

# Ergativity in East Caucasian

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# Avar

With an intransitive verb:

- (1) a. *was w-us:-ana*  
boy M.SG-come.back-PST  
'The boy came back.'
- b. *jas j-us:-ana*  
girl F.SG-come.back-PST  
'The girl came back.'

With a transitive verb:

- (2) a. *was-as: jas j-ec:-ana*  
boy-ERG girl F.SG-come.back-PST  
'The boy praised the girl.'
- b. *jas-at: was w-ec:-ana*  
girl-ERG boy M.SG-come.back-PST  
'The girl praised the boy.'

# Archi

With an intransitive verb:

- (3) a. *dija*                      *w-akdi*  
father.ABS              M.SG-leave.PST  
'Father went away.'
- b. *buwa*                      *d-akdi*  
mother.ABS              F.SG-leave.PST  
'Mother went away.'

With a transitive verb:

- (4) a. *buwa-mu*              *dija*                      *o-w-ka*  
mother-ERG              father.ABS              bring<M.SG>.PST  
'Mother led Father.'
- b. *dija-mu*                      *buwa*                      *o-r-ka*  
father-ERG                      mother.ABS              bring<F.SG>.PST  
'Father led Mother.'

# Ergativity

Absolutive vs. Ergative

**Absolutive** (case, or controller of agreement, etc.)

- subject of an intransitive verb
- direct object of a transitive verb

**Ergative**

- subject of a transitive verb

**Absolutive** controls the number/gender agreement at the clause level (Marina Chumakina's 2020 lecture; Maria Polinsky's December 29 lecture)

# Other uses of Ergative

## Instrument:

Bagvalal

(5) *bes<sup>w</sup>an-d qiq<sup>w</sup>ani* ‘(he) sawed (it) through with a knife-ERG’

## Cause:

Archi

(6) *libχkul-li jalt’an* ‘(he) blushed with shame-ERG’

## Time:

Avar

(7) *co q’o-jat:* ‘one day-OBL.ERG’

## Other uses of Absolutive (typical for Nominative)

### Nominal predicate:

Tsakhur

- (8) *malharram jugna zurnači wo-r*  
Maharram.ABS good zurna.player cop-I  
'Maharram is a good zurna player.'

### Existential and possessive clauses:

Lak

- (9) *Kazbek-lu-l hunar b-ur*  
Kazbek-O-GEN talent.ABS III-COP  
'Kazbek has a talent.'

## Other uses of Absolutive (typical for Nominative)

### **Vocative:**

Bezhta

(10) *kid*, *χisλ'ak-na*

daughter.ABS morning.become-EVD

‘Daughter, it is morning!’

### **Appositions and parts of compounds:**

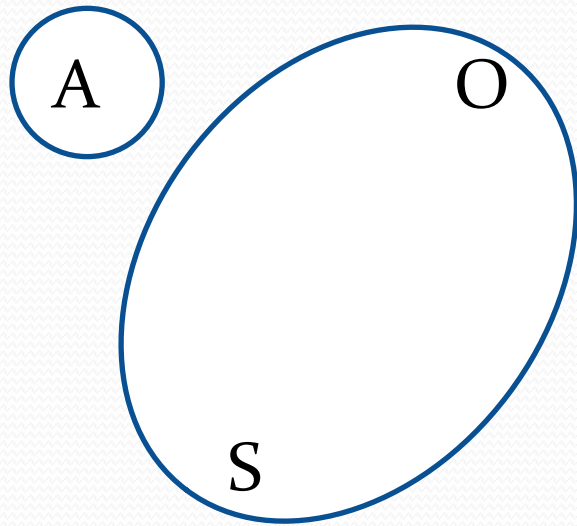
Khwarshi

(11) *išu-obu-t'-es* *ãq*

mother(.ABS)-father-OBL-GEN<sub>1</sub> house

‘parents’ house’

# The ergative-absolutive alignment



transitive verb, ergative subject (A),  
absolutive object (O)

intransitive verb, absolutive subject (S)



# The earliest approach

“In Chechen, there are no active transitive verbs, only middle and passive ones” [Uslar 1888: 64]

“In Avar, there is no active verb *to love*, but only the passive *to be loved*” [Uslar 1889: 122]



# Ergative recognized as Passive

Classical Tibetan (Sino-Tibetan, [von Gabelentz 1861])

Greenlandic Eskimo (Eskimo-Aleut, [Thalbitzer 1911])

Kāshmīrī (Indo-Iranian, [Grierson 1919])

Basque (isolate, [Schuchardt 1921])

A **non-paradigmatic** understanding of Passive, with no Active counterpart.

In fact, some Passive constructions have none:

The analytical resultative passive in Russian:

(12) *V pjat' časov ofis byl vse ešče otkryt.*

in five hours office was still opened

‘At five o’clock, the office was still open.’

Dirr, Adolf. 1928. *Einführung in das Studium der kaukasischen Sprachen*. Leipzig: Verlag der Asia Major. S.75-76.



## The famous passage coining the new term

“Man sieht, das Problem ist äußerst verwickelt, und ich erkläre mich außer Stande, es zu lösen. Statt von passiver Konstruktion zu sprechen werde ich die Ausdrücke **Ergativ**-Konstruktion (das log. Subjekt steht im Erg.)... und Nominativ-Konstruktion sprechen.”

“It is obvious that the problem is extremely complex and I declare myself unable to solve it. Instead of speaking of passive construction, I will use the terms **ergative** construction (the logical subject is in the erg.) ... and nominative construction.”

A rare example in linguistics, when a successful and still generally accepted concept has been introduced on the basis of intuition alone, and the author explicitly stated that he could not substantiate it with analysis.

Dirr claims, in fact, that the construction is not passive because it is obvious that it is not passive.

The term “**absolute** case” occurs first probably in [Thalbitzer 1911]

Lack of voice oppositions and of Passive in particular is one of the fundamental typological characteristics of East Caucasian [Klimov, Alekseev 1980: 239]

# Isn't it Passive, after all?

It seems that Dirr and his many followers are right, it is not. By most definitions, B is a Passive counterpart of A, and A an Active counterpart of B, if A and B denote the same situation and what is Subject in A is not Subject in B (in an Active vs. Passive pair, the correspondence between roles and grammatical relations is switched [Xolodovič (ed.) 1974; Siewierska 1984]):

*A: the enemy destroyed the city*

vs.

*B: the city was destroyed by the enemy*

There is **no active counterpart** to the Ergative construction in EC.

A different approach to voice [Fox, Hopper (ed.) 1994; Langacker 2006]:

Passive is a (peripheral) construction in which Agent is “de-focused”, i.e. obtains a less prominent rank in discourse (“the agent’s identity is unknown or irrelevant”).

In EC, the participant marked with Ergative is not “de-focused” in this sense.

Avar

two equally prominent characters in a folktale  
 (“Wolf and Fox”):

(13) *bac'i-c:a žindir t'anč'i kir aralin hiq'arab*

wolf-ERG its cubs where were asked

*mex:-at:, c'ara-c:a abun bugo žindir anir rugin*

time-LOC fox-ERG said AUX its here are

‘When Wolf asked where its cubs were, Fox said that they were at its place.’



# Peripheral “Passive”

If it is Passive, it is a Passive counterpart to Ergative:

Avar

- (14) *di-q:a* (\**di-c:a*) *ʕeč*                      *k<sup>w</sup>ana-n ana*  
I-POSS (\*I-ERG) apple.ABS eat-CVB go.PST  
‘It happened somehow that I ate the apple’

known since [Magomedova 2006]

## Ergative with complex verbs

The verbal vocabulary expands mainly via combinations of **non-inflected**, often borrowed, elements with **light** (semi-auxiliary) **verbs** with meanings like ‘do’, ‘be(come)’, ‘give’, ‘bring’, ‘leave’, ‘say’ etc. The resulting meaning is sometimes compositional and sometimes idiomatic; phonological and grammatical integration varies.

Morphological derivations like

Avar *k<sup>w</sup>ač* ‘cold’ → *k<sup>w</sup>ač-a-ze* ‘feel cold’; *t’eh* ‘flower’ → *t’eh-a-ze* ‘blossom’ are rare (or less noticeable)

## Ergative with complex verbs

- (15) a. Tsez *ħukmu* ‘decision, judgment’ + *boda* ‘do’ →  
*ħukmu boda* ‘pass a judgment’
- b. Lezgi *azad* ‘free’ + *xun* ‘become’ → *azad xun* ‘free oneself’
- c. Archi *t:an* ‘water’ + *as* ‘do’ → *t:an as* ‘swim’

With transitive light verbs, Ergative is used:

Archi

- (16) *za-ri*     *t:an*     *a-rši*     *i*  
I-ERG     water     do-CVB     AUX  
‘I am swimming.’

## Ergative with integrated non-inflected elements

Lezgi

- (17) a. *ruš-a χürekar har juq'uz hazur i-jizwa*  
girl-ERG food every day ready do-PRS  
b. \**ruš-a χürekar hazur har juq'uz i-jizwa*  
girl-ERG food ready every day do-PRS  
'The girl cooks food every day.'

[Kerimova 2020]

Partly incorporated Absolutive:

- (18) *malar-i sal rug aw-una*  
cattle-ERG vegetable.garden dust do-PST  
'The cattle ravaged (turned to dust) the vegetable garden.'

## Ideophonic verbs: Archi

Combinations with *bos* ‘say’

Fully integrated stems: *ziz-bos* ‘buzz’, *χu-bus* ‘drink’, *aInša-bos* ‘sneeze’; the ideophonic element is ‘invisible’ for syntax

(19) *t’ant’ ziz-war*

bee.ABS buzz-say.PRS

‘A bee buzzes’

(20) *za-ri diq’ χu-bu*

I-ERG soup.ABS drink-say.PST

‘I ate the soup.’

8 less integrated stems, e.g. *λił-bos* ‘hiss’, *tu-bus* ‘spit’:

(21) *jaIt’i-li zat:i-k λił-bo*

snake-ERG I-LOC hiss-say.PST

‘The snake hissed at me.’

## Ideophonic verbs: Lak

With an animate argument, Ergative:

(22) *č:it-ul malw ukunni*

cat-ERG meow-say.PST

‘The cat meowed.’

With an inanimate argument, Absolutive:

(23) *granata p'alq' ukunni*

grenade.ABS explode say.PST

‘The grenade exploded.’

## Ideophonic verbs: Bezhta

With an animate argument, Ergative:

- (24) *is-t'i*                      *hic-λo-jo*  
brother-OBL.ERG sneeze-say-PST  
'Brother sneezed.'

With an inanimate argument, Absolutive:

- (25) *okko*      *c'im-λo-jo*  
coin.ABS jingle-say-PST  
'The coin jingled.'

# Obliterated elements that occur only as stems of complex verbs

Archi

(26) rig abas

X + do

‘find’

Khwarshi

(27) веку аһа

X raise

‘rejoice’

Lak

(28) walk’ učın

X say

‘sway, reel’

Lezgi

(29) terg awun

X do

‘ruin’



## Split S in Batsbi

With 1 and 2 person pronouns, the Nakh prefixal  
“Ergative” denotes Agent, and “Absolutive” Patient

(30) a. *so wože*

I fell (involuntarily)

b. *a-s wože*

ERG-I fell (deliberately)

## Split-S in Tabasaran with person/number agreement

(31) *kurc<sup>w</sup>ura-za-wu*

beat-1sgA-2sgP

‘I beat you.’

(32) a. *aldakura-zu*

fall.down-1sgP

‘I fall down.’

b. *urgura-zu*

burn-1sgP

‘I burn.’

c. *kc:<sup>w</sup>uxura-zu*

slip-1sgP

‘I slip.’

(33) a. *allqura-za*

laugh-1sgA

‘I laugh’

b. *kc:<sup>w</sup>uxura-za*

slip-1sgA

‘I skate.’

# Hierarchical person-number agreement

Person&number agreement in the verb

Lak, Dargic, Tabasaran, Udi, Batsbi

to a lesser degree, in some Avar-Andic languages

1 and 2 persons > 3 person, with many intricate details

Nina Sumbatova's December 22 lecture

Lak

(34) a. *na ga at:a-ra*

'I beat(-1SG) him'

b. *gana-l na at:a-ra*

'He(-ERG) beats(-1SG) me.'

c. *gana-l ga at:a-j*

'He(-ERG) beats(-3SG) him.'

## Biabsolutive construction

A cleft-like construction (cf. *It is John who left*) with analytical verb forms

Archi

(35) *buwa-mu*     $\chi^w$ *alli*    *b-a-rši*    *b-i*  
mother-ERG bread.ABS III-do-CVB III-AUX

(36) *buwa*     $\chi^w$ *alli*    *b-a-rši*    *d-i*  
mother.ABS bread.ABS III-do-CVB II-AUX

The biabsolutive construction (36) topicalizes A and marks the VP with focus ('What is mother doing?')

[Kibrik 1975]

## “Accusative” marking in Udi

A tripartite alignment system. Personal pronouns, human proper names and definite nonhuman NPs are marked with Dative, not Absolutive, as direct objects:

(37) *alík-en šuje-ne ak:-i*

Alik-ERG bear-3SG see-AOR

‘Alik saw a bear.’

(38) *be jan ak:-i te-jan alík-a*

today we see-AOR NEG-1PL Alik-DAT

‘We didn’t see Alik today.’

[Ganenkov 2008: 26]

## Lack of Ergative/Absolutive contrast with 1 and 2 person pronouns

(39) Bezhta

Ergative=Absolutive *do* 'I', *mi* 'you (sg.)', *ile* 'we', *miže* 'you (pl.)'

(40) Khwarshi

Absolutive *da* 'I', *ma* 'you (sg.)', *ila* 'we', *miža* 'you (pl.)'

Ergative *de* 'I', *m-i* 'you (sg.)', *il-i* 'we', *miž-i* 'you (pl.)';

*-i* is an ergative marker

## “Role-dominated” languages?

The long-standing problem: ergative-absolutive alignment disagrees with structure (in terms of grammatical relations, or hierarchy of phrasal categories)

- No passive voice
  - the roles are mapped more or less uniformly
- Very few, if any at all, grammatical characteristics, other than case and gender/number agreement, show asymmetrical orientation like Subject vs. Object, Ergative vs. Absolutive, NP vs. VP... [Kibrik 1979; 1980]

## Lack of orientation: reflexive pronouns

Khwarshi

(41) a. *rasul-i is-i žuč q'w arid uwā-te*

Rasul-ERG self-ERG self.ABS harm do-NEG

‘Rasul does no harm to himself’

b. *rasul is-i žuč q'w arid uwā-te*

Rasul.ABS self-ERG self.ABS harm do-NEG

‘Rasul does no harm to himself’, lit.: “Himself<sub>i</sub> does no harm to Rasul<sub>i</sub>.”



## Lack of orientation: ellipsis

Bezhta

(42) *öže ist'i-q-na goc'oq-na \_\_\_ eļ'e-rö*  
boy.ABS brother-LOC-ADD look-CVB go.away-AOR  
'The boy looked at his brother and (//his brother) left.'

Khwarshi

(43) *už-a es-na žik'-na \_\_\_ ičč-a*  
boy-ERG brother-ADD beat-CVB run.away-AOR  
'The boy beat his brother and (//his brother) ran away.'

## Lack of orientation: ellipsis

Lak

(44) a. [ \_\_\_ *ninu*     *d-uruč:in-širul*]     *na u:k'u-ra*  
(I) mother.ABS FEM.SG-guard-PURP I came-1SG  
'I came to guard (my) mother.'

b. [*nit:i-l*     \_\_\_     *uruč:in-širul*]     *na u:k'u-ra*  
mother-ERG (me) MASC.SG.guard-PURP I came-1SG  
'I came to be guarded by (my) mother [lit.: (for) my mother to guard me].'

# Linear precedence may be sufficient for a NP to be a pronouns' antecedent

Khwarshi

(45) *aw-si*    *uža-lo*    *ĩdu*    **žu**  
this-OBL boy-GEN2    home.LOC **he.ABS**  
*televizor-qol*    *gic'a-na*    *goŕe*  
TVset-LOC    look-CVB    AUX

'In this boy's<sub>i</sub> room, he<sub>i</sub> is watching TV.'

against [Reinhart 1983]:

(46) a. *Near him<sub>i</sub>, Dan<sub>i</sub> saw a snake.*

b. *\*Near Dan<sub>i</sub>, he<sub>i</sub> saw a snake.*

Linear precedence may be sufficient for a NP to be a pronouns' antecedent

Khwarshi

(47) *muḥammad-es mašina is-i miḡejk'-a*  
Muhammad-GEN<sub>1</sub> car.ABS **he-ERG** drive-AOR  
'He<sub>i</sub> drove Muhammad's<sub>i/j</sub> car.'

## Cases of subject oriented anaphora can be found

Avar

Reflexive:

(48) a. *rasul-ic:a žiwgo sijaħ-alda q<sup>w</sup>-ana*

Rasul-ERG **self**.ABS list-LOC write-AOR

‘Rasul wrote himself down in the list.’

b. \**rasul žin-c:ago sijaħ-alda q<sup>w</sup>-ana*

Rasul.ABS **self**-ERG list-LOC write-AOR

\*‘Himself wrote down Rasul in the list’

## No grammatical relations?

[Kibrik 1980]: in the East Caucasian languages, morphosyntactic marking of arguments directly maps (hyper)roles, and there is no need in an intermediate level of grammatical relations, cf. [Van Valin, Foley 1980]:

role-dominated languages

Lakhota, Tunica, Enga, Walbiri...

No grammatical relations → no asymmetries

## No grammatical relations?

There are some subject-object asymmetries in anaphora like (33);

Lexical conversives (different mappings with the same roles):

(49) a. Archi *š:ubus* ‘buy’ vs. *oʒas* ‘sell’

b. Bezhta *jizal* ‘win’ vs. *jüwäl* ‘lose’ and the like.

Conversives with light verbs:

(50) Avar

*dandeč:’ej hab-ize* resistance do-INF ‘offer resistance (to someone)’ vs.

*dandeč:’ej bix:-ize* resistance see-INF ‘meet resistance (from someone)’

# Prominent arguments vs. other arguments and adjuncts (Lyutikova 2021)

Khwarshi

**Group prominence:** Subject & high-ranking Objects

NP in Absolute (Intrans Subject, Trans Object) & Subjects in oblique cases (Ergative, Dative) vs. Other (non-Absolute objects, NPs in postpositional phrases etc.)

- antecede anaphors (reflexives and reciprocals)
- cannot antecede coargument high-ranked pronominals
- in some constructions, e.g. nominalized clauses, can be replaced with Genitive (Lyutikova 2021)
- cannot be marked with Attributive, the form that produces modifiers (Lyutikova 2021)



# Prominent arguments vs. other arguments and adjuncts

Khwarshi

Anaphora, High-ranked Dative Experiencer Subject:

(51) *kad iti-l j-ajk-a*

girl.ABS **she-DAT** FEM.SG-видеть-AOR

‘She saw the girl.’

‘\*The girl saw herself.’

Low-ranked applicative Dative Object:

(52) *kand-i iti-l čorpa lajl-a*

girl-ERG **she-DAT** soup.ABS cook-AOR

‘The girl cooked her(self) a soup.’

Low enough to be anteceded by Subject in Ergative

# Prominent arguments vs. other arguments and adjuncts

Khwarshi nominalizations (Lyutikova 2021):

High-ranking Experiencer Dative Subject:

(53) *di-l goqq-a [pat'imate-l//pat'imate-s*  
I-DAT be.glad-AOR [Patimat-DAT//GEN  
*iša jak<sup>w</sup>a-nu]*  
mother.ABS see-MSD]

'I am glad that Patimat saw Mother.'

Low-ranking Recipient Dative Object:

(54) *di-l goqq-a [iša-t'i pat'imate-l//\*pat'imate-s*  
I-DAT be.glad-AOR mother-ERG [Patimat-DAT//\*-GEN  
*tiλ-nu kunta]*  
give-MSD dress.ABS]

'I am glad that Mother gave Patimat the dress.'

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