreferent. In the absence of the offending coreferent pronoun, ergative extraction is grammatical from the embedded clause (78).

- (76) E lē mana’o l-o lā’ua<sub>i</sub> tinā [e ai [e Talia ma Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> sanuisi  
 PRES not want the-GEN they.DU mother PRES eat ERG Talia and Iosefa sandwich  
 ia.] ]  
 this.PL  
 ‘Their<sub>i</sub> mom doesn’t want [Talia and Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> to eat these sandwiches.’

- (77) \* O [Talia ma Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> e lē mana'o l-o lā'ua<sub>i</sub> tinā [e ai-a  
 ALT Talia and Iosefa PRES not want the-GEN they.DU mother PRES eat-INA  
 sanuisi ia].  
 sandwich this.PL  
 Intended: 'It is [Talia and Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> that their<sub>i</sub> mom doesn't want to eat these sandwiches.'
- (78) O [Talia ma Iosefa] ou te lē mana'o [e ai-a sanuisi ia].  
 ALT Talia and Iosefa 1SG PRES not want PRES eat-INA sandwich this.PL  
 'It's Talia and Iosefa that I don't want to eat these sandwiches.'

The crossover effect in 77 suggests that *-ina* is not interpreted as a base generated pronoun; in fact, the crossover violation may be repaired by inserting an overt pronoun in the ergative position in the embedded clause (79).

- (79) O [Talia ma Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> e lē mana'o l-o lā'ua<sub>i</sub> tinā [**lā** te ai-a  
 ALT Talia and Iosefa PRES not want the-GEN they.DU mother 3DU PRES eat-INA  
 sanuisi ia].  
 sandwich this.PL  
 'It is [Talia and Iosefa]<sub>i</sub> that their<sub>i</sub> mom doesn't want them<sub>i</sub> to eat these sandwiches.'

Another scenario where *-ina* contrasts in acceptability with a base generated resumptive may be observed in focus fronting over a *wh*-element. While certain combinations of focus fronted constituent and *wh*-word are grammatical, for example, a focused absolutive theme and a *wh*-fronted ergative agent (80), focus fronting of an ergative agent over a *wh*-element is ungrammatical (81). Similarly to the crossover effect above, the offending configuration may be salvaged with the insertion of a pronoun in the ergative position (82).<sup>15</sup>

- (80) O [Lulu ma Iosefa]<sub>ABS</sub> o ai<sub>ERG</sub> na fafāgā?  
 ALT Lulu and Iosefa ALT who PST feed.INA  
 'Lulu and Iosefa, who fed them?'
- (81) \* O oe<sub>ERG</sub> o [ai tamaiti]<sub>ABS</sub> na fafāgā?  
 ALT you ALT who children PST feed.INA  
 Intended: 'You, which children did you feed?'
- (82) O oe<sub>ERG</sub> o [ai tamaiti]<sub>ABS</sub> na e fafāgā?  
 ALT you ALT who children PST **you** feed.INA  
 'You, which children did you feed?'

<sup>15</sup>The form *fafāgā* 'feed.INA' in 80-82 is derived from the predicate *fafaga* 'feed' by adding *-ina* and elongating the vowel in the penultimate syllable.

While the reasons behind the ungrammaticality of 81 lay outside the scope of this paper, the contrast with 82 reinforces the observation that *-ina* does not behave as a resumptive pronoun which appears in otherwise illicit movement configurations: the predicate in 81 is marked with *-ina*, but the movement dependency is nevertheless ungrammatical, whereas the pronoun in 82 is able to remedy the illicit dependency, presumably by being base-generated in the position of the ergative argument.

**4.4. MORPHOLOGICAL OR SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY: SUMMARY.** This section has presented evidence that a morphologically marked displacement strategy, such as the use of a resumptive pronoun or a dedicated morpheme on the predicate, does not necessarily entail the presence of a constraint on movement. Both West Circassian (§3) and Samoan display a morphological distinction between absolutive and ergative displacement: the former is unmarked, whereas the latter involves additional morphology—a specialized *wh*-agreement prefix in West Circassian and a verbal suffix in Samoan. However, in both languages ergative displacement passes typical diagnostics for movement: it displays island sensitivity, licenses parasitic gaps, and is sensitive to crossover effects.

Given the lack of a reliable connection between morphological markedness and a syntactic ban on ergative displacement, it is misleading to characterize such patterns of markedness as SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY. In such cases, rules of displacement are not sensitive to the distinction between ergative and absolutive arguments, but rather to the morphological features associated with the case marking of the corresponding nominals. The distinction is purely morphological, hence, such effects would be better characterized as a type of MORPHOLOGICAL ERGATIVITY.

**5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION.** The term SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY has largely become synonymous with a particular effect: markedness in the domain of ergative displacement. Traditionally, this type of effect has been explained as a constraint on ergative displacement, and this constraint has been broadly taken to be a universal characteristic of syntactically ergative languages. This paper challenges the consensus position on two counts.

Firstly, I have argued that the universality of the ban on ergative displacement in syntactically ergative languages is theoretically unexpected and empirically incorrect. A syntactically ergative clause structure, wherein the absolutive argument c-commands the ergative agent, cannot reliably rule out ergative displacement, and existing analyses in this vein employ additional parameters to derive the constraint. This is in fact a desirable outcome: West Circassian departs from the existing typology by displaying several syntactic ergativity effects, but allowing for ergative relativization.

Secondly, I have challenged the connection between markedness in the domain of displace-

ment and the presence of a syntactic rule which discriminates between ergative and absolutive arguments. Based on evidence from West Circassian and Samoan, I have demonstrated that despite ergative arguments displaying a more marked extraction pattern, the constructions in question pass typical diagnostics for movement dependencies, suggesting that the markedness patterns are a superficial, morphological phenomenon, rather than a diagnostic for a syntactic rule. This calls into question whether patterns of markedness in displacement can be reliably characterized as a syntactic ergativity effect.

In sum, the association between constraints on ergative displacement and ergativity in the syntax is far from straightforward. A language may have a syntactically ergative clause structure and not display a ban on ergative displacement. A language may display a distinct morphological strategy for ergative displacement with it being just that—a morphological pattern, with no underlying constraint on ergative movement. To complete this typology, it has also been extensively argued that a language may display a ban on ergative displacement in the absence of high absolutive syntax (Otsuka 2006; Legate 2012; Polinsky 2016; Deal 2016; Deal et al. 2024).<sup>16</sup> In such cases, the impossibility of ergative displacement is attributed to its morphological features (ergative case) or structural status as a PP (Polinsky 2016). Taken together, these considerations lead to the conclusion that the term SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY, when used to characterize patterns of ergative displacement, is at best imprecise and at worst misleading. The term would be better utilized as a characteristic for patterns which are truly syntactic: rather than describing patterns of morphological markedness, it should be used to denote ergativity in the syntax.

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<sup>16</sup>See also Erlewine 2016; Richards 2023 for analyses of ergative extraction in Mayan languages which do not rely on high absolutive syntax, counter to Coon, Mateo, and Preminger 2014; Coon, Baier, and Levin 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022.

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