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ENS ÉDITIONS

Reconstructing proto-syntax: the case of West Caucasian

Viatcheslav Chirikba¹

The West Caucasian (WC), or Abkhazo-Adyghean languages, represent the western branch of the North Caucasian linguistic family² and are five in number: Abkhaz and Abaza (the Abkhazian subgroup), Adyghe and Kabardian (the Circassian subgroup), and Ubykh. Their traditional habitat is the Western Caucasus, where they are still spoken, with the exception of the now extinct Ubykh. Large numbers of WC speakers are to be found also in Turkey and in some Middle Eastern countries, to where their ancestors came after fleeing the Russian-Caucasian war in the middle of the 19th century.

The WC languages are notorious amongst phonologists for their large consonantal inventories (up to 80 phonemes in Ubykh) and minimally developed vocalism (two or three phonemic vowels); the salient features in morphology include a weakly developed nominal system (4 cases in Circassian, two in Ubykh, none in Abkhaz), a highly developed verbal system (the verbal form is capable of coding up to 5 arguments), extreme verbal prefixation (a dozen or so fixed prefixal slots), and the ergative/absolute realised via the contrasting ordering of agreement markers.

As to the word order parameters, the modern WC languages are characterized, on the one hand, by a relatively free word order and, on the other hand, by the rigidly fixed order of the cross-referencing, prefixed agreement markers. The preferred or neutral word order in all WC languages is SOV, as exemplified by the phrase *The boy sees a book*:

Abbreviations used in this study are listed page 336.

- ¹ I thank Prof. B. G. Hewitt and Dr. L. Kulikov for valuable comments and suggestions.
- ² The other branch is Nakh-Dagestanian or East Caucasian.

- Shapsygh Adyghe (Smeets 1984, p. 95)
- (1) $\text{ɛ}^{\text{ʔ}}\text{aLe-m}$ $\text{tx}\lambda\text{-er}$ $\text{θ-j-e-}\lambda\text{e}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$
 boy-ERG book-ABS it-he-DYNPRES-SEE
- Ubykh (Dumézil 1931, p. 21)
- (2) $\text{a-m}\alpha\text{z}\alpha\text{-n}$ $\text{a-t}\lambda\alpha\text{-}\emptyset$ $\text{θ-(}\alpha\text{)-bj}\epsilon\text{-n}$
 ART-boy-ERG ART-book-ABS it-he-SEE-DYNPRES
- Abkhaz
- (3) $\text{a-}\text{ɛ}^{\text{ʔ}}\text{k}^{\text{w}}\text{ən}$ $\text{a-}\text{ʃ}^{\text{w}}\text{q}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $\text{θ-j}\alpha\text{-ba-wa-jt}'$
 ART-boy ART-book it-he-SEE-DYNPRES-FIN
- 'The boy sees a book'

The neutral SOV word order is preferred irrespective of the lexical-grammatical properties (*viz.* transitivity/intransitivity) of the main predicate. In contrast, the arrangement of agreement markers depends directly on the transitivity of the verb, determining either the absolutive or the ergative agreement. Circassian and Ubykh express the absolutive/ergative alignment both by NP marking and verbal agreement, whilst Abkhaz, which does not have nominal cases, employs only cross-referencing.

The correlation between the order of main actants and the order of their verbal indices is demonstrated by the following scheme:

	word order	vs.	order of agreement markers
(a) intransitive / absolutive:	S-(IO)-V		S-(IO)-V
(b) transitive / ergative:	A-(IO)O-V		O-(IO)-A-V

Scheme 1

The absolutive agreement is characterized by the direct concord of agreement markers with their referents (called by Allen 1956, p. 155, *leapfrog concord*), whilst for the ergative agreement the order of the agreement markers is reversed (Allen's *mirror concord*).

There is no doubt that this scheme, where the neutral word order follows a *subject-first* principle, reflects the situation typical for the late stage of the Proto-West Caucasian (i.e. Common West Caucasian) level. But what can be said of the earlier stages of WC morpho-syntax in the light of the theory of PWC's analytical/isolating past?³ It has been put forward by Yakovlev & Ašxamaf (1941, p. 23) that historically "the Adyghe predicate-verb represents in fact a whole sentence fused into one word. This fusion involved monosyllabic amor-

3 There is strong evidence in favour of the theory that the modern polysynthetic agglutinative structure of WC is the result of a radical evolution from an entirely different system, which was by its main parameters analytical or isolating. This latter system, in its turn, was the result of an evolution from a moderately agglutinative system of the EC type (see Chirikov forthcoming).

phous words/roots..." The same idea was repeated by Yakovlev (2006, p. 152) in relation to the Abkhaz verb-form, which "was originally a whole sentence, fused into one word – a predicate". This is reminiscent of course of Givón's (1971) famous aphorism about today's morphology being yesterday's syntax.

A number of authors, such as Abdokov (1981, p. 57, p. 83) and Kumaxov (1989, p. 339), have suggested that agreement markers, as well as other verbal prefixes, which form in their entirety an impressive edifice of the WC verbal complex, derive from originally independent words. They also point out that the relative order of prefixed actant markers can indicate the old word order within the PWC sentence. According to Abdokov (1981, p. 60), the line of evolution was as follows: when the WC languages lost inflection and the grammatical classes concord (in a similar way as happened, e.g. in the related EC Lezgi language), all syntactic relations (subject-object, etc.) had to be expressed analytically by separate lexemes, which later, having been carried along by the polysynthesis drive, were incorporated into the verbal form, while preserving the very same order they were assigned relatively to the verb when they were still autonomous units.

Indeed, even a quick look at PWC 1st and 2nd person personal pronouns and the corresponding agreement markers is sufficient to persuade one of their genetic interconnection:

personal pronouns	agreement markers	
*sa	*sə-	'I, me'
*wa	*wə-	'thou'
*šwə	*šwə-	'you'

It is obvious that agreement markers are historically nothing other than incorporated personal (and deictic – in the case of the 3rd person) pronouns⁴, though formally, having the vocalization -ə, they coincide rather with possessive markers (which have, of course, the same pronominal origin) than with independent personal pronouns, which end in -a; see Dixon (1995, p. 219, fn 7) on cross-linguistic evidence for the usual connection between cross-referencing pronominal series on verbs and possessive markers on nouns.

From this we come necessarily to the conclusion that the (in)transitivity parameter, which determines the choice of either absolutive or ergative strategy, had to be expressed in the period preceding PWC solely by the

4 In a similar way, the history of French agreement markers shows how Latin independent deictic pronoun *ille* became transformed into a clitic personal pronoun *il* 'he, it' (*il est dancier*), and further, in modern non-standard French, into an agreement marker: *Ma femme il est venue*, where *il* is bound to the verb and does not express gender (cited from Hopper & Traugott 1993, p. 17).

relative order of clausal constituents.⁵ The S(IO)V word order would thus reflect the intransitive clause, and the OAV word order – the transitive clause. In the light of both internal and typological considerations, the line of the evolution of the word order in WC would be as follows.

1. In the pre-PWC (i.e. analytical) period, the ergativity was expressed by the contrastive constituent order only:

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| (a) intransitive clause: | S-(IO)-V |
| (b) transitive clause: | O-(IO)-A-V |

2. After the incorporation of personal pronouns into the verbal form and turning them into agreement markers, a mirror concord between the latter and the constituent order was established:

	word order	vs.	order of agreement markers
(a) intransitive clause:	S-(IO)-V		S-(IO)-V
(b) transitive clause:	O-(IO)-A-V		O-(IO)-A-V

Scheme 2

3. Finally, as plausibly suggested by Kumaxov (1989, p. 339), in the transitive clause a diachronic shift took place from the constituent order OAV to AOV, which is characteristic of modern WC languages. This shift can be explained by the redundancy of the double expression of the ergative principle both by constituent order and by the pronominal cross-referencing. As a result, we arrive at a mirror concord between the clausal arguments and the cross-referencing markers in the transitive clause and the *leap-frog* concord in the intransitive clause (see the Scheme 1 above).

Though this line of reasoning presents quite a plausible scenario of the historical development of WC syntactic structure, in accordance with the evolution of its structural type – from agglutinating and moderately synthetic to isolating and then cyclically again to agglutinative and polysynthetic – the question arises as to the validity of the traditional approach to such concepts as transitivity/intransitivity and, subsequently, ergative/absolutive patterning in the analysis of the language type presented by earlier (isolating) stages of PWC.

As for the ergativity being expressed exclusively by the constituent order, Dixon (1995, p. 50, p. 52) remarks that he is not aware of any ergative language in which constituent order is the only or major mark of core syntactic functions (despite some evidence from Tolai, Austronesian, Papuan) and that “since constituent order fulfils a wide variety of pragmatic as well as grammatical functions, we should hesitate to characterize a language as ‘ergative’ on the basis of constituent order alone”. As to the transitivity parameters, in the absence of formal morphology, which would characterize the analytical pre-PWC system,

5 See Yakovlev (1930, p. 33); Abdokov (1981, p. 83).

transitivity itself becomes an elusive concept. See, for instance, such typically isolating language as Classical Chinese, where the intuitive classification of verbs like *shā* ‘to kill’ and *lái* ‘to come’ as “transitive” vs. “intransitive” is compromised by the fact that both can take objects; moreover, even nouns can be used as “transitive” verbs under certain circumstances (see Norman 1988, p. 91).

A possible indication of the older situation might be seen in the presence in WC languages of a group of *labile* (or *ambitransitive*) verbs, which, depending on the context, can be used either transitively or intransitively. See CCirc. **k^we* ‘to go’ (*itr.*) vs. **k^wə* ‘to go a distance’ (*tr.*); the vowels *e/ə* serve to distinguish intransitive vs. transitive variants; Abkhaz *pa-ra* ‘to knit (in general)’, and ‘to knit X’. Though all Caucasian languages, and of course many non-Caucasian ones, have such classes of verbs, in WC they could theoretically well be a relic of that distant epoch, when verbs, void of any inflection, lacked the lexical meaning of (*in*) transitivity and could be used both with and without the direct object.⁶

The presence of an unexpectedly great number of labile verbs in such classical ergative languages as WC, where transitivity plays a crucial role in the overall structuring of the verbal complex pivotal for the entire grammar, suggests that the transitivity parameter was not always such an all-pervasive principle and that some other principles could have been in place at earlier stages of PWC. But what could be the alternative organizing principle then, responsible for the structuring of inflection less words into clauses?

One of the possible hypotheses would be that in archaic WC, topic prominence could have served as an organizing principle for the syntactic ordering of clausal constituents, which would resemble the situation in Chinese (but also in such other topic-prominent languages as Japanese or Tagalog). There are in fact some data coming from Circassian which some could regard as supporting the topicality hypothesis. Thus, Circassian, parallel to the preferred AOV constituent order, in some variants of the ergative construction requires the OAV order (the examples are from Kabardian):

- (4) constituent order AOV and cross-referencing order O-A-V
- | | | | |
|-----|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (a) | <i>λə-m</i> | <i>dək^wəzə-r</i> | <i>Ø-jə-theL-a-š</i> |
| | man-ERG | wolf-ABS | it-he-smother-PRF-CONF |
| | ‘The man strangled the wolf’ | | |
| (b) | <i>šak^we-m</i> | <i>šəhə-r</i> | <i>Ø-jə-wəč^w-a-š</i> |
| | hunter-ERG | deer-ABS | it-he-kill-PRF-CONF |
| | ‘The hunter killed the deer’ | | |

6 Klimov & Alekseev (1980, p. 51) also regard the group of labile verbs as archaic and as relics of the former active typology of WC, replaced later by the ergative one, with its importance on the transitive / intransitive dichotomy. Note that in WC, labile verbs do not form a close group, which is seen from the fact that they incorporated also later loans, cf. Abkhaz *a-wanta-ra* ‘ironing’ / ‘to iron X’, from Tu *ittü* ‘iron’.

- (5) OAV and O-A-V
- (a) $\lambda^{\text{a}}\text{-r}$ psa-m $\emptyset\text{-ja-theL-a-s}$
 man-ABS water-ERG him-it-smother-PRF-CONF
 'The man was drowned (by the water)'
- (b) $c^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{w}}\text{abza-r}$ šablE-m $\emptyset\text{-ja-wač}^{\text{c}}\text{-a-s}$
 woman-ABS lightning-ERG her-it-kill-PRF-CONF
 'The woman was killed by the lightning'

Analyzing cases in (4) and (5) (I added the example in (4b) for the sake of symmetry), Kumaxov (1989, p. 336-339) draws attention to the fact that the constituent order in (5a) and (5b) coincides with the arrangement of agreement markers within the ergative construction – obviously in violation of the standard *mirror* concord principle between the clausal constituents and the agreement markers. Kumaxov emphasizes that in (4) and (5) we are dealing with a neutral word order, which has more expressive alternative variants (4 – OAV, VOA, AVO; 5 – AOV, VOA, AVO). He explains the difference in the ordering of the constituents in (4) vs. (5) by the action of the pragmatic factor: in (4) the theme is the Agent, whereas in (5) the theme is the object. However, it remains unclear, what exactly are the criteria, which are responsible for the different treatment of patients in the examples (4a) and (4b), as opposed to (5a) and (5b).

Kumaxov remarks that in the ergative construction, the diachronic theme or topic could also be the logical subject, as observed in the construction OAV in the examples (4) and (5) above. This returns us, of course, to the much-debated discussion over whether or not the patient possesses high topicality in ergative languages. In his paper devoted to this issue, Tsunoda (1986), analysing examples from both ergative and accusative languages, argues that the agent, irrespective of the alignment type, is universally more topical than the patient. However, if the pronominal agreement markers in WC languages indeed reflect the old word order, which seems strongly to be the case, then we shall have to admit that in the Pre-PWC transitive clause it was the patient, rather than the agent, which enjoyed higher topicality status, by occupying the privileged first position in the sentence.

I agree with Kumaxov concerning the original *ergative* OAV constituent order in PWC. As to the modern Circassian examples adduced in (4) and (5), it is possible, however, to explain their OAV order by the animacy hierarchy factor: a man, even being a notional and grammatical patient, and exercising a zero level of control, still occupies a higher position in the animacy hierarchy than an inanimate entity affecting it, such as the river or the lightning. This seems to be a pan-West Caucasian pattern: in Adyghe, as my fieldwork proves, the situation is exactly the same as in the Kabardian examples given by Kumaxov, and the same is repeated in Abkhaz, where in the sentence with inanimate

agent and human patient, the preferred order is the placement of the Patient in the initial position':

- (6) constituent order AOV and cross-referencing order O-A-V
- (a) $A\text{-waj}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $a\text{-k}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}^{\text{z}}\text{ma}$ $\emptyset\text{-ja-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-man ART-wolf it-he-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The man killed the wolf'
- (b) $A\text{-k}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}^{\text{z}}\text{ma}$ $a\text{-waj}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-wolf ART-man 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The wolf killed the man'
- (7) OAV and O-A-V
- (a) $A\text{-waj}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $a\text{-zə}$ $d\text{-a-gə-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-man ART-water 3SG-it-take-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The man was drowned (by the water)'
- (b) $A\text{-ph}^{\text{w}}\text{əs}$ $a\text{-c}^{\text{c}}\text{la}$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'^{\text{8}}$
 ART-woman ART-tree 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The woman was killed by the tree'
- (c) $A\text{-ph}^{\text{w}}\text{əs}$ $a\text{-mac}^{\text{w}}\text{əs}$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-woman ART-lightning 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The woman was killed by the lightning'
- (d) $A\text{-waj}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $a\text{-maš}^{\text{c}}\text{əna}$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-man ART-car 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The car killed a man'
- (e) $A\text{-waj}^{\text{w}}\text{ə}$ $a\text{-t}^{\text{c}}\text{ok}'$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-man ART-current 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The electric current killed a man'

It is thus the animacy hierarchy that can explain the violation of the otherwise standard subject-first constituent order in both Circassian and Abkhaz; note that even in these cases the canonical *ergative* case marking and the O-A-V mirror concord of the agreement markers in (4), (5) (in Circassian), and (6), (7) (in Abkhaz) are being maintained.

But can it be that either topicality or animacy factors, as in the examples adduced above, be used to explain the OAV order in the pre-PWC ergative construction? The problem is, the OAV patterning of agreement markers in the ergative construction is universal and tolerates no exceptions: *any* patient marker occupies the left-most position (reflecting the older sententially initial position), and *any* agent marker – the right-most/verbal root-immediate position, irrespective of their referents' topicality or animacy status.

⁷ In Abkhaz, *d-* is the marker of the 3rd person human singular, and it does not distinguish the gender, while *j-* is the marker of the 3rd person singular non human.

⁸ The constituent order will be different if 'the tree' is the focus:

- (f) $A\text{-c}^{\text{c}}\text{la}$ $a\text{-ph}^{\text{w}}\text{əs}$ $ja\text{-lə-k}^{\text{w}}\text{-ha-n}$ $d\text{-a-š}^{\text{b}}\text{-}^{\text{b}}\text{-jt}'$
 ART-tree ART-woman it-her-top-fall-PLDF 3SG-it-kill-AOR-DYNFIN
 'The tree fell and killed a woman'

It is doubtful, therefore, that topicality or the animacy hierarchy could have played a role in the structuring of the pre-PWC word order. It seems that in the (near) absence of nominal and verbal morphology in the presumably basically isolating pre-PWC, the ergative principle, supposedly inherited by pre-PWC from its ancestor language, simply did not have any other possibility of expression (except probably for ablaut or tone distinctions) than by contrastive word order (representing thus cross-linguistically a rare example of an ergative language expressing ergativity by constituent order alone, see Dixon's remark above).

The main syntactic configurations were thus as follows:

- | | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. intransitive clause | S _{NOM} | (IO _{OBL}) | V |
| 2. transitive clause | O _{ABS} | (IO _{OBL}) | A _{ERG} V |

Even in modern WC languages, in certain cases contrastive word order can serve as the sole means of expressing the core grammatical relations. In Abkhaz this happens when both the agent and the patient belong to the same nominal class: if the agreement markers are the same for both agent and patient, the distinguishing role is taken over by the constituent order, and in this case the word-initial position must necessarily be occupied by the agent. The same is even truer of Circassian, which does not have gender distinctions:

- (8)
- | | | | |
|----|------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| a. | <i>psáše-m</i> | <i>šʷaLe-r</i> | <i>ə-lexʷə-ɣ</i> |
| | girl-ERG | boy-ABS | 3SG-SEE-PAST |
| | 'The girl saw the boy' | | |
| b. | <i>šʷaLe-m</i> | <i>psáše-r</i> | <i>ə-lexʷə-ɣ</i> |
| | boy-ERG | girl-ABS | 3SG-SEE-PAST |
| | 'The boy saw the girl' | | |

Interestingly, in riddles, proverbs and similar genres, Circassian optionally permits the zero marking of ergative and absolutive on core NPs (if they are indefinite), the word order remaining thus the only means to distinguish between the NPs:

- (9) Kabardian (Gezadze 1979, p. 126)
- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| <i>žem</i> | <i>laqʷ</i> | <i>šk'e</i> | <i>Ø-jə-wəčʷə-r.čʷə-m</i> |
| cow | leg | calf | it-it-kill-NEG |
| 'Cow-leg does not kill the calf' | | | |

However, all these Abkhaz and Circassian cases do not disturb the general principle, according to which the main grammatical roles are expressed by cross-referencing, and the constituent order in most cases plays no significant role. But the situation in pre-PWC, in which both verb and noun apparently lacked inflection, was quite different. The mere need to express the ergative/

absolutive alignment, i.e. purely grammatical considerations, could have overridden the seemingly universal higher topicality status of the agent, raising the patient, for the sake of the grammatical contrast/foregrounding, to the privileged sentence-initial position.⁹

We have thus in the history of WC languages a diachronic shift from a purely syntactic marking of ergativity – by contrastive constituent order alone¹⁰ – to its purely morphological expression by pronominal prefixation alone, which is still observed in Abkhaz, whereas Circassian and Ubykh developed also nominal inflection. The appearance of the latter is of later chronological periods; the fact that case markers in Circassian do not coincide materially with those in Ubykh testifies to their independent development in both languages. And, as examples above show, in certain cases the expression of the ergative vs. nominative alignment by purely syntactic means (i.e. by word order) is still observed in modern WC languages.

When later, during the early PWC period, personal pronouns were incorporated into the verbal form and started to express syntactic relations¹¹, the need to use contrastive word order, which in the case of the transitive clause violated the higher topicality status of the agent, became redundant.¹² This stimulated the shift of the order in the transitive clause from OAV to AOV, now perfectly in line with the (natural) high topicality status of the agent. However, even if the constituent order has changed, the principle of the contrasting arrangement of the prefixed agreement markers, which reflects the older word order, is still being preserved.

- ⁹ It should be mentioned here that Abdokov (1981, p. 57), on the contrary, spoke about the relative closeness to the verb as being the privileged position in pre-PWC; from this it would follow that in the OAV word order it is S/A, close to the predicate, which is in the privileged, or higher hierarchical position, rather than O; if we accept this, it would imply, as observed by B. G. Hewitt (personal communication), rather a nominative-accusative configuration of pre-PWC (by virtue of closeness of S and A to the verb).
- ¹⁰ See similar conclusions in Gezadze (1967, p. 165-166); (1971, p. 57).
- ¹¹ Gezadze (1971, p. 52-55) assumes that originally the WC verb was monopersonal, containing only the subject marker in the intransitive clause and only object marker in the transitive clause, as, for example, in modern Daghestanian languages, and only later the agent marker was also incorporated into the verb-form, thus changing the verbal structure and creating polypersonal verb-forms. She regards the absence of the agent marker in Abkhaz transitive converbs and transitive positive imperatives as vestiges of that epoch.
- ¹² The role of non-predicate words – substantives, adverbs, etc. – has also become significantly diminished. That is why Yakovlev & Ašxamaf (1941, p. 23-24) labelled all non-predicates in WC as *additional words*, in contrast to the predicates, which they regarded as *the main and basic parts of the sentence*.

Abbreviations

A	agent	NEG	negation
ABS	absolutive	NOM	nominative
ABX	abkhaz	NP	noun phrase
AD	adyghe	O	object
AOR	aorist	OBL	oblique
ART	article	PIDF	past indefinite
CCIRC	common Circassian	PRES	presence
CIRC	Circassian	PRF	perfect
CONF	confirmative	PWC	proto-West Caucasian
DYN	dynamic	S	subject
EC	East Caucasian	SH	Shapsygh
ERG	ergative	TU	Turkish
FIN	finite	UB	Ubykh
IO	indirect object	V	verb
KAB	Kabardian	WC	West Caucasian

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