Reciprocal binding and syntactic ergativity in Adyghe (Northwest Caucasian)

1 Overview. A long-standing question in the research on syntactically ERG languages concerns the range of phenomena that draws a distinction between ABS vs. ERG arguments (Polinsky 2007; Deal 2016; a.o.). Syntactic ergativity is well-documented in A̅-phenomena. However, Ershova (2019, 2023) claims that reciprocal binding in Adyghe is revealing of the ERG/ABS alignment that characterizes this language (Ershova 2019, 2021). In Adyghe, a prefix closer to the stem crossreferences the ERG subject, while the outermost prefix crossreferences the ABS object (1a). In a reciprocal sentence, the antecedent is crossreferenced not by the ERG prefix, but by the ABS one, and the reciprocal *ze-* replaces the prefix that crossreferences the highest argument (1b). Thus, a reciprocal sentence in Adyghe looks as though its underlying configuration is *Each other saw us*, where an ERG anaphor is bound by an ABS antecedent.

(1) a. ŝʷə-t-λeʁʷə-ʁ
2PL.ABS-1PL.ERG-see-PST
'We saw you.'

b. te-ze-re-λeʁʷə-ʁ
1PL.ABS-RECP-INSTR-see-PST
'We saw each other.' (Ershova 2023)

Ershova (op. cit.) argues that this is indeed the case, but the ABS antecedent moves from the object position to a position where it c-commands the reciprocal in the subject/ERG position. This analysis follows the High ABS view of syntactic ergativity, whereby the ERG/ABS distinction *wrt* e.g. A̅-phenomena is due to ABS occupying a position c-commanding ERG. Ershova concludes, thus, that reciprocal binding sentences in Adyghe are revealing of the fact that this is a syntactically ergative language.

(2) [TP ANTECEDENT-ABS [vP RECP-ERG see *t*]]
② *binding*
① *High* ABS *movement*

This High ABS analysis rests on assumptions that raise theoretical and empirical concerns (§2). I propose instead an analysis that is based on the (in)ability of a nominal to participate in Case Competition, concluding that reciprocal binding in Adyghe is not informative of syntactic ergativity in Adyghe.

2 Against High ABS. Ershova's (op. cit.) analysis rests on unconventional assumptions. First, as seen in (2), the reciprocal is base-generated above its antecedent, with binding achieved only *after* movement. While A-movement can create new antecedents for binding, this is not a necessary condition. One may wonder why this would have to be the case in (1b). Indeed, reciprocal binding in Adyghe does not always require movement: in (3), the antecedent is the ERG causer and the reciprocal, the causee (OBL in Adyghe). The former binds the latter independently of the High ABS movement of 'goods.'

(3) te š'eʁen-xe-r Ø-**ze**-re-d-[ʁe]-š'efə-ž'ə-ʁe-x
1PL good-PL-ABS 3PL.ABS-RECP-INSTR-1PL.ERG-CAUS-buy-RE-PST-3PL.ABS
'We made each other buy goods.' **RECP** > [CAUS] (Letuchiy 2013)

Second: relatedly, Ershova maintains that High ABS movement (2) is required only when the antecedent is ABS. How would the Adyghe grammar enforce the correlation between case and binding? If binding is possible without movement (3), why is this option not taken in (1b), which would result in an ERG antecedent binding an ABS reciprocal? Third, this analysis predicts that High ABS movement of the antecedent should be able to bind any reciprocal on its movement path. (4) illustrates a three-argument configuration, where the reciprocal is bound after the High ABS movement (5).

(4) tə-ze-f-jə-š'a-ʁ
1PL.ABS-RECP-BEN-3SG.ERG-bring-PST
'She brought us to each other.' (Ershova 2023)

(5) [TP *us*-ABS [vP *she*-ERG bring *t* RECP-BEN]]
② *binding*
① *High* ABS *movement*
(based on Ershova 2023)

In (6), the ERG subject is replaced by another reciprocal. Because it is c-commanded by the antecedent after High ABS movement (7), binding is expected to go through, contrary to fact.

(6) *tə-**ze**-f-**ze**-š'a-ʁ
1PL.ABS-RECP-BEN-3SG.ERG-bring-PST
Lit.: 'Each other brought us to each other.'
(author's elicitation)

(7) [TP *us*-ABS [vP RECP-ERG bring *t* RECP-BEN]]
② *binding*
② *binding*
① *High* ABS *movement*

Given these shortcomings, an alternative analysis is called for.

3 Against valency-decreasing. An analysis that does not resort to High ABS movement is proposed by Letuchiy (2007), who capitalizes on the fact that sentences like (1b) appear to be intransitive, since the subject is ABS. The author argues that this is the result of intransitivization. However, adding to observations made by Ershova (op. cit.), *ze-* does not exhibit the behavior of a valency-decreasing morpheme.

Irrespective of the order of causativization and reciprocalization, the relative order of these prefixes is always the same: compare (3) and (8). This fixed order does obey not the Mirror Principle (Baker 1985), as is expected of valency-changing morphemes. Further, several affixes can intervene between *ze-* and the stem (8), even though valency-changing morphemes tend to be adjacent to it (Haspelmath et al., 2004).

(8) [&P čətəwə-m-re ha-m-re] Ø-**ze**-re-z-ʁe-λeʁʷə-ʁe-x
cat-OBL-COORD dog-OBL-COORD 3PL.ABS-RECP-INSTR-1SG.ERG-CAUS-see-PERF-PL
'I made the cat and the dog see each other.' CAUS > **RECP** (Letuchiy 2014)

4 Proposal. I assume that a reciprocal is uniformly base-generated below its antecedent and that binding takes place as soon as possible, at the *v*P-level, before High ABS movement (Brodkin & Royer 2024). Assuming a Dependent Case Theory (DCT; Marantz 1991), I propose that the antecedent of a reciprocal in Adyghe can be marked ABS (instead of ERG) because the reciprocal is unable to be a Case Competitor. The latter cannot be assigned dependent ERG and must be assigned unmarked ABS instead. This proposal is motivated by the similarities between (1b) and Pseudo-Noun-Incorporation in Niuean (Massam 2001), where the subject of a transitive verb is also marked ABS, instead of ERG:

(9) Takafaga [**ika**] tūmau nī [a ia].
hunt fish always EMPH ABS he 'He is fish-hunting.' (Massam 2001)

I restate Massam's analysis of (9) in DCT terms: the PNI-ed object is deficient and, hence, unable to be a Case Competitor for the subject. In Adyghe, an ordinary object act as a Case Competitor for the subject (1a), which is then assigned Dependent ERG (10). However, when the object is a reciprocal (1b), Case Competition is not possible, so the subject/antecedent is assigned unmarked ABS (11). The result is an intransitive-looking morphosyntax without an intransitivization operation (cf. §3).

(10) [*v*P SUBJ-ERG see OBJ-ABS]
✓*competition*

(11) [*v*P ANTECEDENT-ABS see RECP-INSTR]
binding; ✗*competition*

Bringing the analogy to its logical conclusion, while the PNI-ed object is licensed by adjacency with the verb (Levin 2015), I propose that the reciprocal is licensed by Last Resort assignment of INSTR(umental) case (see the INSTR- that immediately follows the reciprocal in (1b)/(3)/(8)). Indeed, INSTR is prohibited when the verb that selects the reciprocal is able to assign lexical case to its object (e.g. 'worry'):

(12) te ʂ'ənes tə-ze-(***re-**)fe-gʷəmeč'-əž'ə
1PL still 1PL.ABS-RECP-(*INSTR-)BEN-worry-PRES
'We're still worried about each other.' (author's elicitation)

That case competition is responsible for the peculiar morphosyntax of reciprocal binding sentences in Adyghe is provided by the fact that, if a case competitor is provided to the reciprocal's antecedent, it can be assigned ERG. This configuration obtains in causative sentences such as (3), where the antecedent is assigned ERG via competition with the underlying theme (13), voiding the reciprocal's inability to be a case competitor. (In (8), the reciprocal is the underlying theme and is assigned Last Resort INSTR. The causee is a case competitor for the ERG in the causer and is subsequently assigned unmarked ABS.)

(13) [CauseP ANTECEDENT-ERG CAUSE [*v*P RECP-INSTR buy goods-ABS]
✓*competition*

Because this analysis does not relate reciprocal binding to High ABS movement, it correctly predicts that (6) is ungrammatical. (14) shows that the ABS argument of 'bring' c-commands the benefactive.

(14) aš' te tə-zə-f-jə-š'a-ʁ
3SG 1PL 1PL.ABS-REFL-BEN-3SG.ERG-bring-PST
'She brought us to ourselves.' (author's elicitation)

(15) [*v*P *she*-ERG *us*-ABS bring REFL-BEN]
binding

The representation of (6) would then be as in (16), a run-of-the-mill Condition A violation.

(16) [*v*P RECP-ERG *us*-ABS bring RECP-BEN]
✗*binding*; *binding*

5 Conclusion. I proposed an analysis of reciprocal binding in Adyghe that is based on well supported assumptions about Case Competition, concluding that reciprocal binding is not informative of syntactic ergativity in this language. These results enforce Brodkin & Royer's (op. cit.) conclusion that High ABS syntax is consistent with the absence of ERG anaphors. Reciprocal binding in Adyghe takes place at the *v*P level, independently of High ABS movement. The appearance of ERG reciprocals in this language is illusory: it is a byproduct of the case properties of the reciprocal.