Essais
de typologie
et de
linguistique
générale

Mélanges offerts
à Denis Creissels

Sous la direction
de Franck Floricic

Reconstructing proto-syntax:
the case of West Caucasian

Viacheslav Chirikba

The West Caucasian (WC), or Abkhazo-Adyghean languages, represent the
western branch of the North Caucasian linguistic family 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 con-
sonantal 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 (a 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 prefix slots), and the ergative/absolutive realised via the contrasting
ordering of agreement markers.

As to the word order parameters, the modern WC languages are charac-
terized, 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. Kalikov for valuable comments and suggestions.
2 The other branch is Nakh-Dagestanian or East Caucasian.
ESSAIS DE TYPOLOGIE ET DE LINGUISTIQUE GÉNÉRALE

Shapuygh Adyghe (Smeets 1984, p. 93)

(1) oš-'e m-nt<br>boy-č book-čn<br>he-b-see-n<br>

Ubykh (Durmish 1931, p. 21)

(2) a-kw-ç-n<br>boy-č book-čn<br>he-b-see-n<br>

Abkhaz

(3) oš-ç-<br>boy-č book-čn<br>he-b-see-n<br>

"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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word order vs. order of agreement markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) intransitive / absolutive: S-00-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) transitive / ergative: A-00-0-V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scheme 1

The absolutive agreement is characterized by the direct concord of agreement markers with their referrers (called by Allen 1956, p. 158, leaping 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? It has been put forward by Yakovlev & Abramov (1941, p. 23) that historically "the Adyghe predicate-verb represents in fact a whole sentence fused into one word. This fusion involved monosyllabic amor-

uous words/roots..." The same idea was repeated by Yakovlev (2000, 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 Leqzı 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>personal pronouns</th>
<th>agreement markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*ju</td>
<td>*jö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*gyö</td>
<td>*gyö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ng</td>
<td>*ngö</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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 TC type (see Chastain forthcoming).

4 In a similar way, the history of French agreement markers shows how Latin independent deictic pronoun se became transformed into a clitic personal pronoun s’est, il s’est... (see Danford, and further, in modern non-standard French, into an agreement marker Même, d’est venu, where it is bound to the verb and does not express gender (cited from Hopper & Thompson 1993, p. 17).
relative order of clausal constituents. The S(O)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-(O)-V
   (b) transitive clause: O-(O)-A-V

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word order</th>
<th>order of agreement markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>S-(O)-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>O-(O)-A-V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 ADV, 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 contrast between the clausal arguments and the cross-referencing markers in the transitive clause and the leap-frog contrast 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 agglutinative 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 fulfills 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,

transitivity itself becomes an elusive concept. See, for instance, such typically isolating language as Classical Chinese, where the intuitive classification of verbs like "to kill" and "to come" as "transitive" vs. "intransitive" is complicated 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’s ’to go’ (tr.) vs. k’s ’to go a distance’ (tr.); the vowels e/a serve to distinguish intransitive vs. transitive variants; Abkhaz pa-r ’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.

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 OAV constituent order, in some variants of the ergative construction requires the OAV order (the examples are from Kabardian):

4. constituent order ADV and cross-referencing order O-A-V

   | (a) | λ’-m | da-[x] | 0-x-
   | man-x | wolf-x | it-be-another-pers-x
   "The man strangled the wolf"

   | (b) | 0-x-
   | hak’a-x | do-y-
   | hunter-x | deer-x | it-be-kill-x
   "The hunter killed the deer"
(5) OAV et O-A-V

(a)  A-waj10 a-ji-y3-mq3
    man-GEN 3sB-mortal-3SG
    'The man was killed by the lightning'

(b)  A-3a-yq3 ma-
    man-3SG kill-3SG
    'The man was killed by the lightning'

Analyzing cases in (4) and (5) (I added the example in (4b) for the sake of symmetry), Kumaxov (1989, 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 (A - OAV, VOA, AV; S - ADV, VOA, AV). He explains the difference in the ordering of the constituents in (4) vs. (5) by the action of the pragmatic factors: 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), analyzing 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 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
It is doubtless, 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. Dixon’s remark above).

The main syntactic configurations were thus as follows:

1. Intransitive clause $S_{an} \rightarrow (O_{an}) \rightarrow v$
2. Transitive clause $O_{an} \rightarrow (S_{an}) \rightarrow A_{an} \rightarrow v$

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) Atygby

a. $\text{g} \text{d} \text{a} \text{g} \text{b} \text{u} \text{w} \text{a} \text{h} \text{e} \text{s} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{a} \text{w} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y}$
   “The girl saw the boy”

b. $\text{g} \text{d} \text{a} \text{g} \text{b} \text{u} \text{w} \text{a} \text{h} \text{e} \text{s} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{a} \text{w} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y}$
   “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) Xazar (Gencadze 1979, p. 126)

$\text{g} \text{e} \text{d} \text{a} \text{g} \text{b} \text{u} \text{w} \text{a} \text{h} \text{e} \text{s} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{a} \text{w} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y} \text{b} \text{a} \text{y}$
“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/
Abbreviations

A agent  NEG negation
ABS absolutive  NOM nominative
AKX abkhaz  NP noun phrase
AD adyge  O object
AOR aorist  OBL oblique
ART article  PDR past indefinite
CCIRC common Circassian  PRES presence
CIRC Circassian  PERF perfect
CONF confirmative  PWC proto-West Caucasian
DYN dynamic  s subject
EC East Caucasian  SH ش paspasgh
ERG ergative  TU Turkish
FIN finite  UB ubykh
IO indirect object  V verb
KAB Kabardian  WC West Caucasian

References