What it means to be a subject

Evidence from a syntactically ergative language

Ksenia Ershova

Stanford University

7 February 2020

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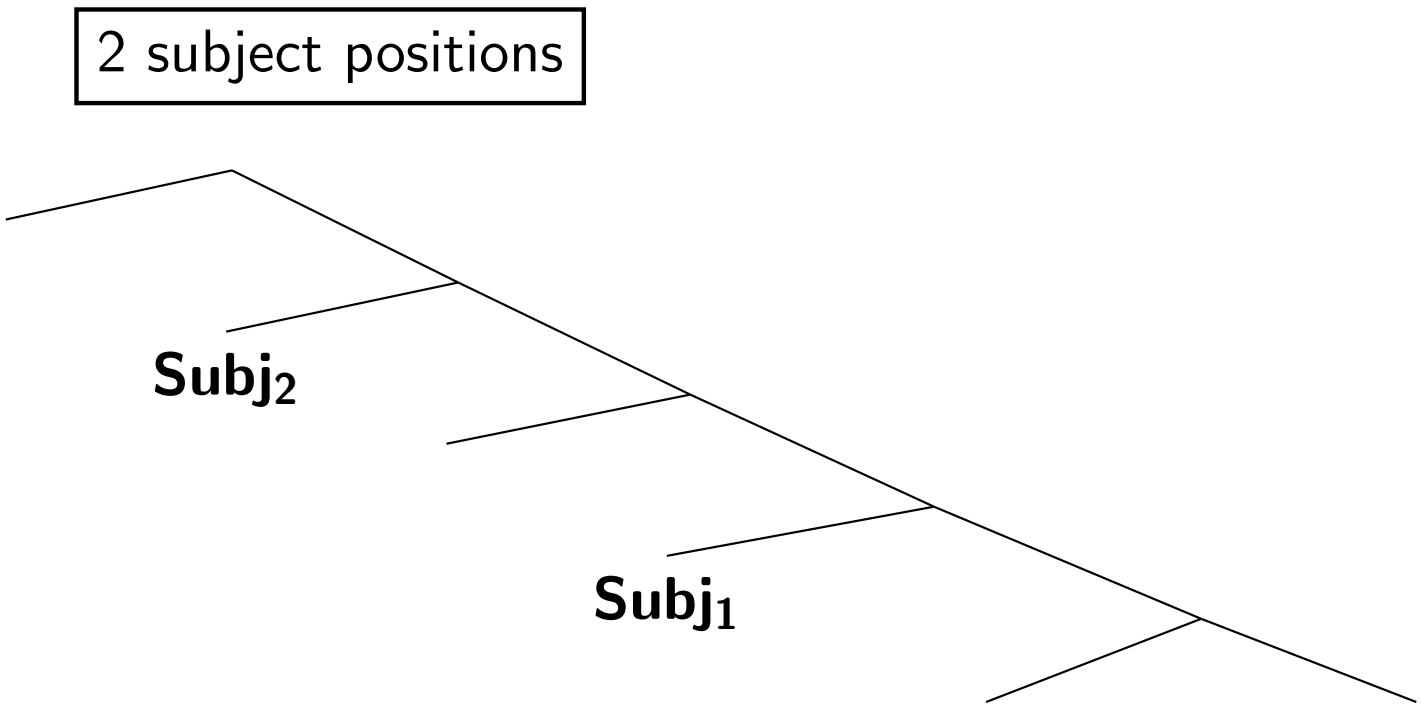

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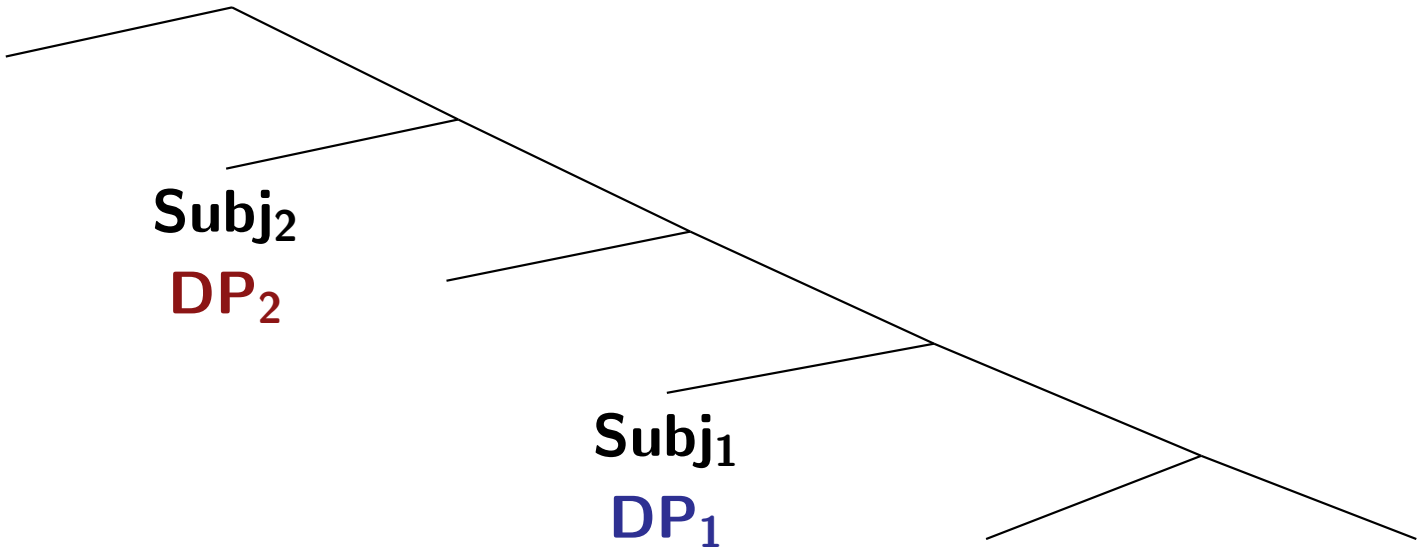
2 subject positions + occupied by 2 distinct nominals



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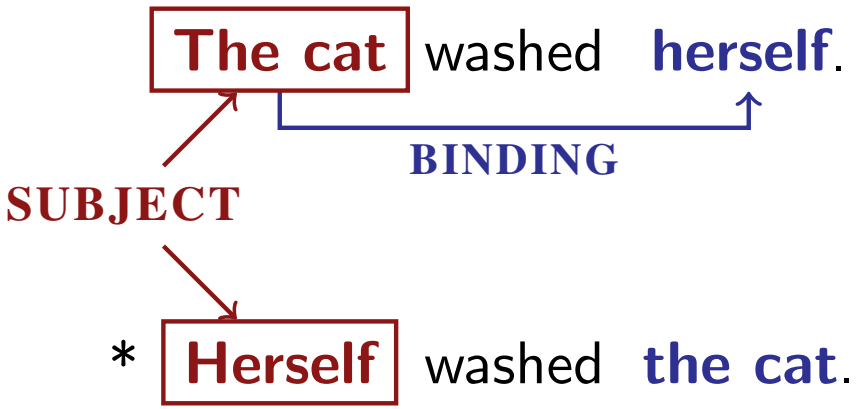

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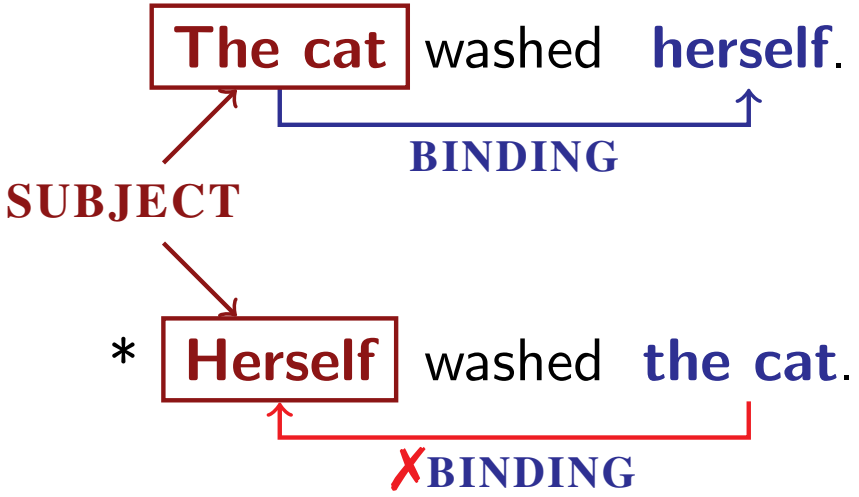

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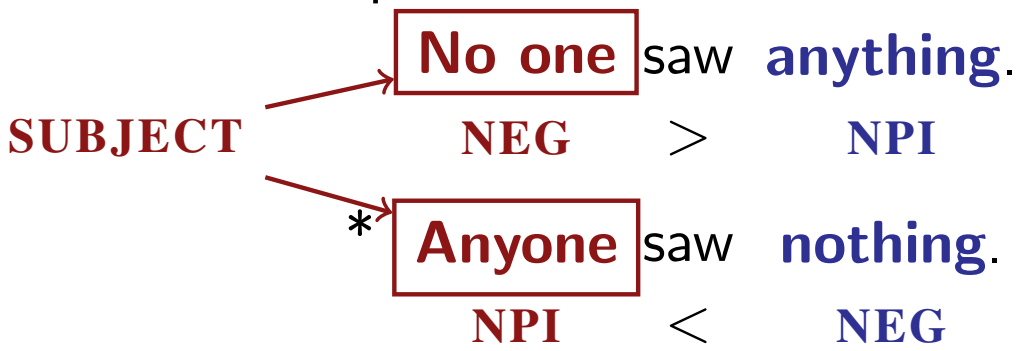

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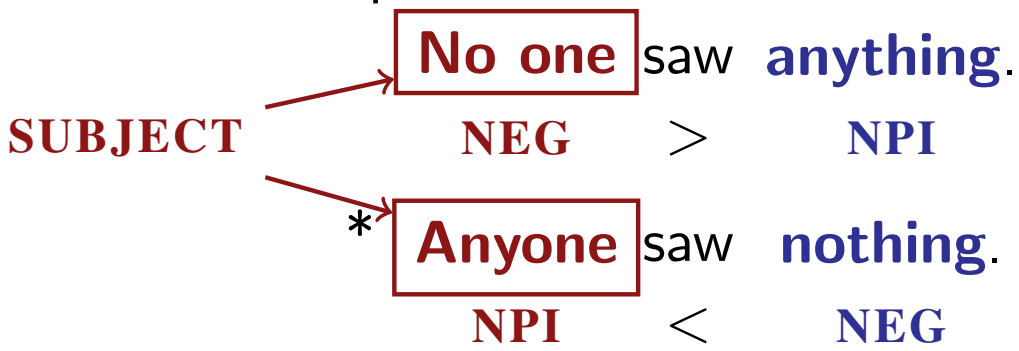

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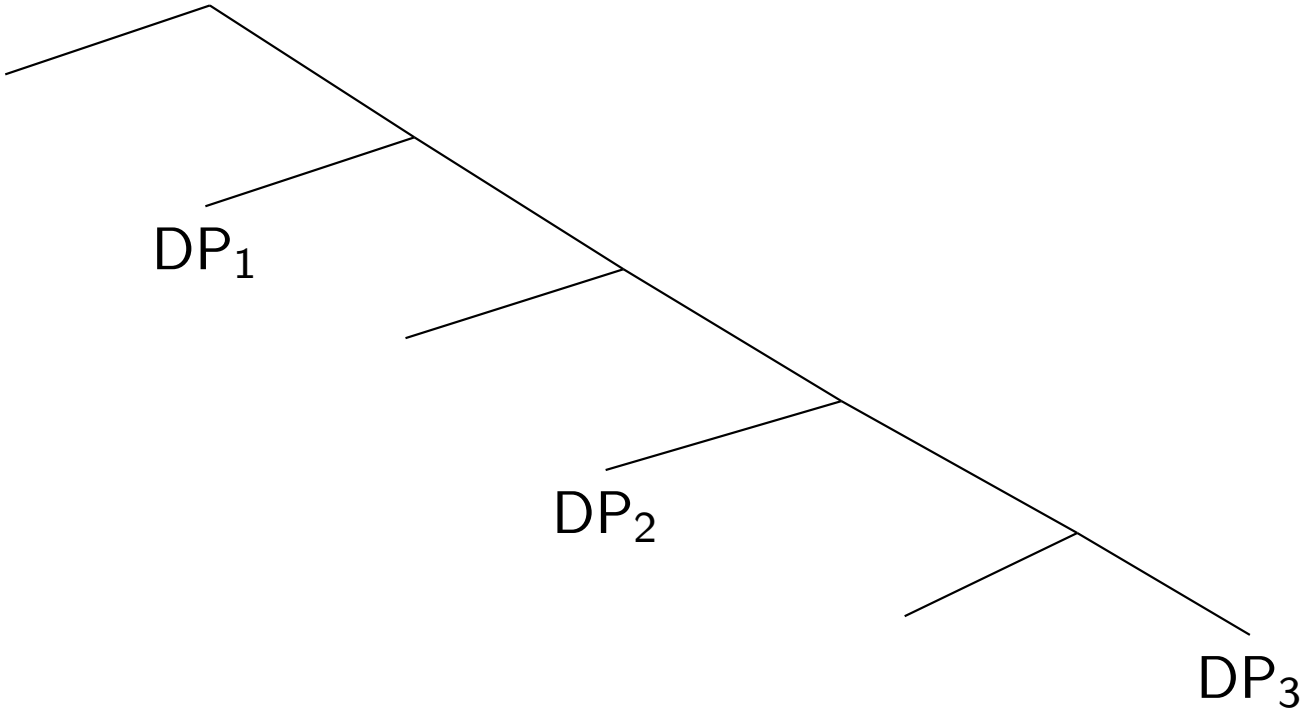

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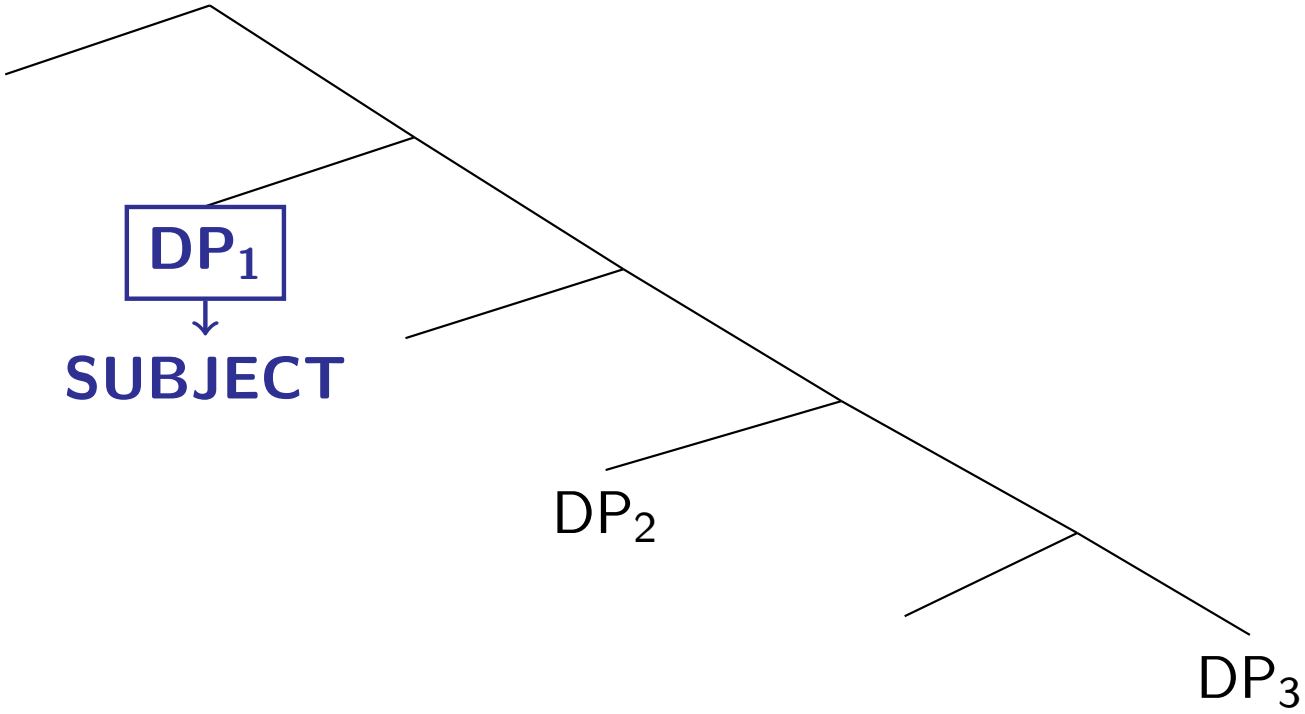

Deconstructed subjecthood

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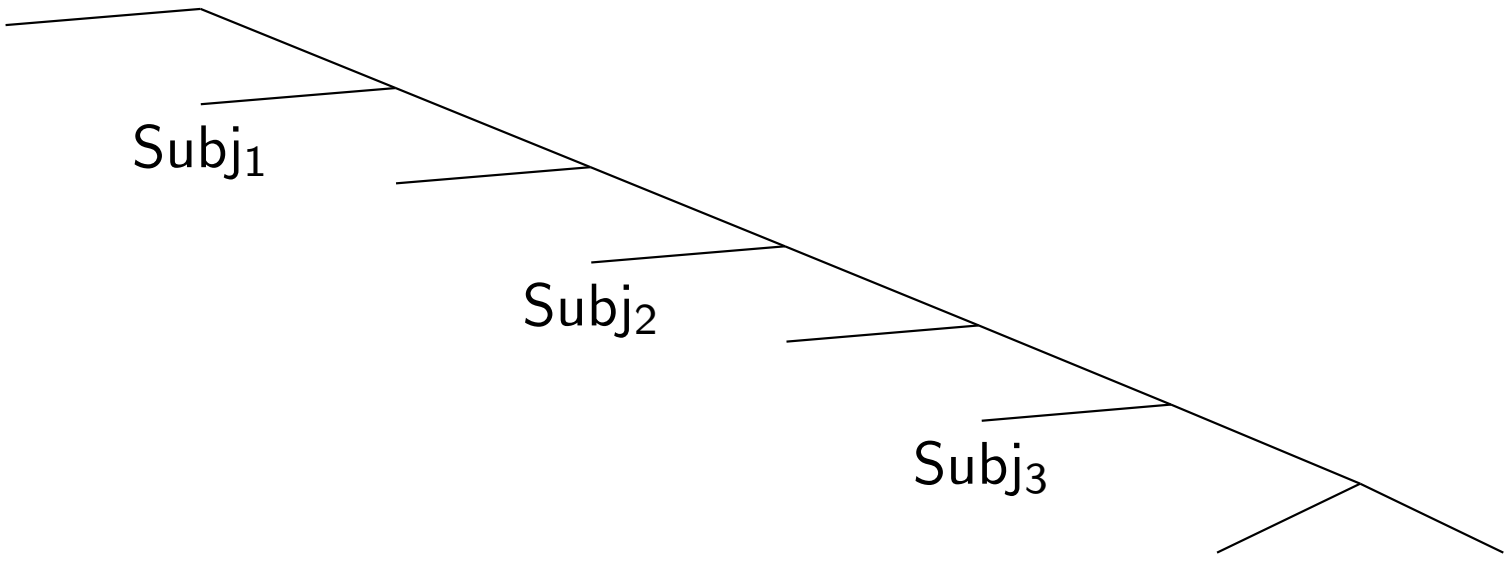

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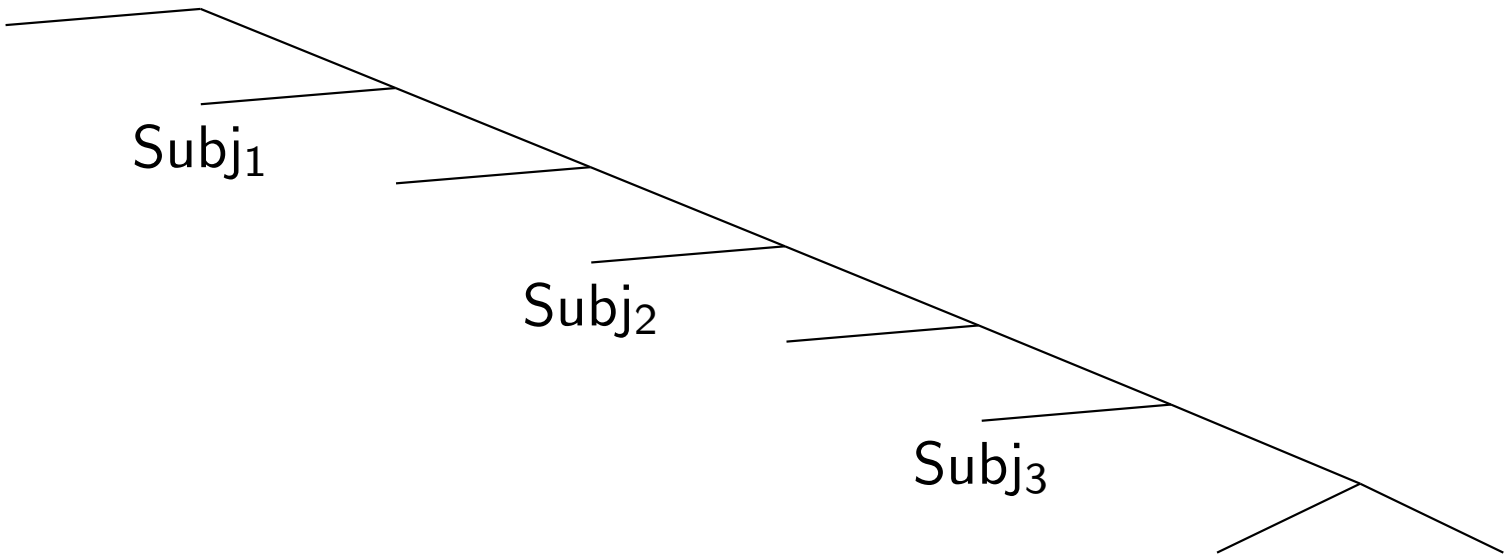

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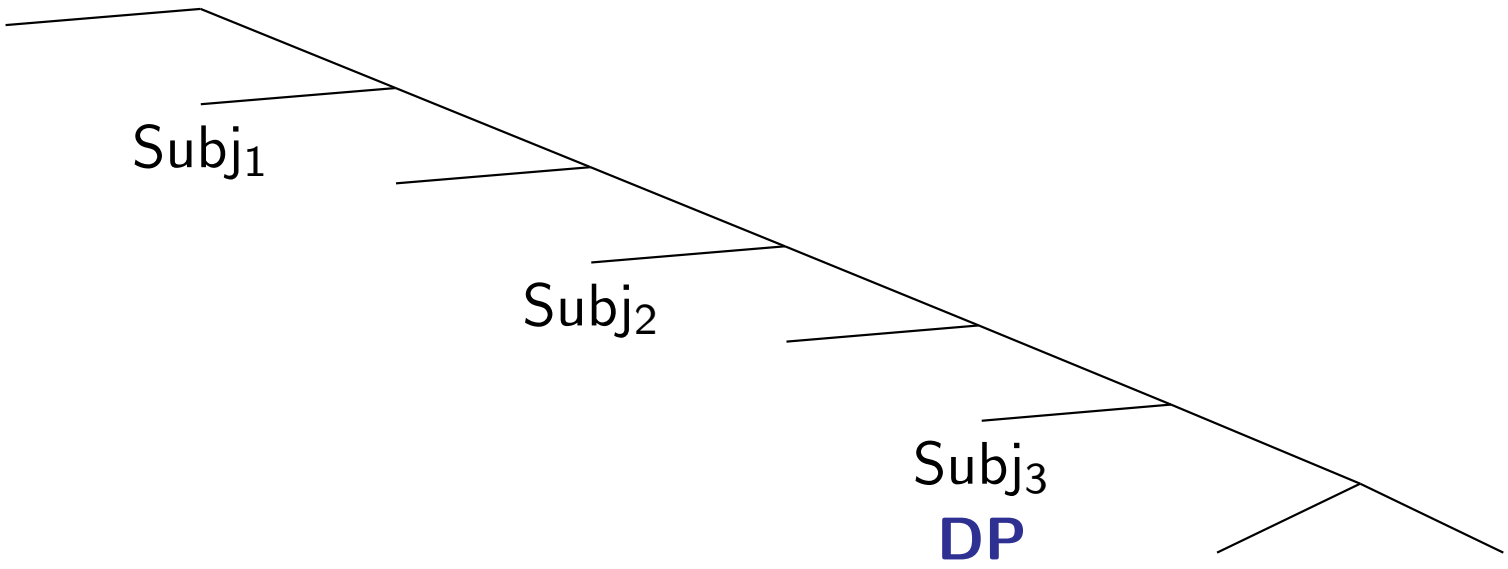

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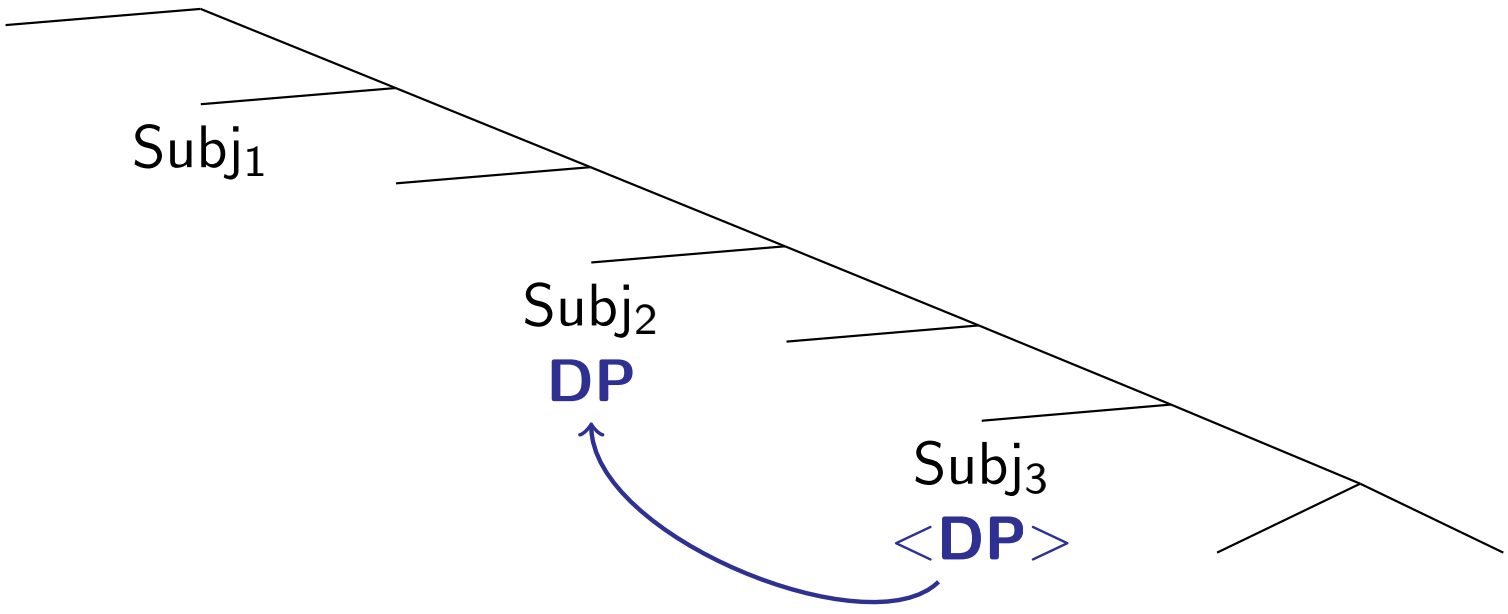

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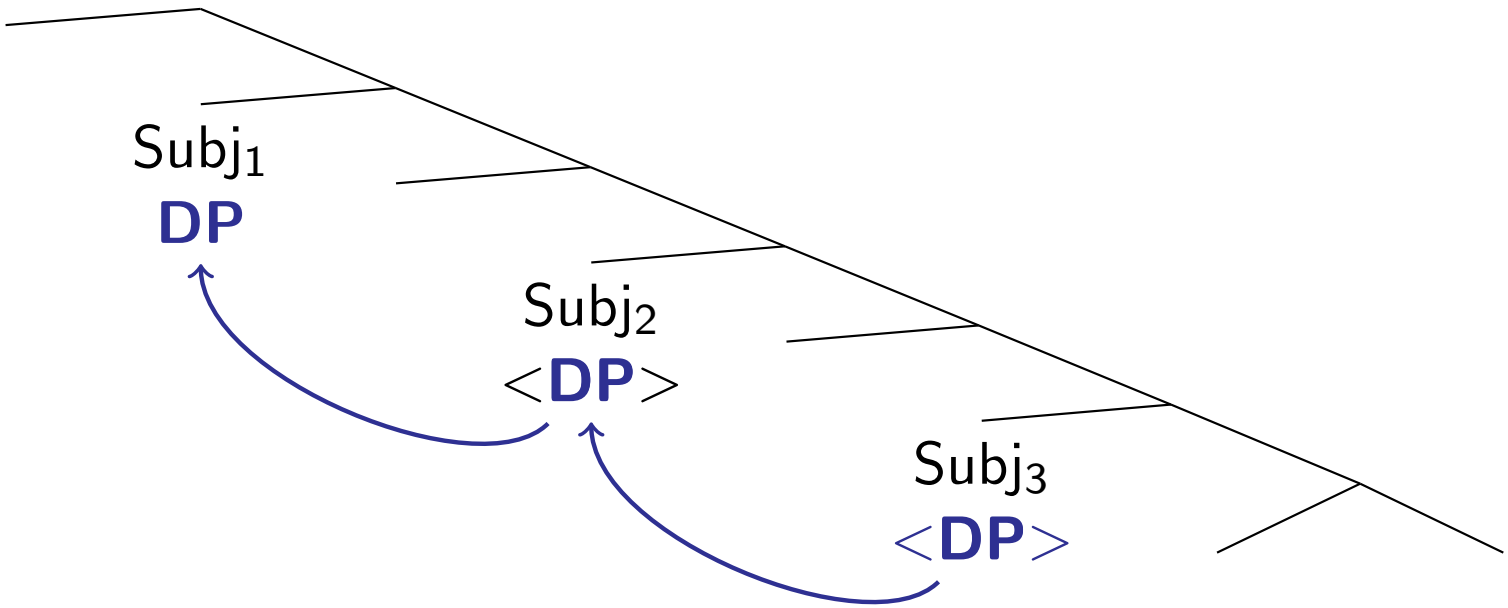

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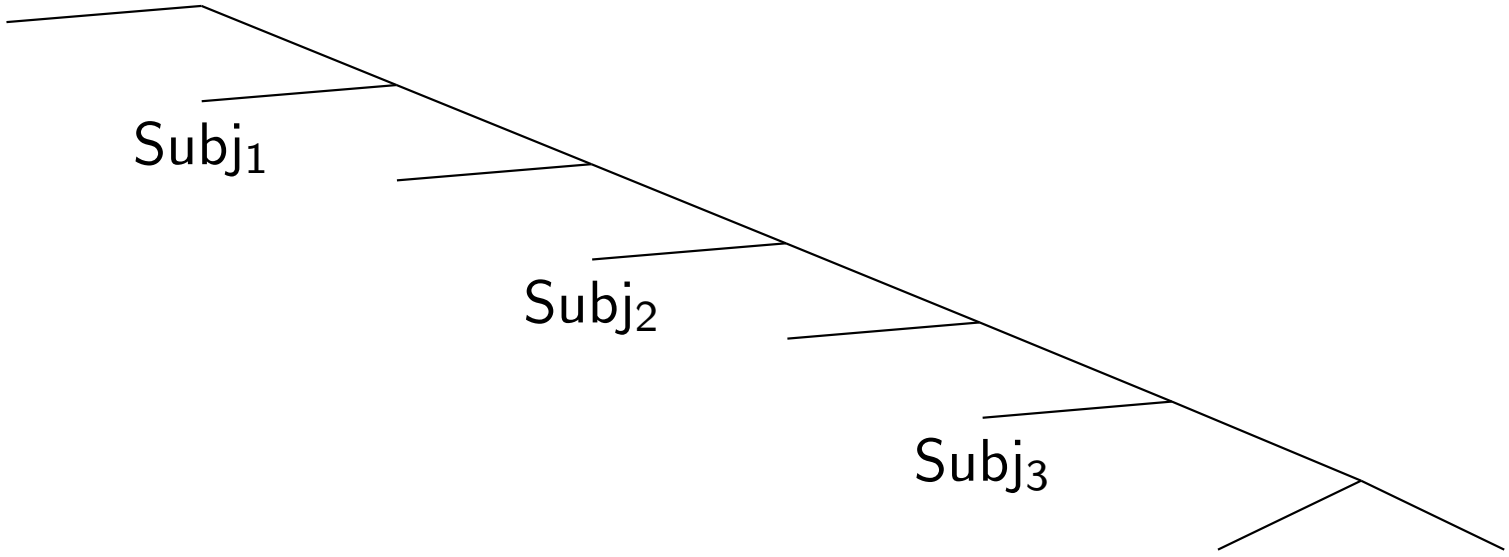

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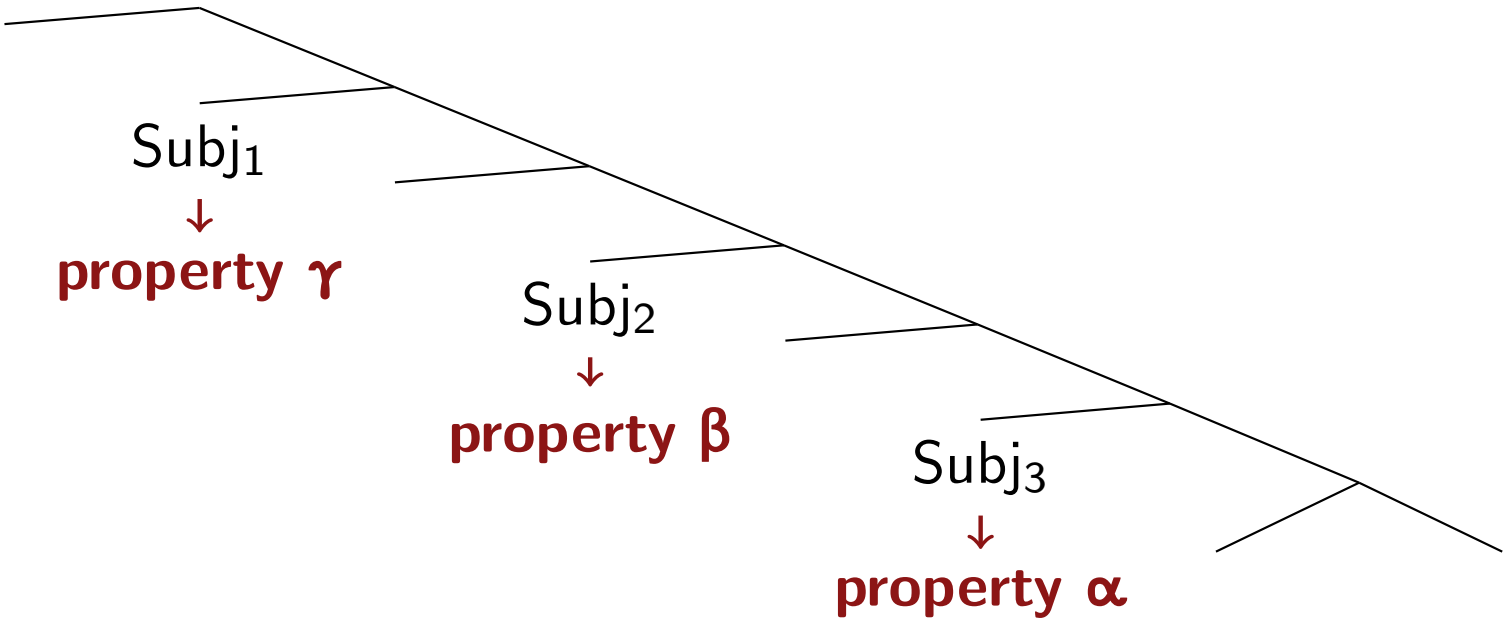

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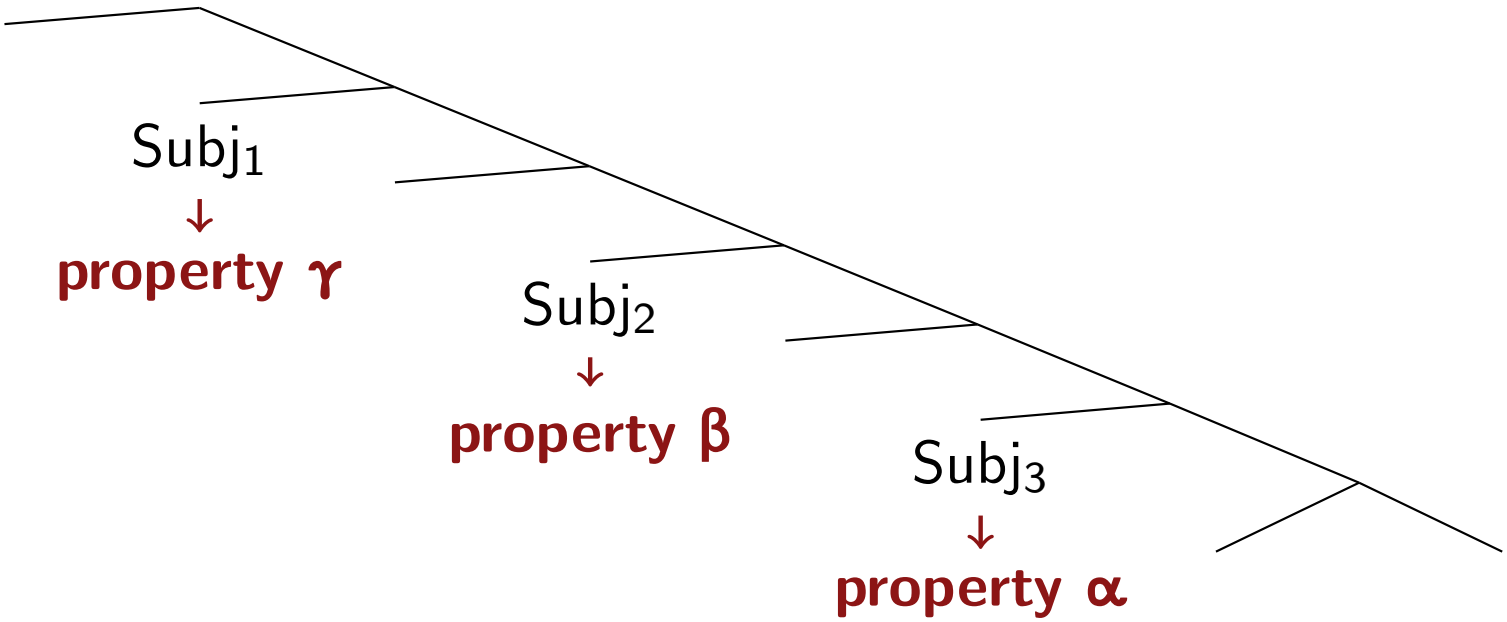

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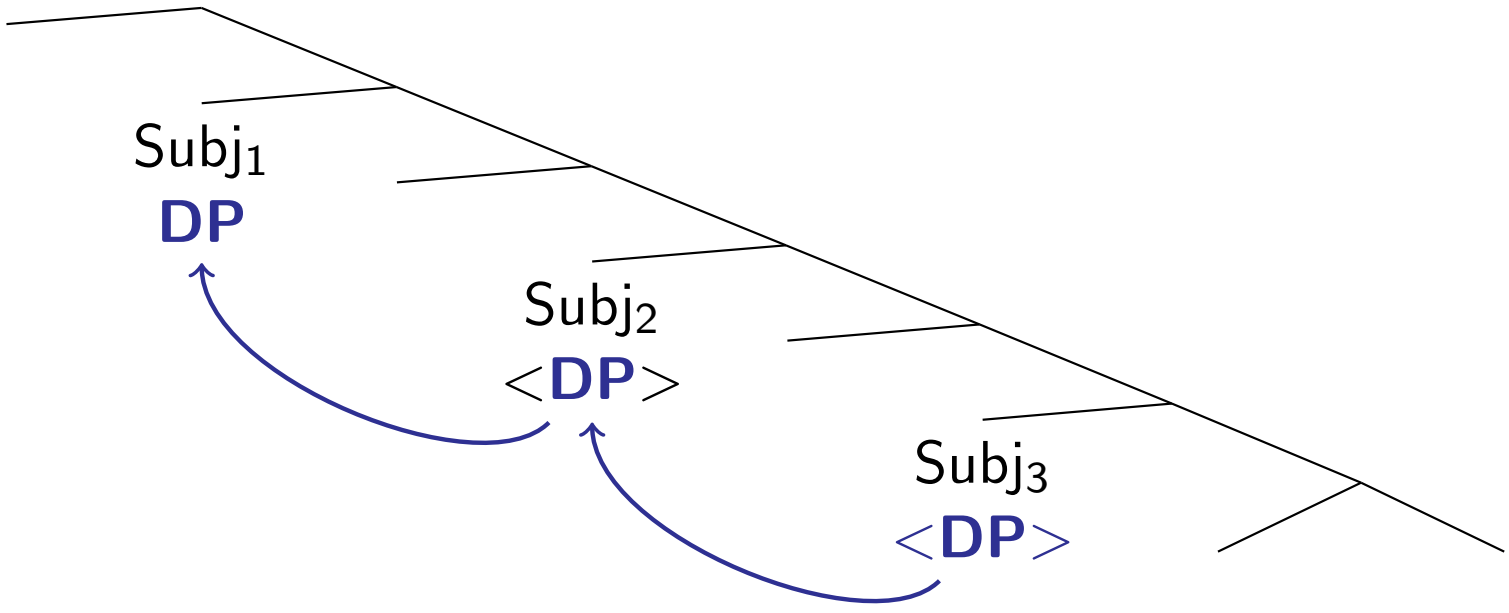

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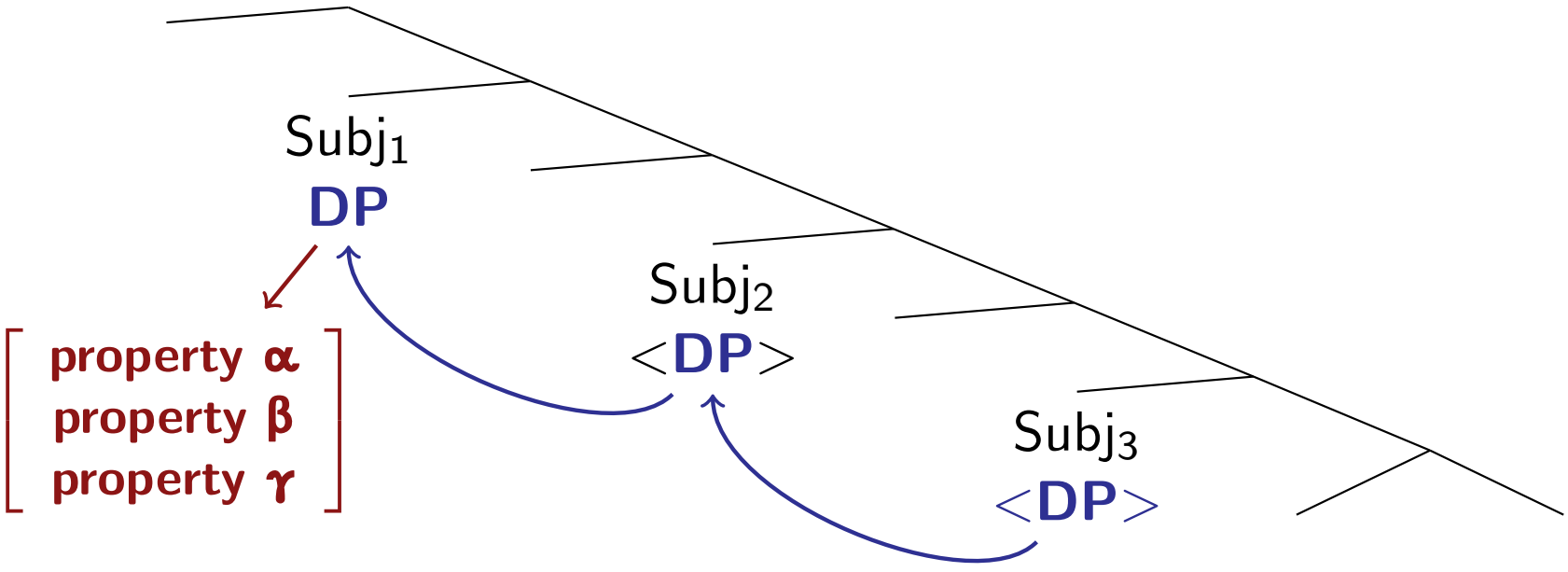

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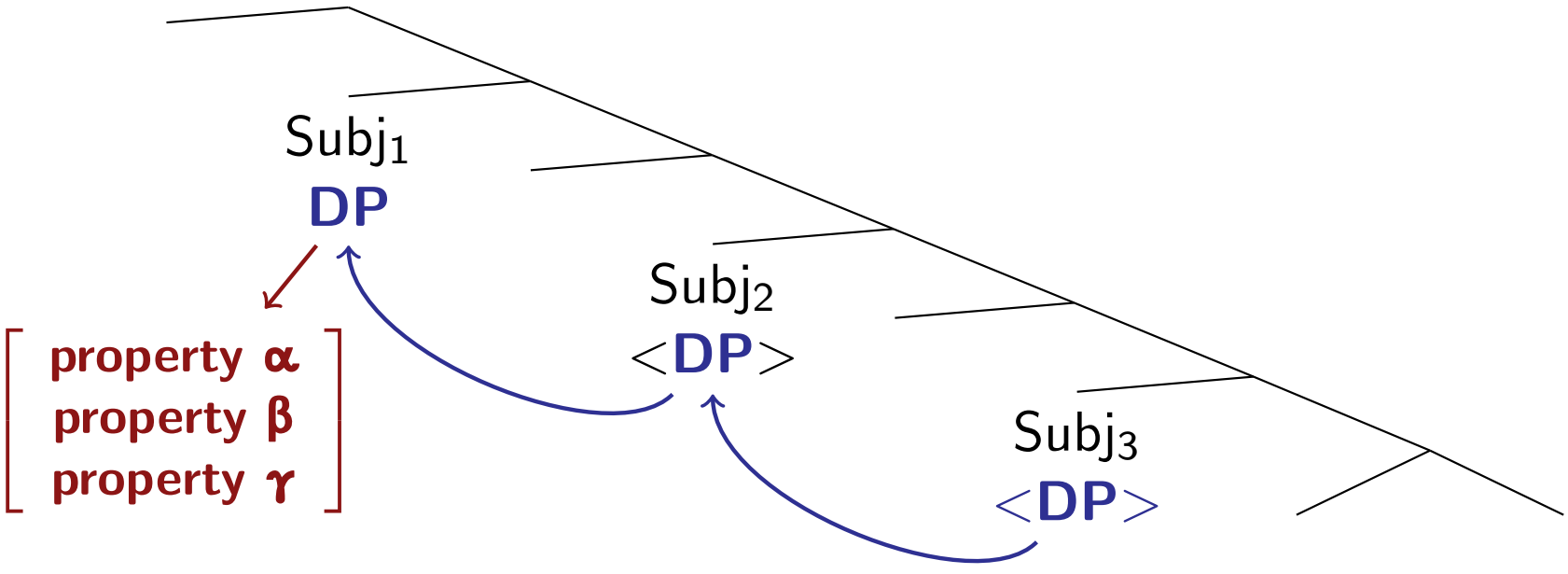

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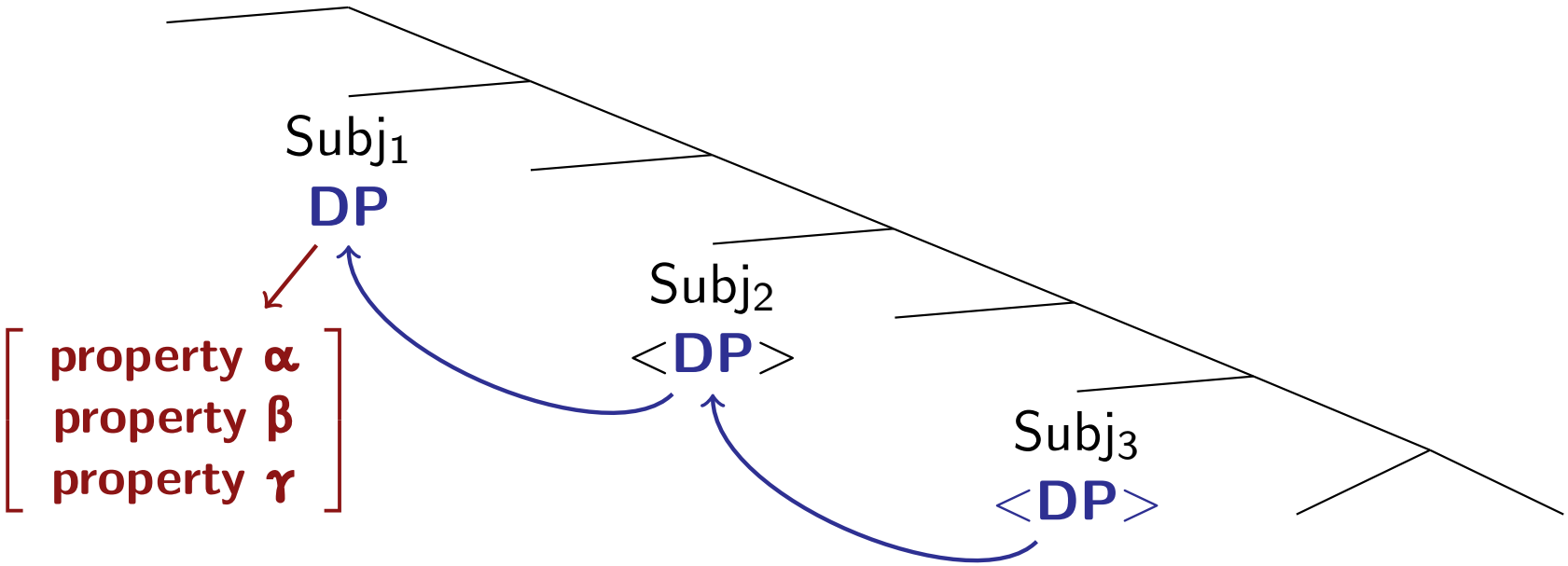

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obscures connection between syntactic position and subjecthood properties

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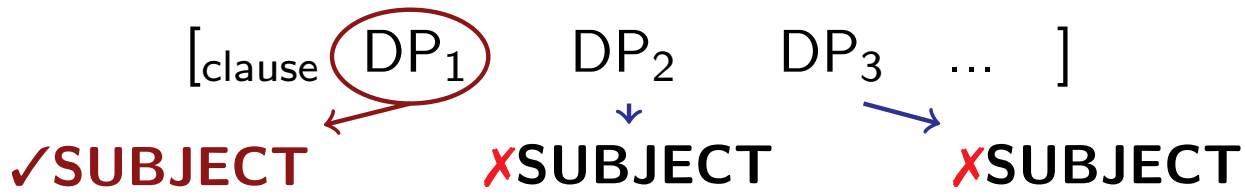

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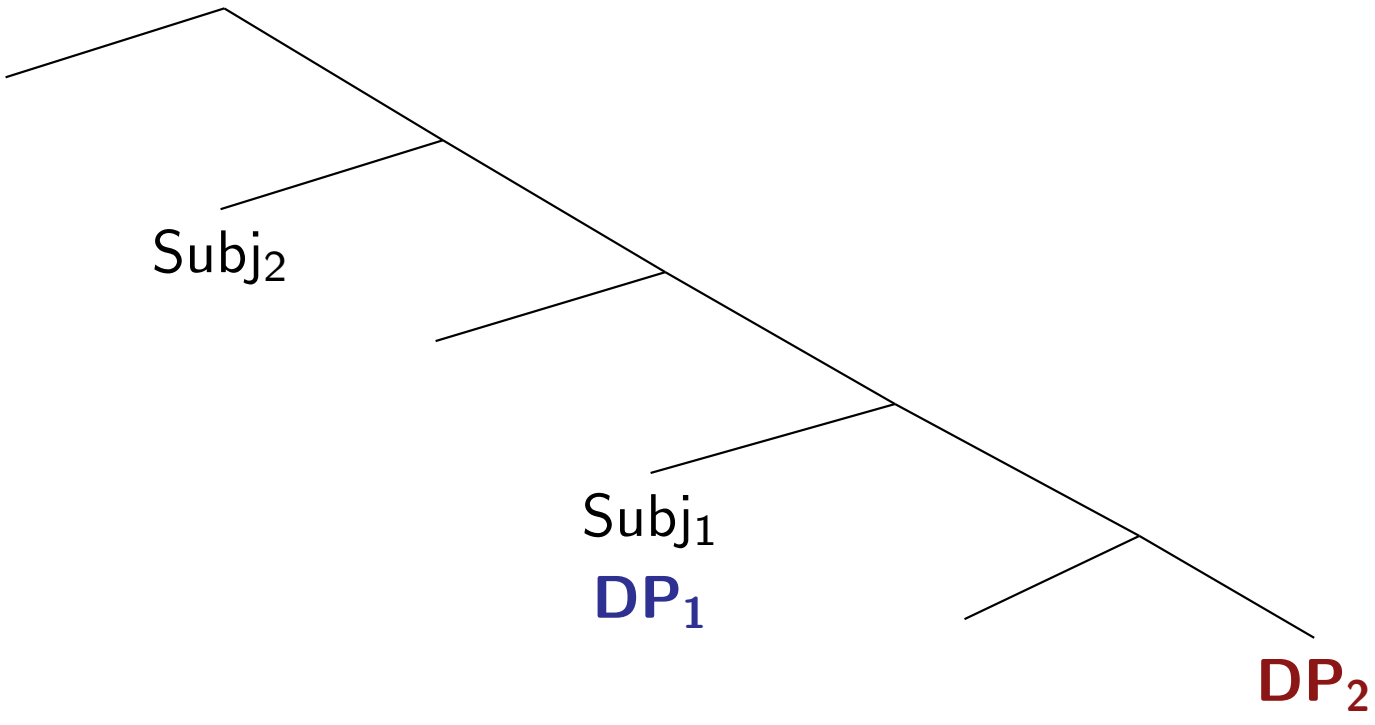

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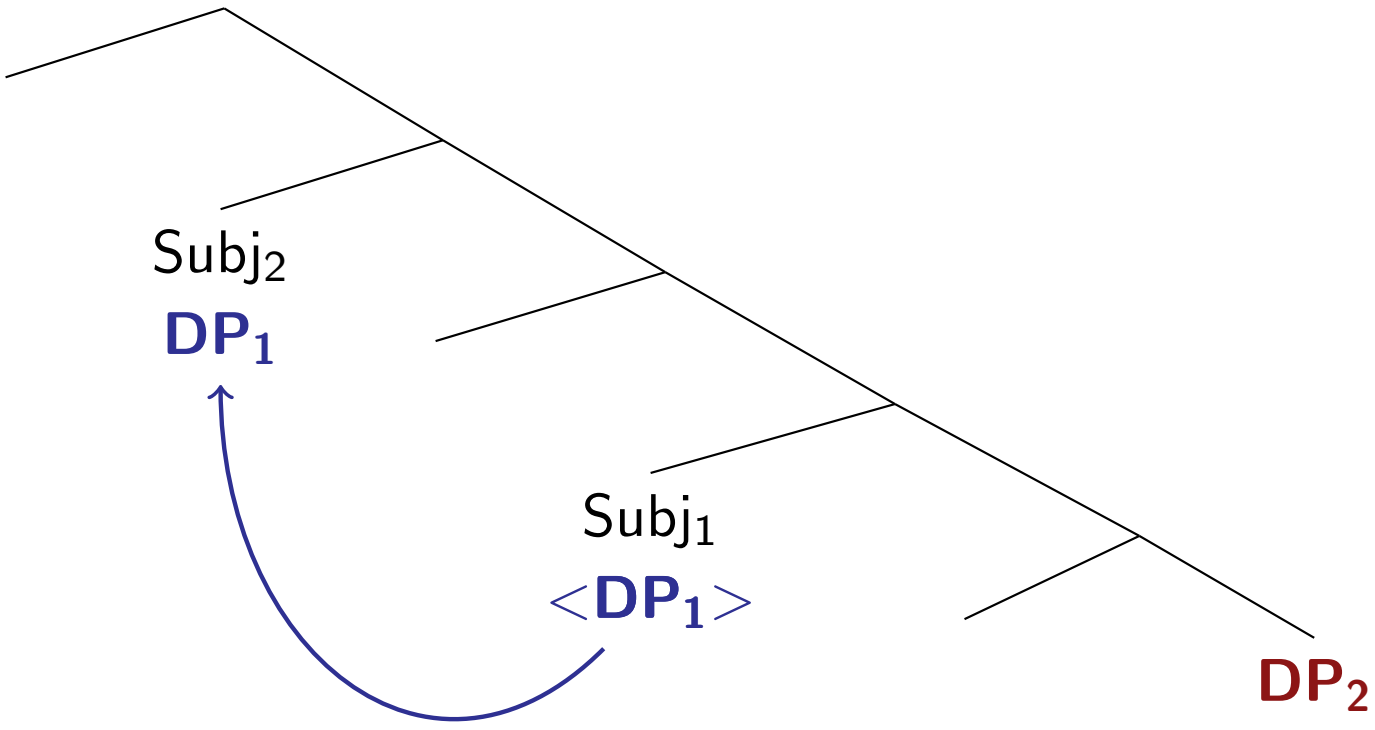

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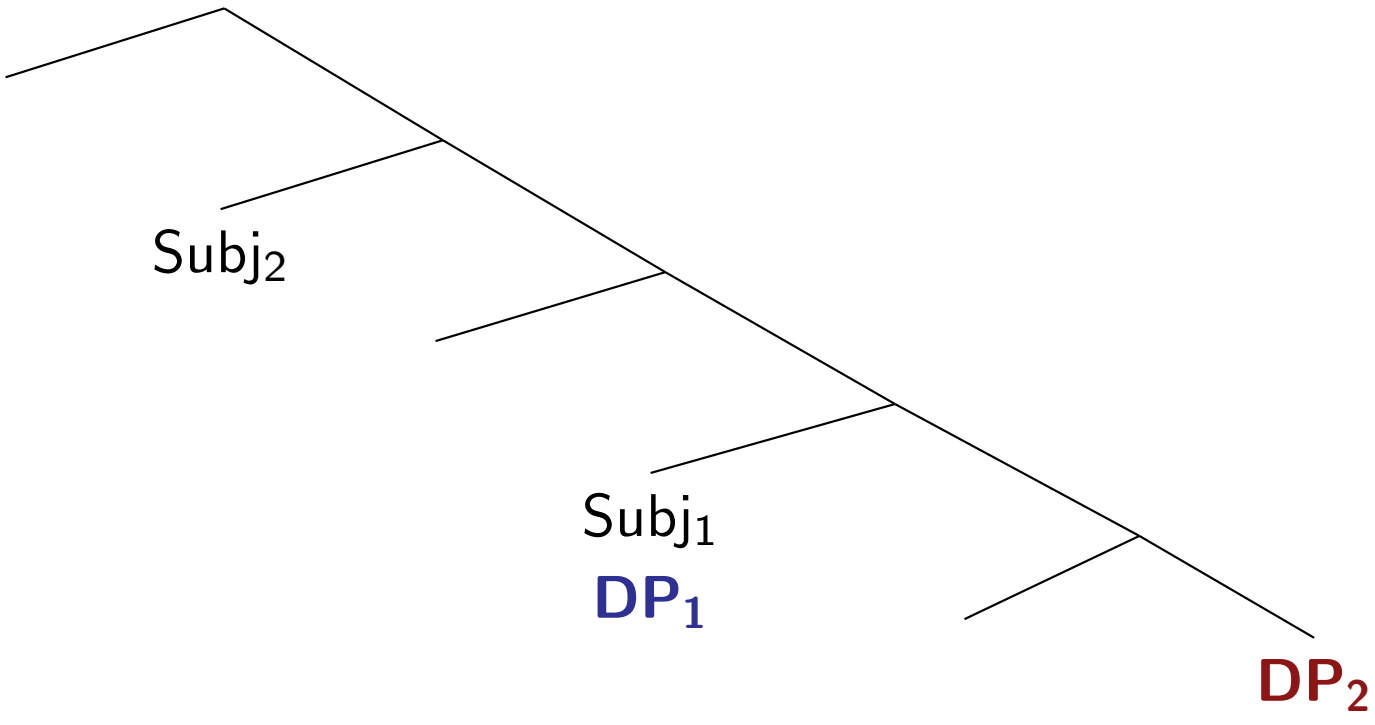

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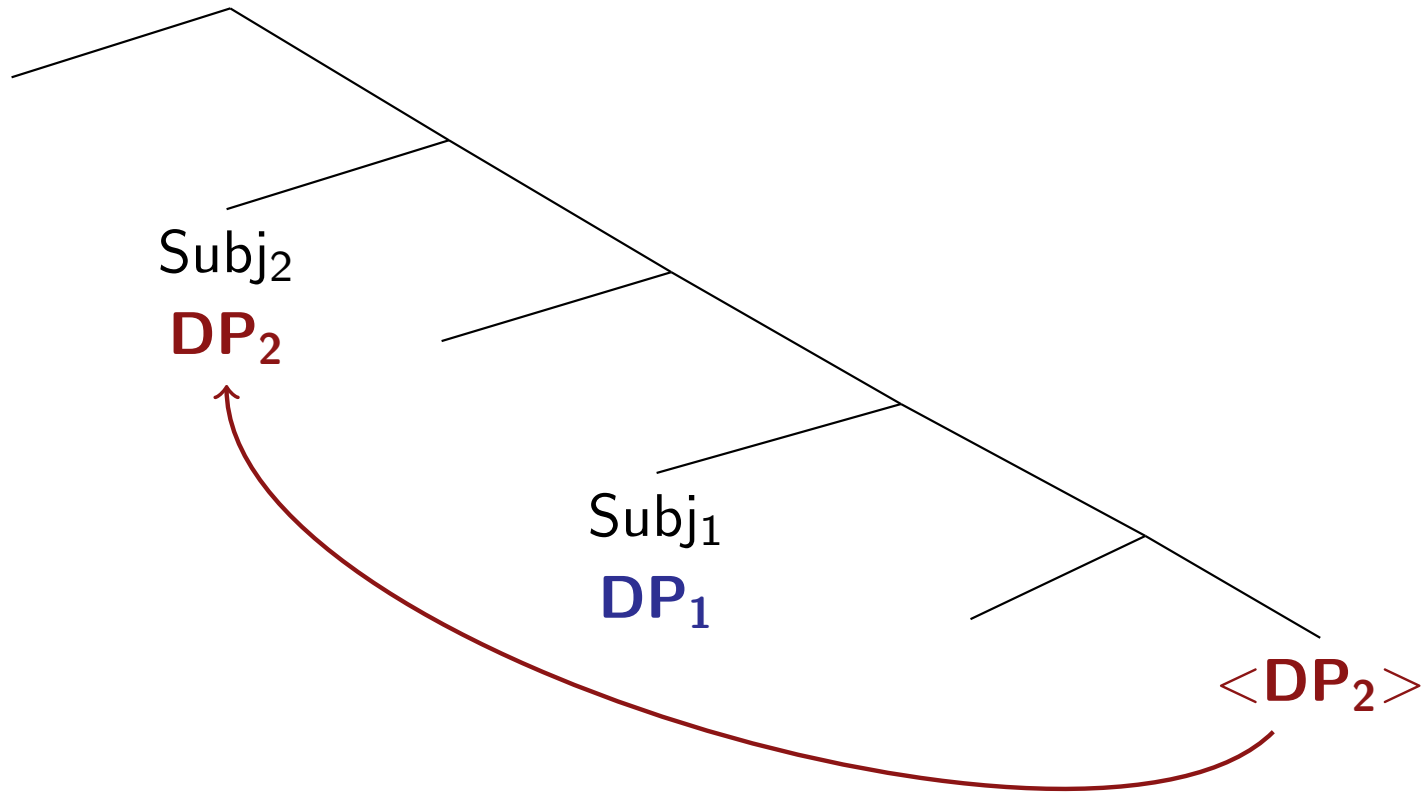

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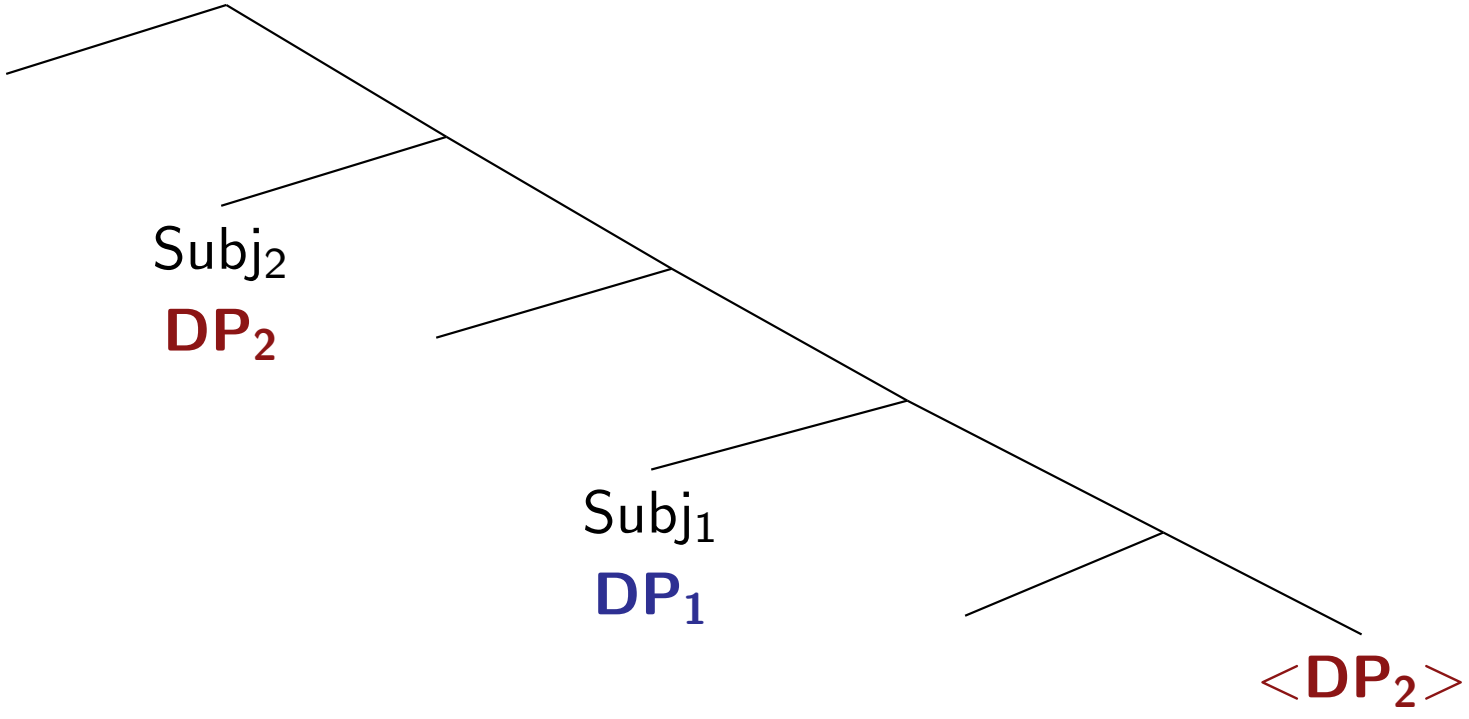

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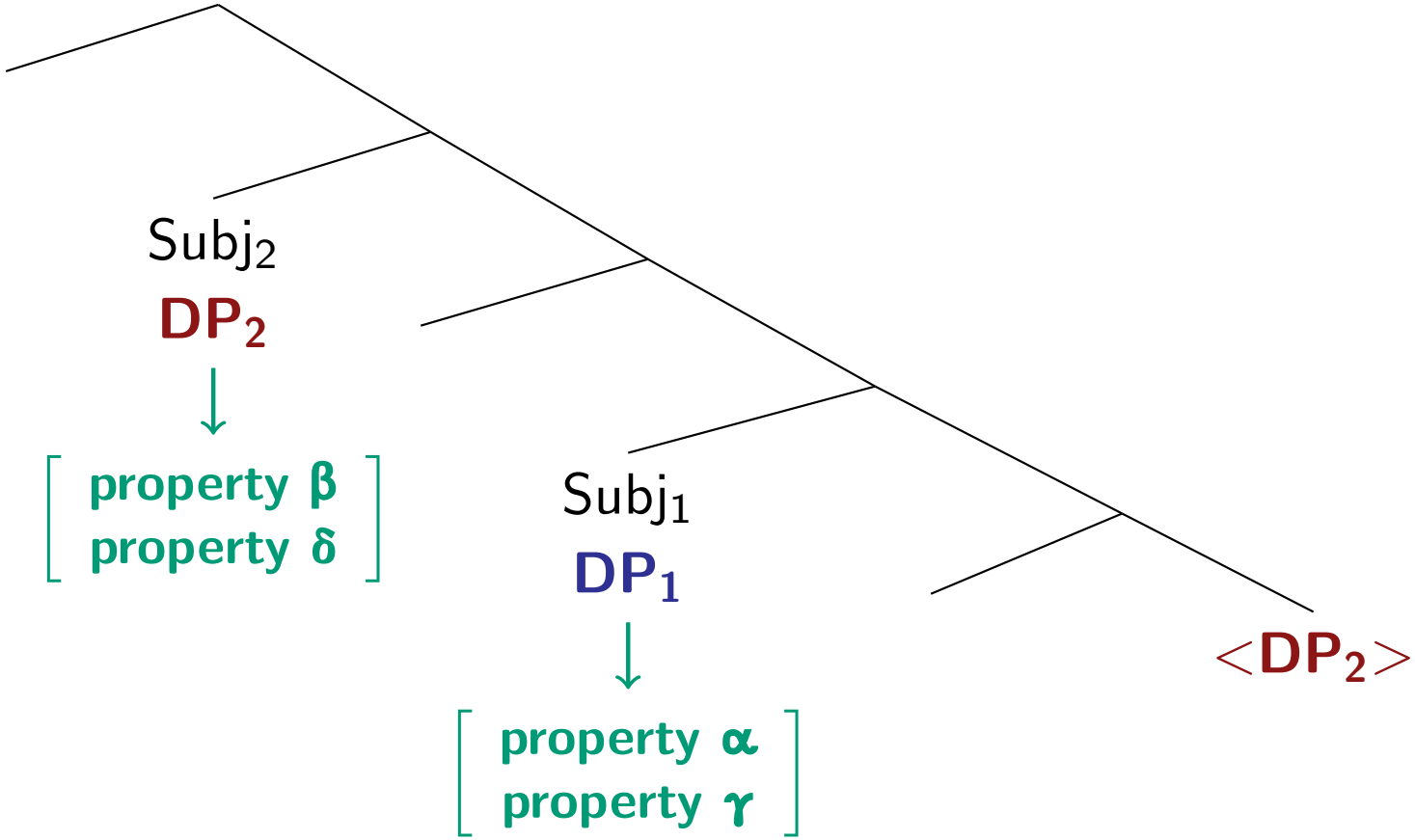

Different nominals in different subject positions

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Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion.

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Syntactically ergative languages confirm this prediction.

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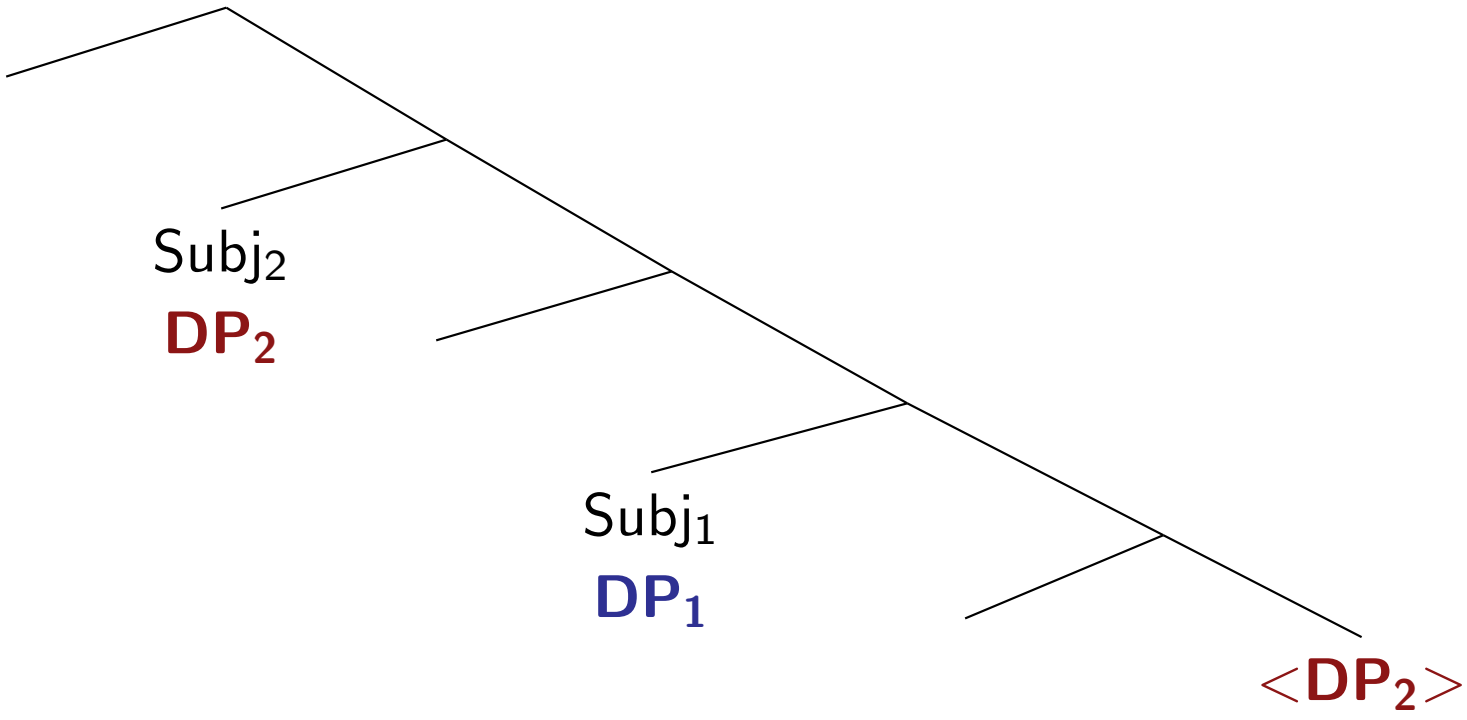

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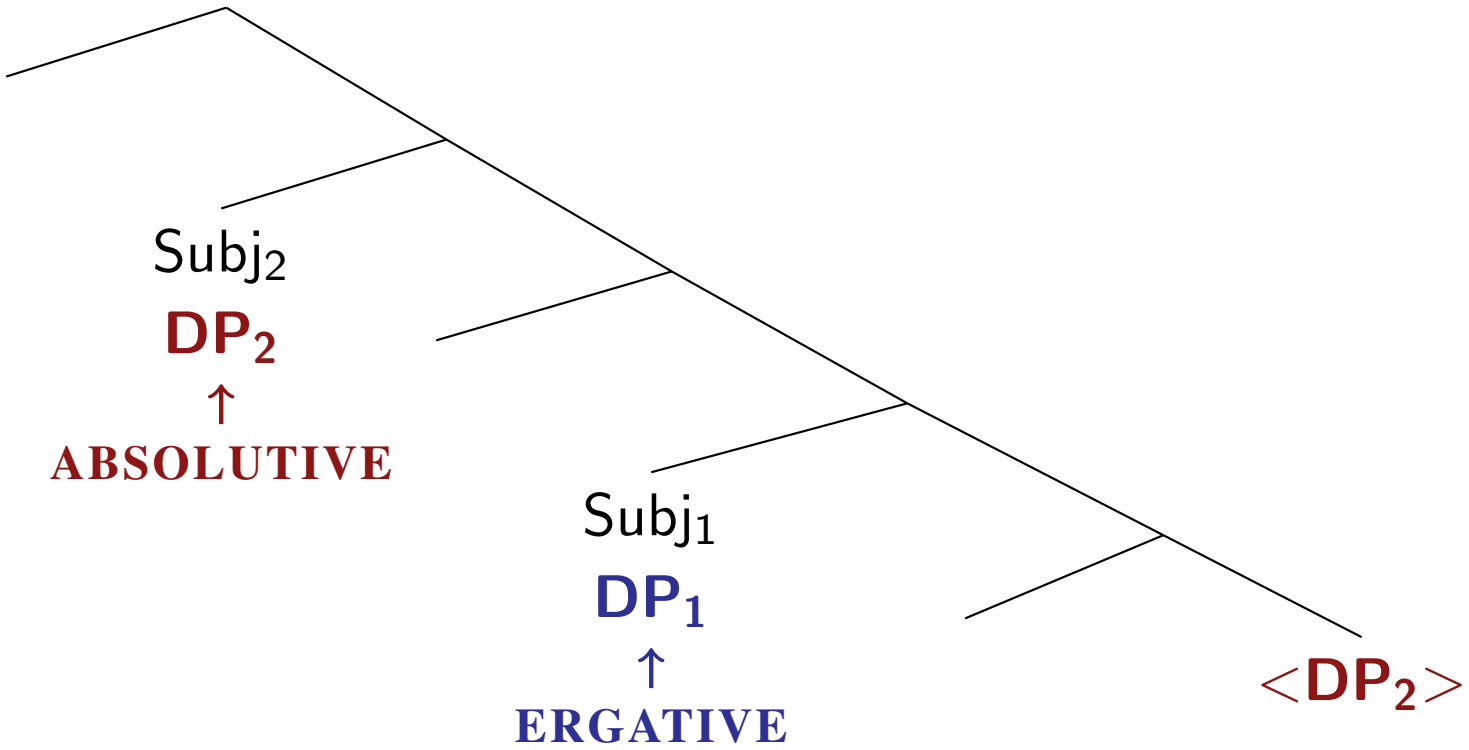

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Syntactic ergativity:

2 subject positions

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$\Rightarrow$ **SUBJECT** is not a theoretically meaningful notion

See e.g. Bittner and Hale (1996); Coon et al. (2014); Deal (2016, 2017); Polinsky (2016, 2017); Yuan (2018) on syntactic ergativity effects.

Case Study: West Circassian

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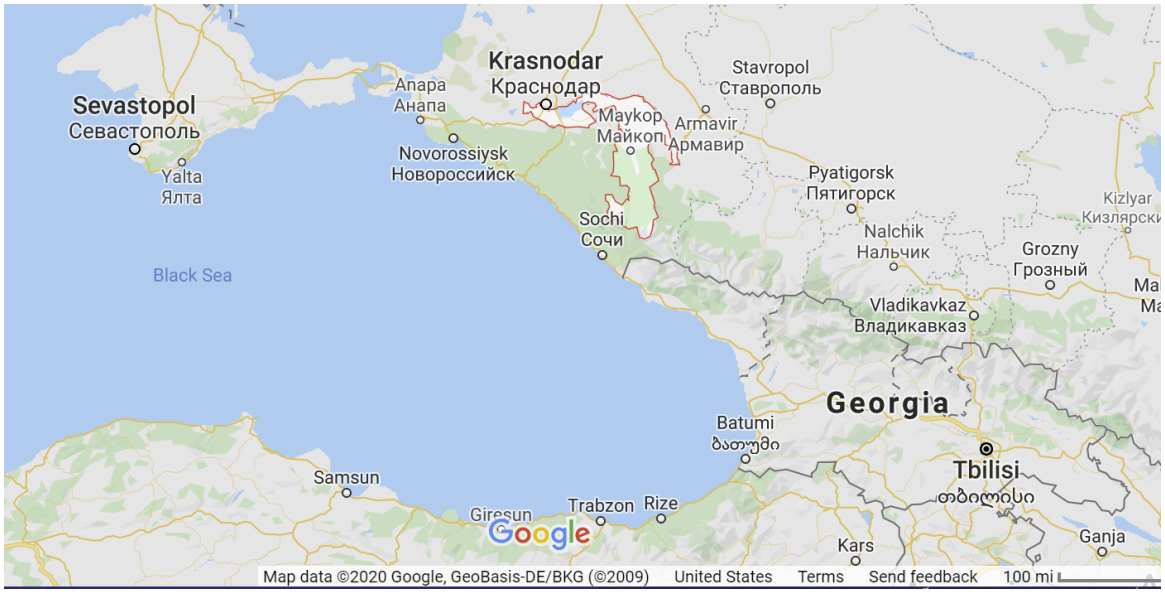

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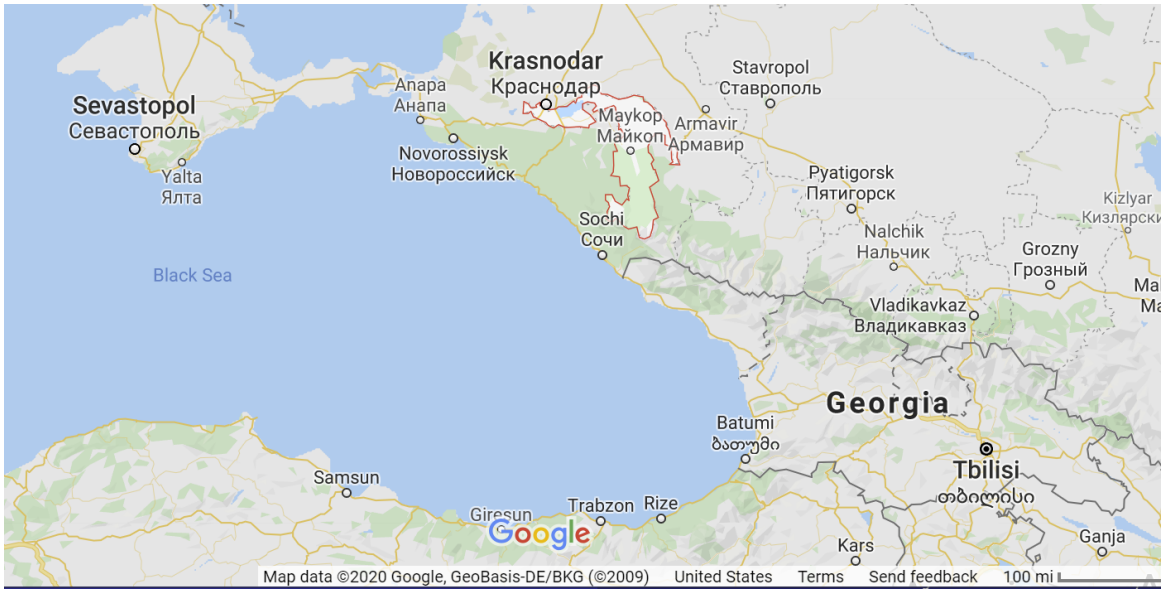

Data from fieldwork on **Temirgoy dialect** in the Shovgenovsky district of Adygea, collected during three trips in 2017-2019.

West Circassian is polysynthetic

Agglutinating prefixal and suffixal morphology:

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Agglutinating prefixal and suffixal morphology:

wəqəzereŝhapərəzʁewəkʲʷəreječ'əž'əŝʷəʁaʁer

wə-	qə-	zere-	ŝha-	pə-	rə-	z-	ʁe-
2SG.ABS-	DIR-	FACT-	head-	LOC-	TRANS-	1SG.ERG-	CAUS-
wəkʲʷereje	-č'ə	-ž'ə	-ŝʷə	-ʁa	-ʁe	-r	
fall	-go.out	-RE	-POT	-PST	-PST	-ABS	

'that I was able to make you turn a somersault'
(Lander and Testelets 2017:952)

West Circassian is polysynthetic

Head marking and pro-drop:

West Circassian is polysynthetic

Head marking and pro-drop:

səqəpfarjəʁeλeʁʷəʁ

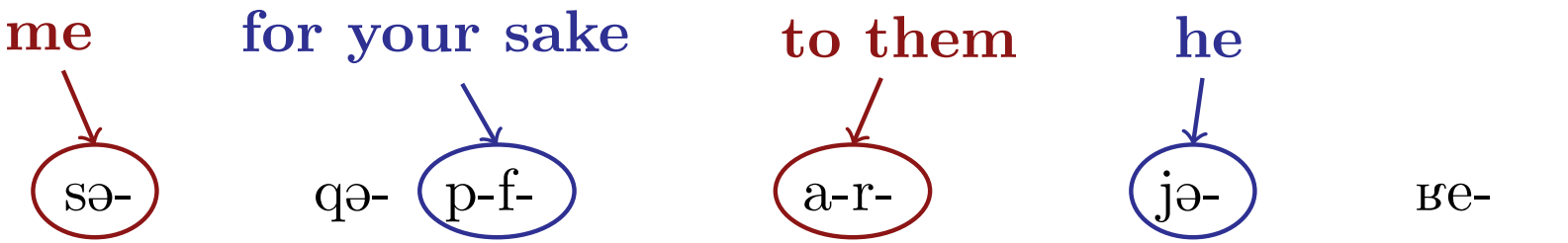
sə-	qə-	p-f-	a-r-	jə-	ʁe-
1SG.ABS-	DIR-	2SG.IO+BEN-	3PL.IO+DAT-	3SG.ERG-	CAUS-
λeʁʷə	-ʁ				
see	-PST				

'He showed me to them for your sake.'
(Korotkova and Lander 2010:301)

West Circassian is polysynthetic

Head marking and pro-drop:

səqəpfarjəʁeλeʁʷəʁ



1SG.ABS- DIR- 2SG.IO+BEN- 3PL.IO+DAT- 3SG.ERG- CAUS-
λeʁʷə -ʁ
see -PST

'He showed me to them for your sake.'
(Korotkova and Lander 2010:301)

Verbal agreement is ergative

w-	**a-de-**	**s-**	šʼaʁ
2SG.ABS-	3PL.IO-COM-	1SG.ERG-	bring.PST

‘I brought you with them’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:160)

Verbal agreement is ergative

O	**IO**	**A**	
w-	**a-de-**	**s-**	š’aʁ
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wə-	q-	**a-fe-**	kʲʷaʁ
2SG.ABS-	DIR-	3PL.IO+BEN-	go.PST

‘You went for them.’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:138)

Verbal agreement is ergative

O	**IO**	**A**	
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‘I brought you with them’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:160)

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wə-	q-	**a-fe-**	ḳʷaʁ
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‘You went for them.’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:138)

Agreement order:

S/O- IO- A-

ABS- IO- ERG-

Case marking is ergative

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

- subject of intransitive verb (**S**)

mə	pŝaŝe-**r**	daxew	qaŝ^{w}e
this	girl-**ABS**	well	dances

'This girl(S) dances well.'

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

- subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- object of transitive verb (**O**)

sabəjxe-m haxe-**r** qaλeʁʷəʁ
children-OBL dogs-**ABS** saw

'The children(A) saw the dogs(O).'

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

- subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- object of transitive verb (**O**)

-m (OBL):

sabəjxe-m haxe-r qaλeʁʷəʁ
children-OBL dogs-ABS saw

'The children(A) saw the dogs(O).'

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

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- subject of transitive verb (**A**)

sabəjxe-**m** haxe-r qaλeʁʷəʁ
children-**OBL** dogs-ABS saw

'The children(A) saw the dogs(O).'

Case marking is ergative

-r (ABS):

- subject of intransitive verb (**S**)
- object of transitive verb (**O**)

-m (OBL):

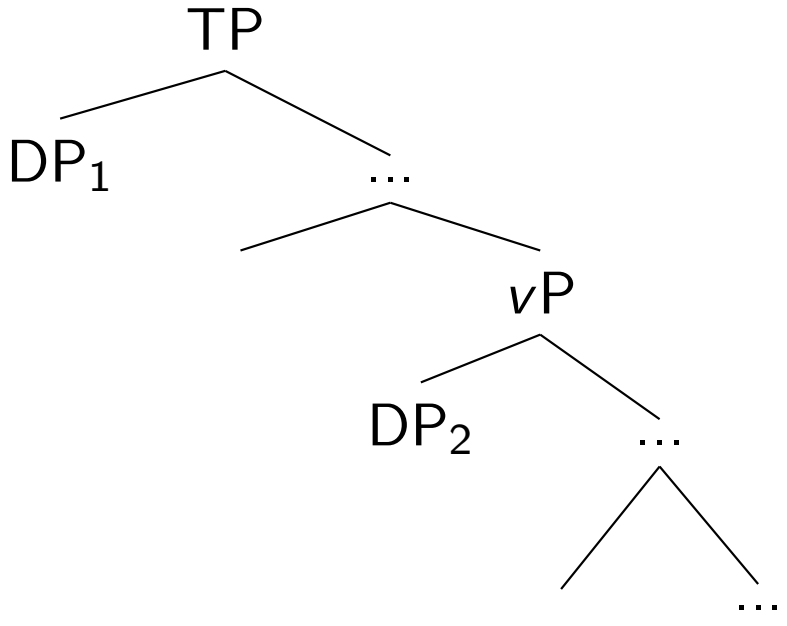
- subject of transitive verb (**A**)
- applied object (**IO**)

ǯeg^{w}ə-**m** səqəš'əŝ^{w}aʁep
wedding-**OBL** I didn't dance

'I didn't dance at the wedding(IO).'

Distributed subjecthood and syntactic ergativity

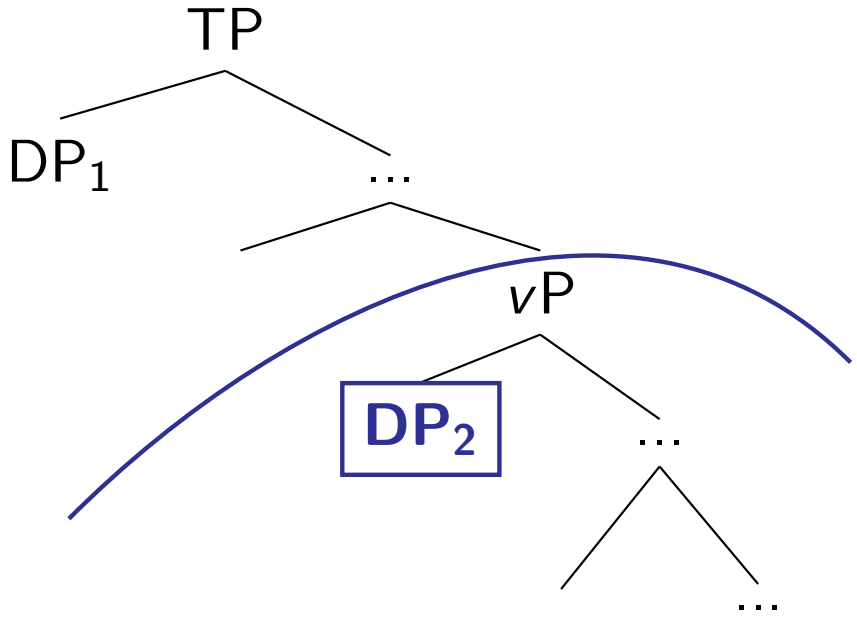
Subjecthood diagnostics in West Circassian single out (at least) **two positions**:



Distributed subjecthood and syntactic ergativity

Subjecthood diagnostics in West Circassian single out (at least) **two positions**:

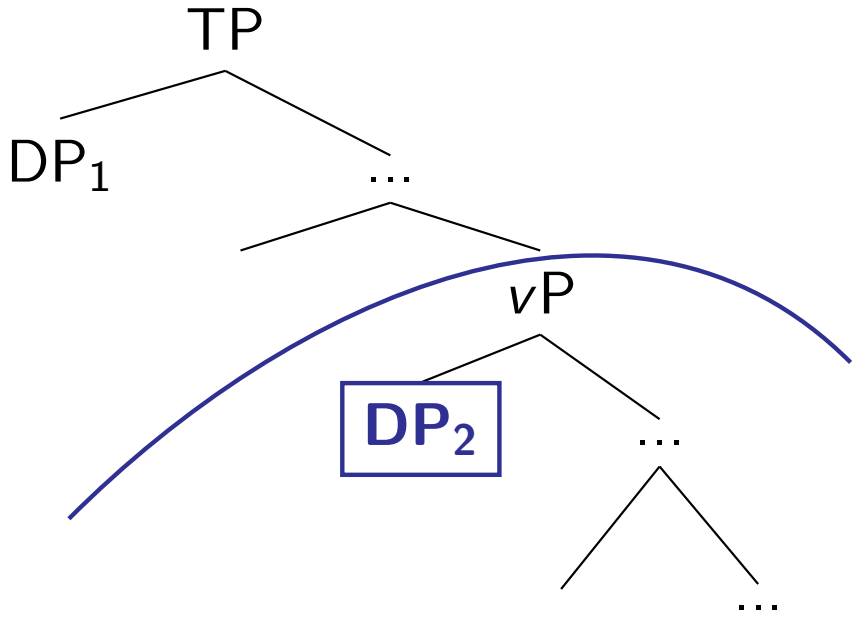
- the highest nominal in the theta-domain



Distributed subjecthood and syntactic ergativity

Subjecthood diagnostics in West Circassian single out (at least) **two positions**:

- the highest nominal in the theta-domain — ***v*P**



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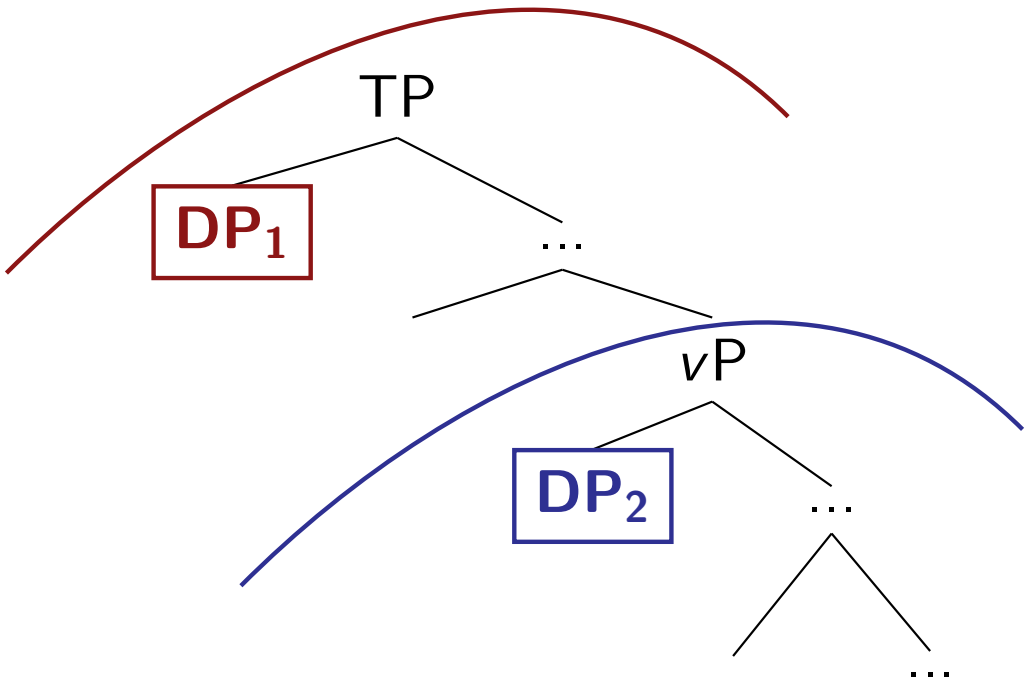
Subjecthood diagnostics in West Circassian single out (at least) **two positions**:

- the highest nominal in the theta-domain — ***v*P**
- the highest nominal in the A-domain — **TP**



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A-domain=TP	**theta-domain=vP**
reciprocals	reflexives
parasitic gaps	control

Distributed subjecthood and syntactic ergativity

Subjecthood diagnostics in West Circassian single out (at least) **two positions**:

- the highest nominal in the theta-domain — **vP**
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A-domain=TP
reciprocals
parasitic gaps
↓
S/O

theta-domain=vP
reflexives
control
↓
S/A

Distributed subjecthood and syntactic ergativity

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reciprocals
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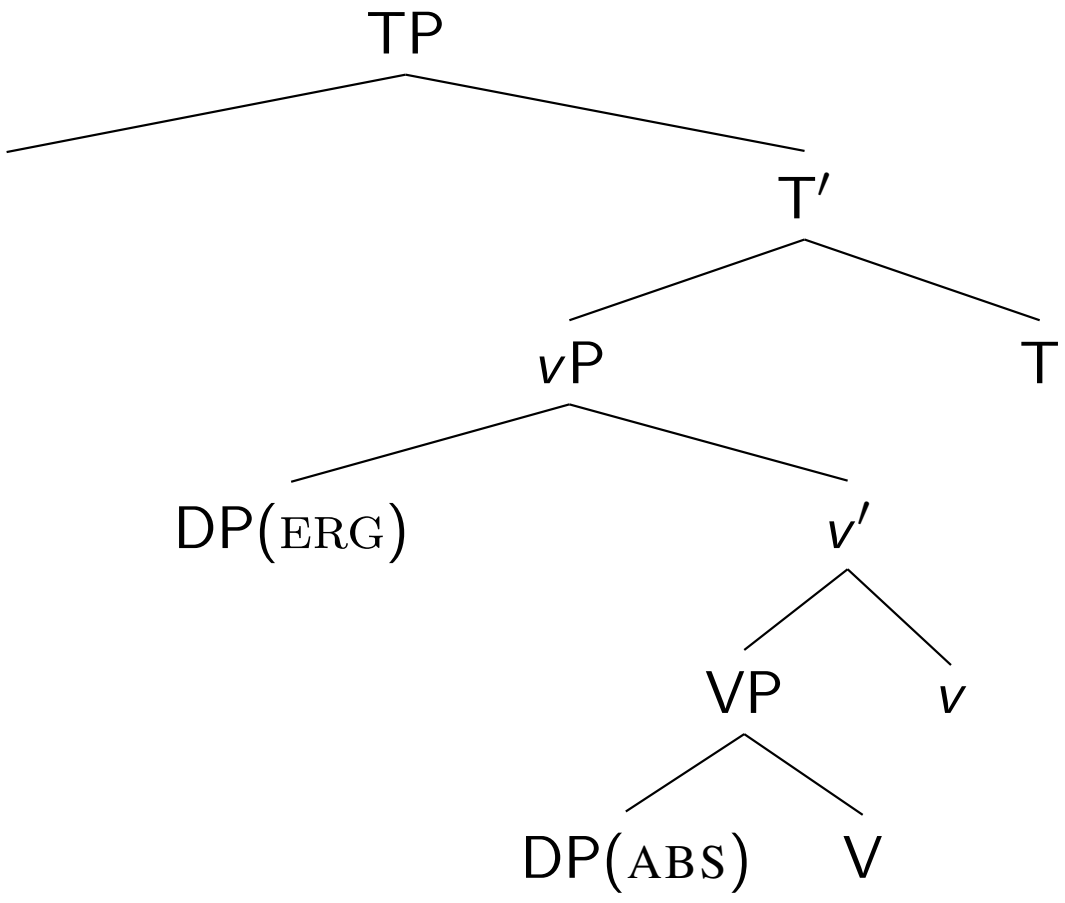
↓
S/O
ABS

theta-domain=vP
reflexives
control
↓
S/A
ERG

High absolutive and two subjects

E.g. for a transitive (ERG-ABS) verb:



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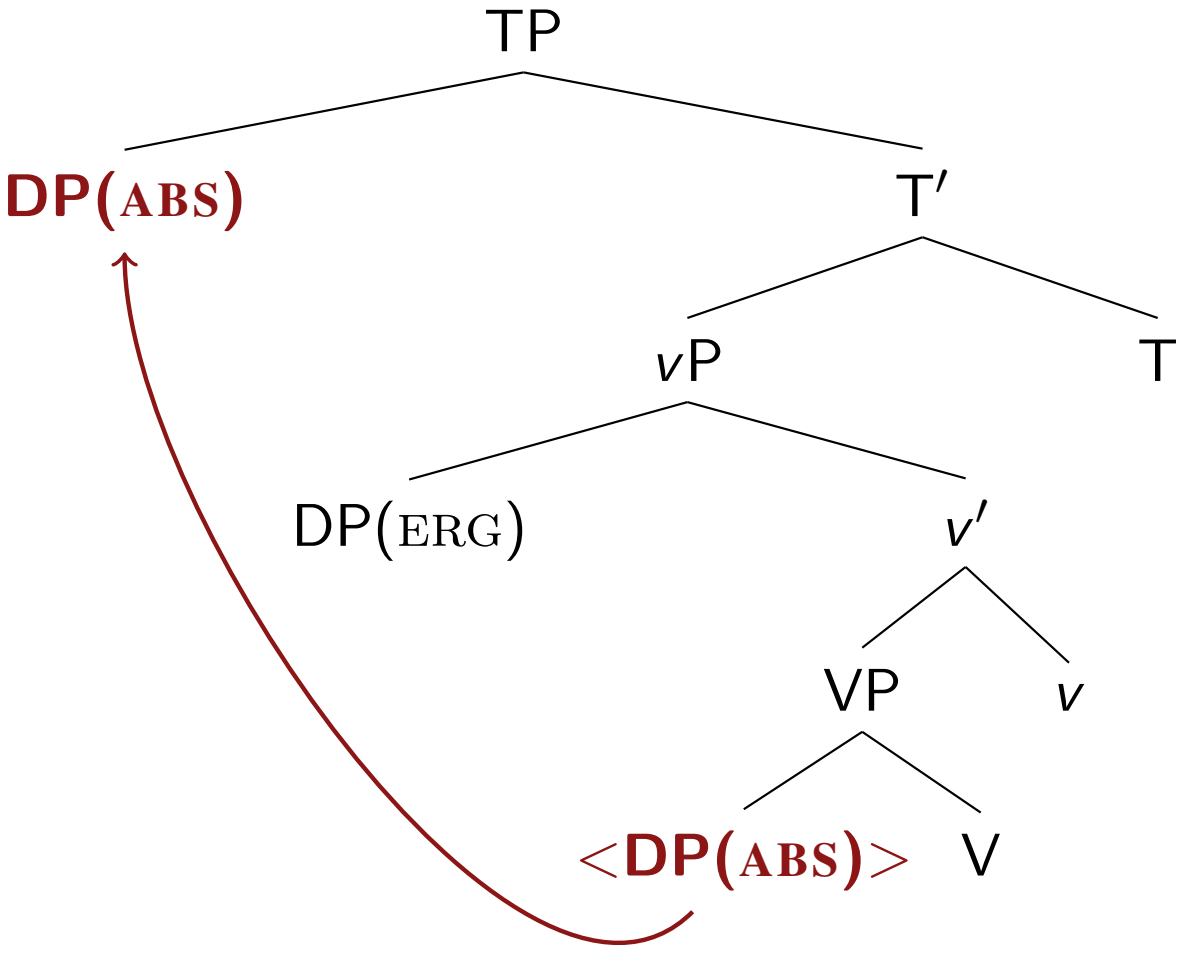

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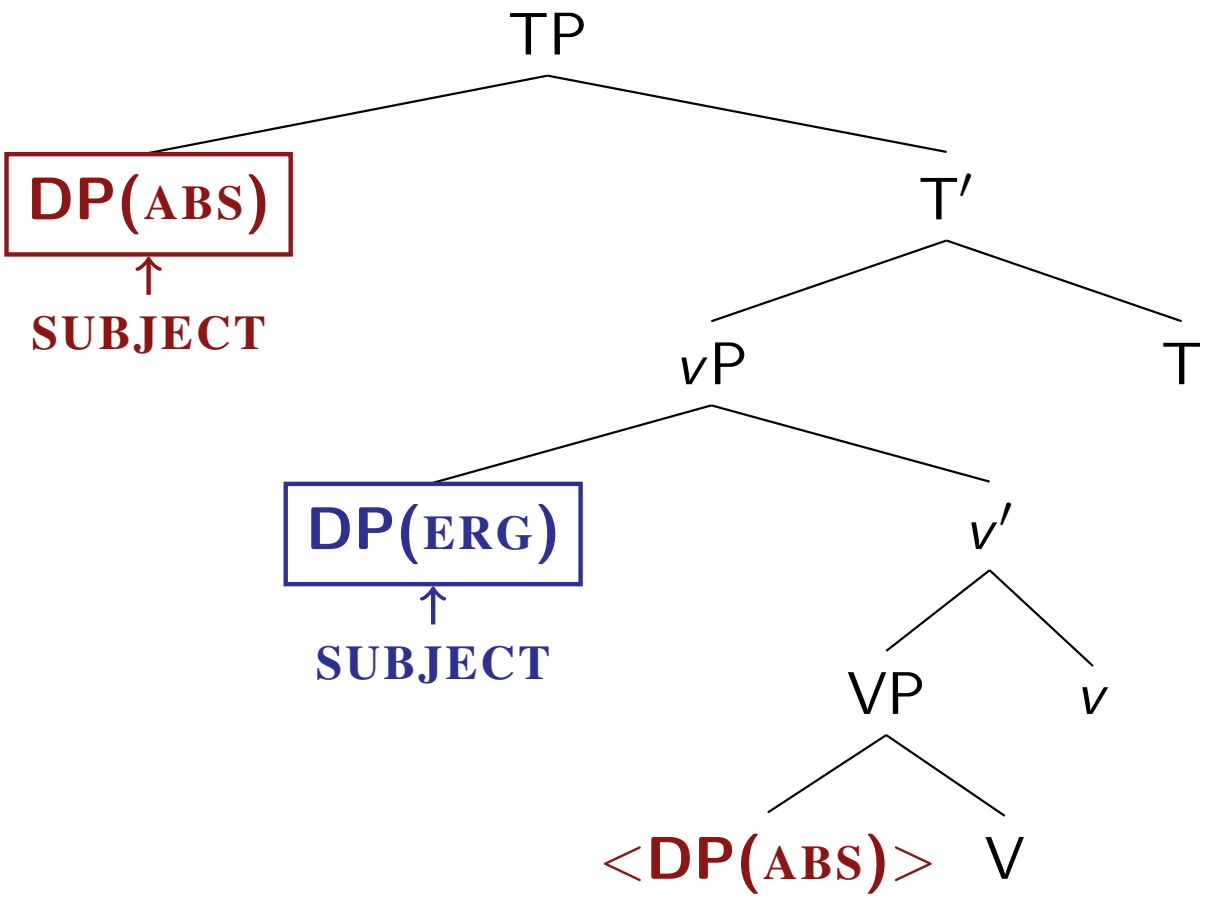

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

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Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- reciprocals

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

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Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- reciprocals
- parasitic gaps

} **A-domain**

- reflexives
- control

} **theta-domain**

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- **reciprocals**
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A-domain

theta-domain

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

Reciprocals provide evidence that ABS is the subject.

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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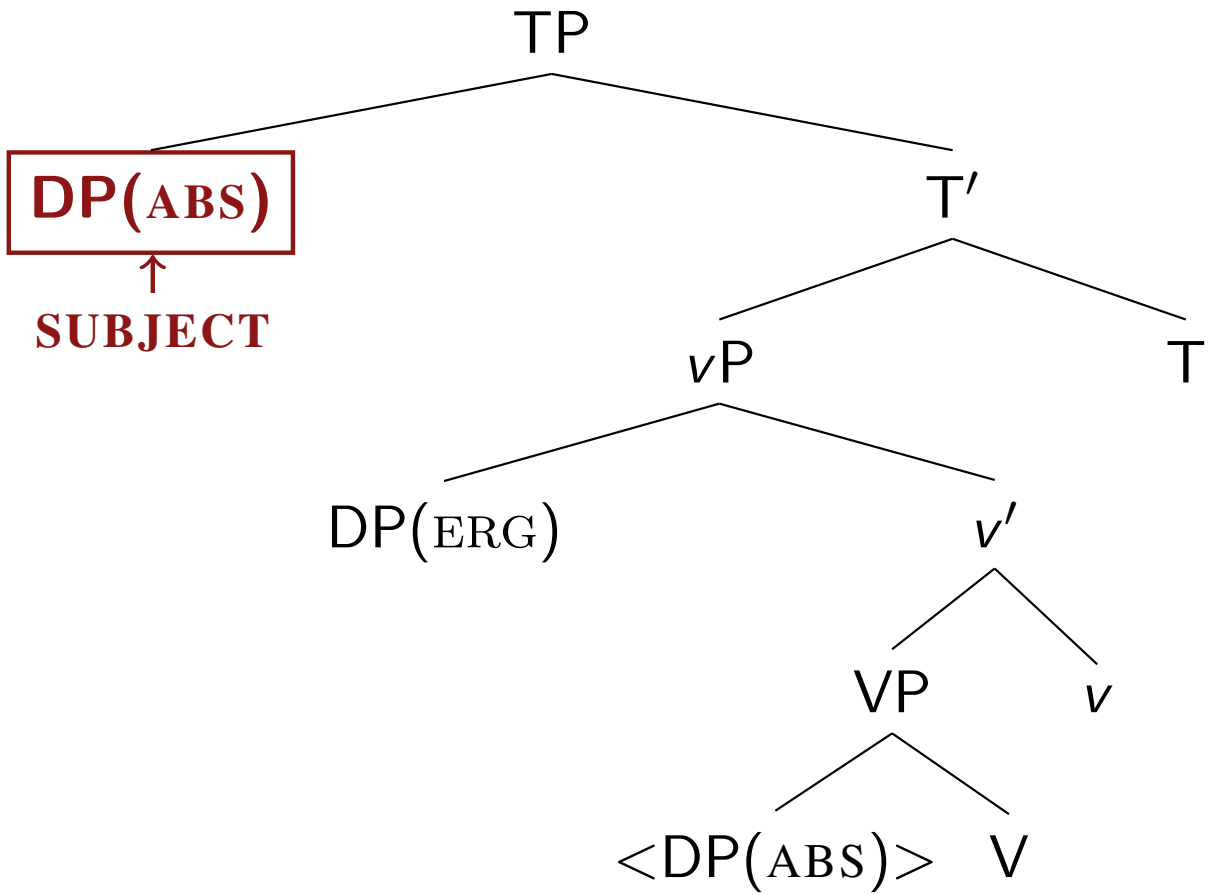

Reciprocal binding is diagnosed morphologically

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ABS external argument binds **IO**

Reciprocal binding is diagnosed morphologically

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$\Rightarrow$ REC replaces IO agreement

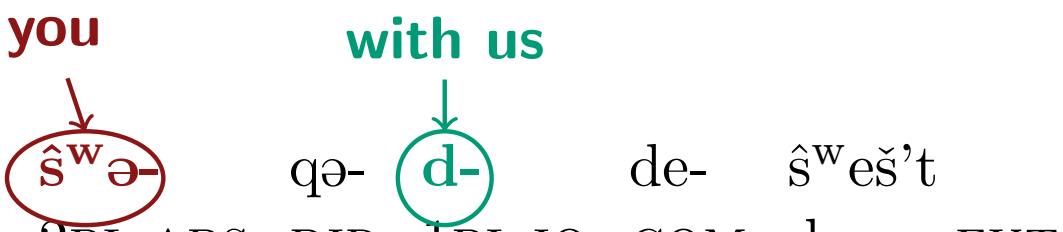
ŝʷə-	qə-	**d-**	de-	ŝʷeš't	
2PL.ABS-	DIR-	1PL.IO-	COM-	dance.FUT	

'You(pl) will dance with us'

Reciprocal binding is diagnosed morphologically

ABS external argument binds **IO**

⇒ REC replaces IO agreement



BASELINE

'You(pl) will dance with us'

Reciprocal binding is diagnosed morphologically

ABS external argument binds **IO**

⇒ REC replaces IO agreement

you **with each other**

ŝʷə-	qə-	ze-	de-	ŝʷešʼt
2PL.ABS-	DIR-	REC.IO-	COM-	dance.FUT

RECIPROCAL

'You(pl) will dance with each other'

Reciprocal binding is established via c-command

ABS external argument binds **IO**:

Reciprocal binding is established via c-command

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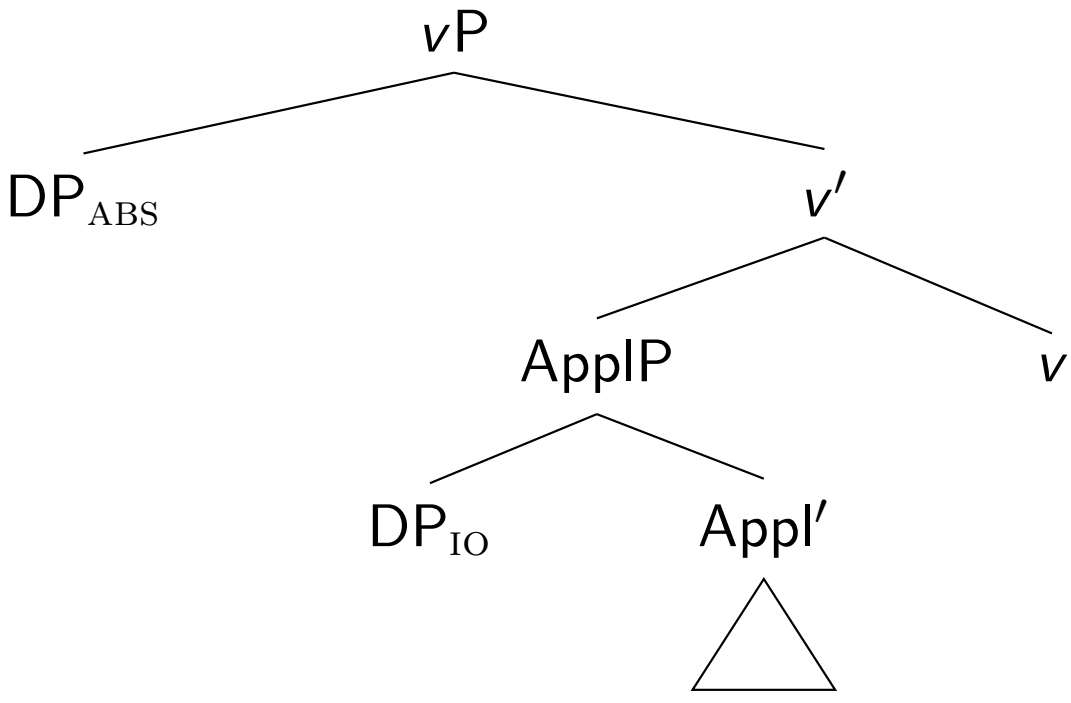

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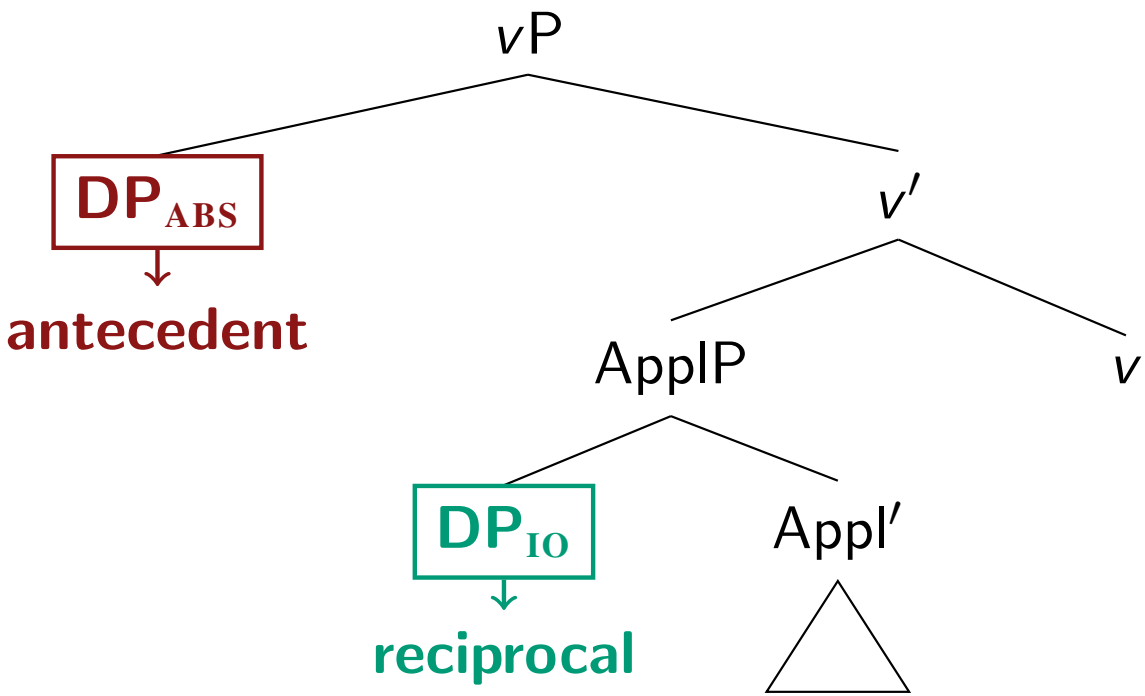

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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ABS binds **ERG**:

ŝʷə-	**t-**	ʎeʁʷəʁ
2PL.ABS-	1PL.ERG-	see.PST

BASELINE

'We saw you(pl).'

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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ABS binds **ERG**:

you **we**

ŝʷə-	t-	λeʁʷəʁ
2PL.ABS-	1PL.ERG-	see.PST

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Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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ABS binds **ERG**:

we **each other**

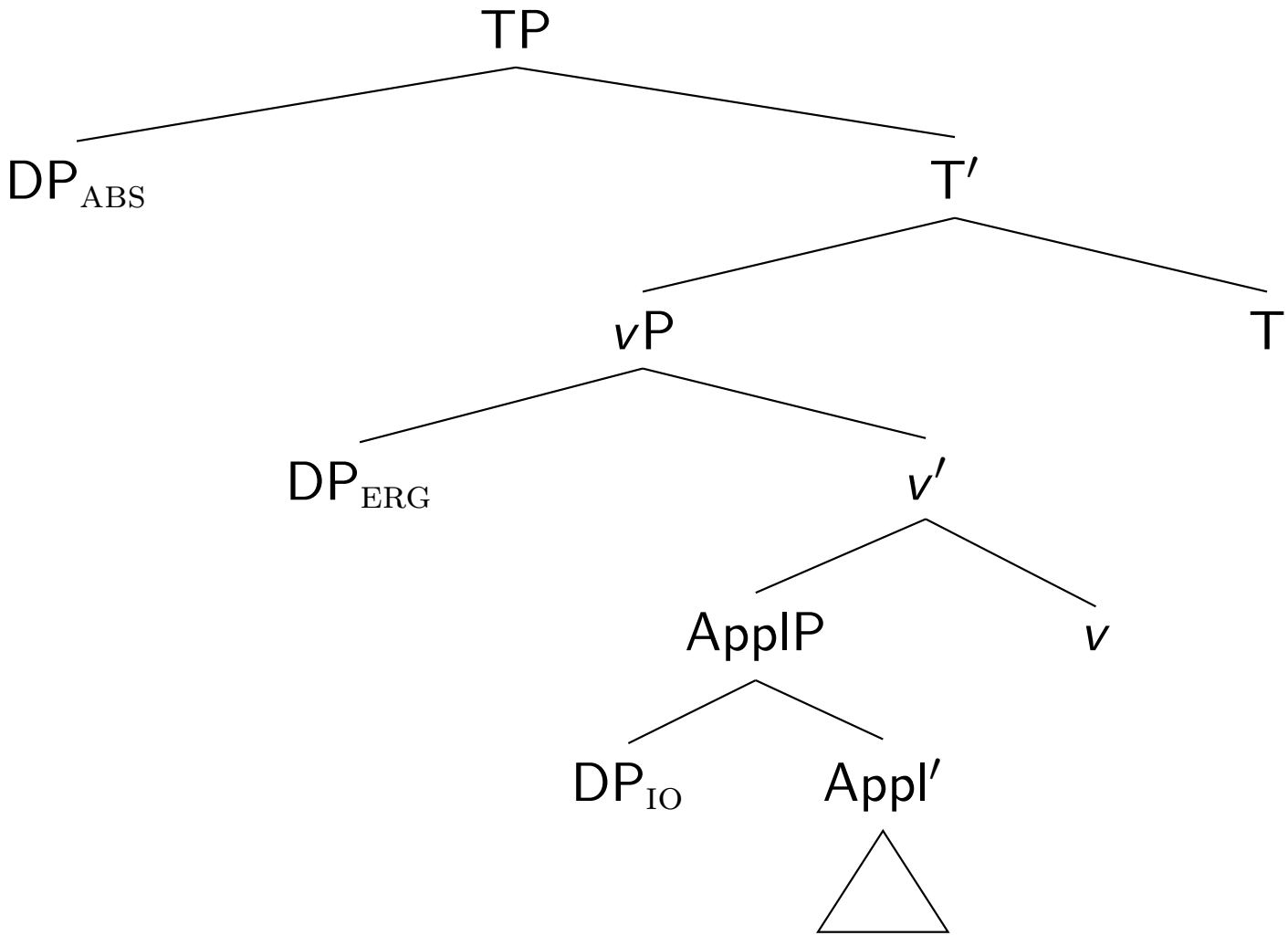
tə-	zere-	λeʁʷəʁ
1PL.ABS-	REC.ERG-	see.PST

RECIPROCAL

'We saw each other.'

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

ABS binds reciprocals in **ERG** and **IO** positions:



Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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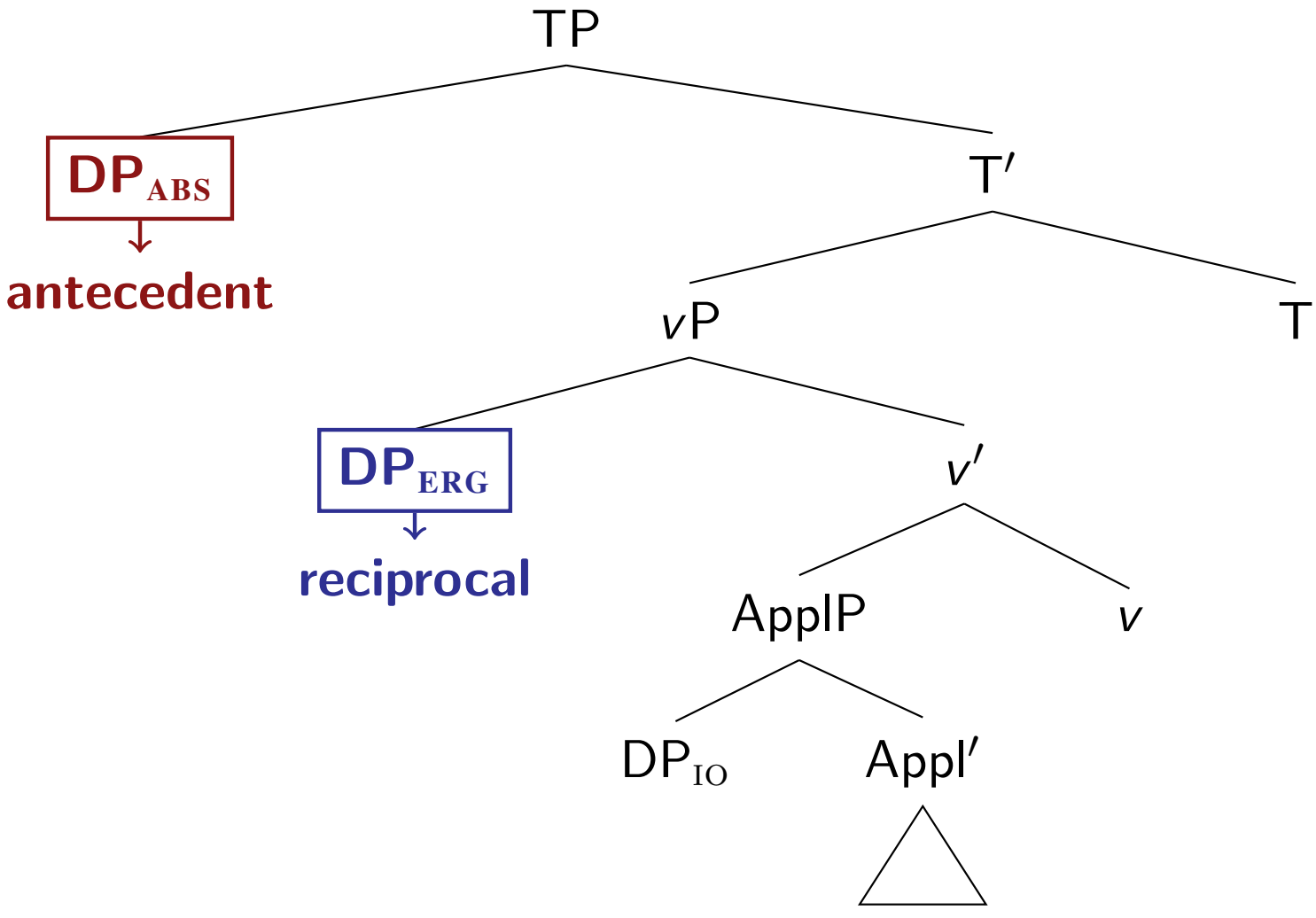

Reciprocals and syntactic ergativity

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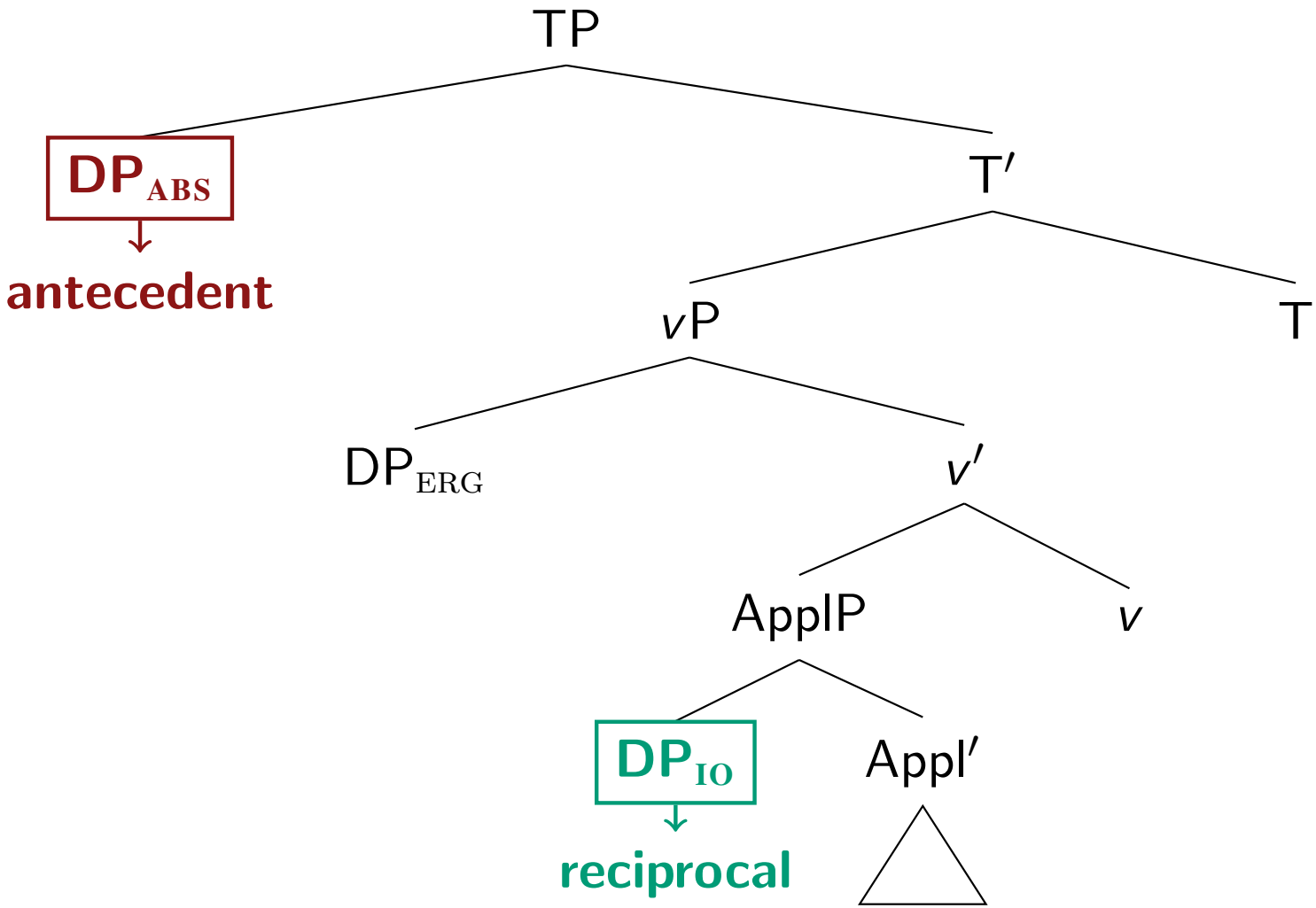

Absolutive as the clause-level subject

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- reciprocals → **ABS** c-commands **ERG** and **IO**

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- other clause-level phenomena should single out ABS as the subject

Absolutive as the clause-level subject

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- other clause-level phenomena should single out ABS as the subject

Parasitic gaps confirm subjecthood of absolutive.

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- reciprocals ✓
- **parasitic gaps**
- reflexives
- control

} **A-domain**

} **theta-domain**

Parasitic gaps as a subjecthood diagnostics

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Anti-C-Command Condition (Engdahl 1983:22):
"A parasitic gap may not be c-commanded by the real gap."

See also Engdahl (1983); Aoun and Clark (1985); Chomsky (1986); Contreras (1987), a.o.

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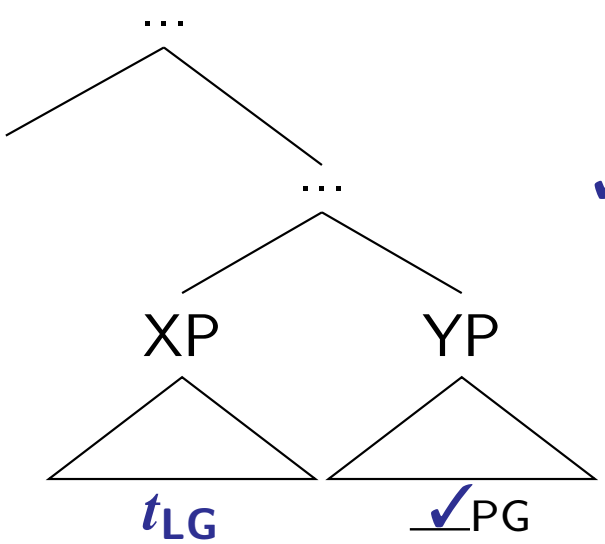

✓parasitic gap

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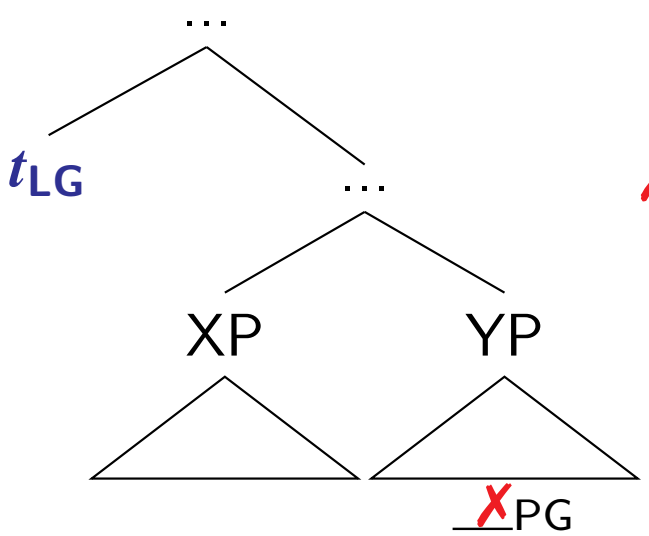

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E.g. in English:
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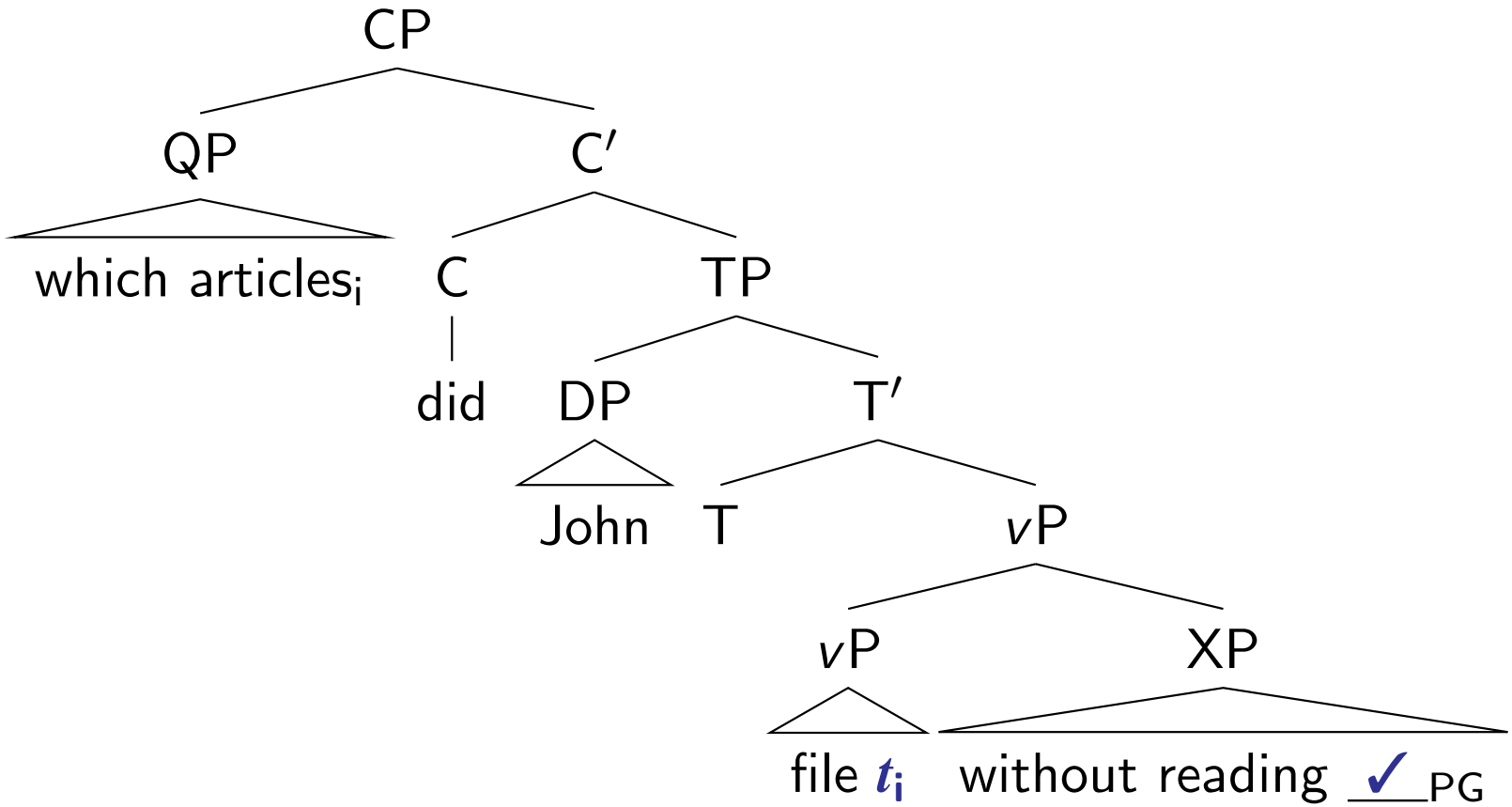

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E.g. in English:
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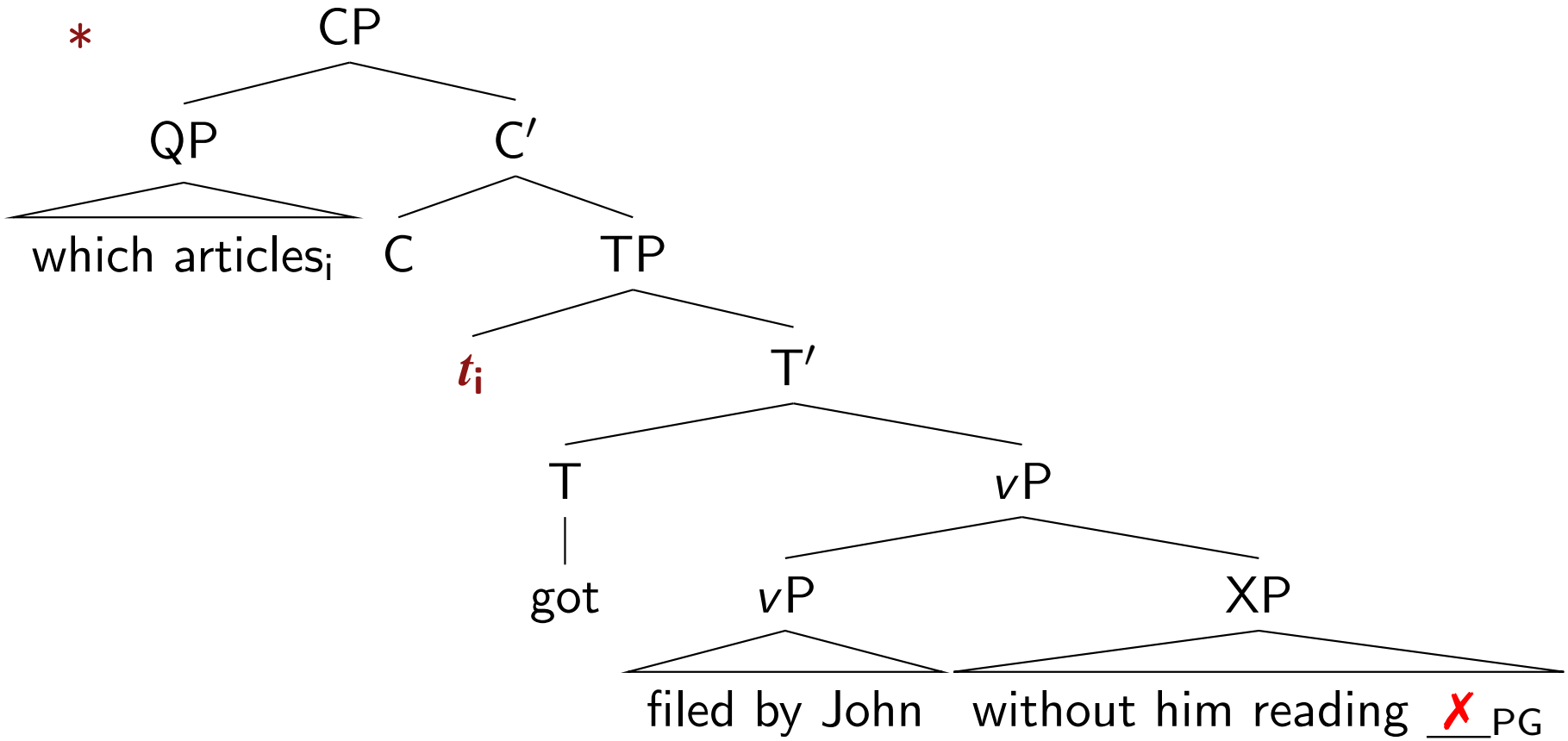

Possessor parasitic gaps in West Circassian (Ershova 2019a)

Possessor parasitic gaps in West Circassian (Ershova 2019a)

- wh-movement triggers wh-agreement on the predicate

četəwew$_{\text{i}}$	[*pro*$_{\text{i}}$	Ø-	jəšxən]	t_{i}	Ø-	**zə-**	məšxərer
cat		3SG.POSS-	food		3ABS-	**WH.ERG-**	NEG.eat.DYN.ABS

'the cat who doesn't eat its food'

Possessor parasitic gaps in West Circassian (Ershova 2019a)

- wh-movement triggers wh-agreement on the predicate

Op$_i$				**wh-trace$_i$**			
↓				↓			
četəwew$_i$	[*pro*$_i$	Ø-	jəšxən]	***t*$_i$**	Ø-	**zə-**	məšxərer
cat		3SG.POSS-	food		3ABS-	**WH.ERG-**	NEG.eat.DYN.ABS

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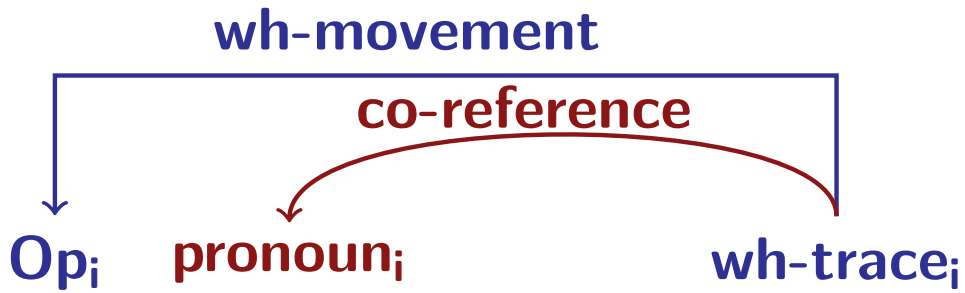

četəwew$_i$	[*pro*$_i$	Ø-	jəšxən] t_i	Ø-	**zə-**	məšxərer
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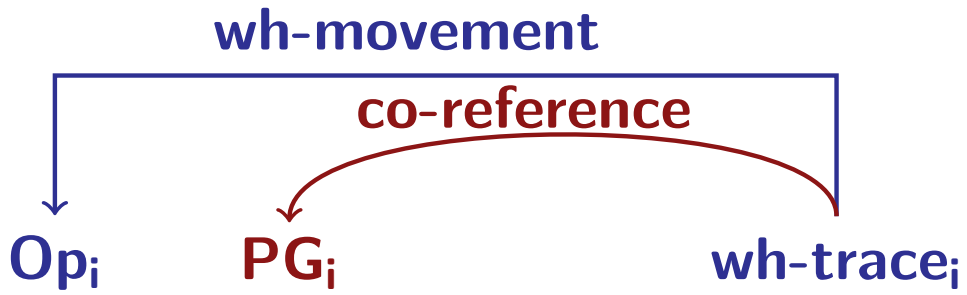
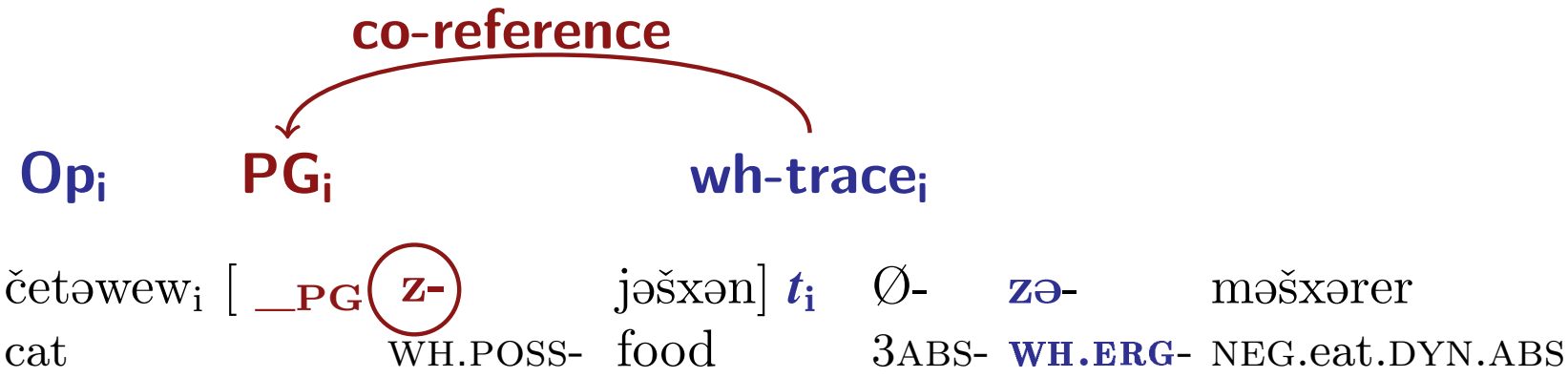


četəwew$_i$	[**__PG**	**z-**	jəšxən]	t_i	Ø-	**zə-**	məšxərer
cat		WH.POSS-	food		3ABS-	**WH.ERG-**	NEG.eat.DYN.ABS

'the cat who doesn't eat its food'

Possessor parasitic gaps in West Circassian (Ershova 2019a)

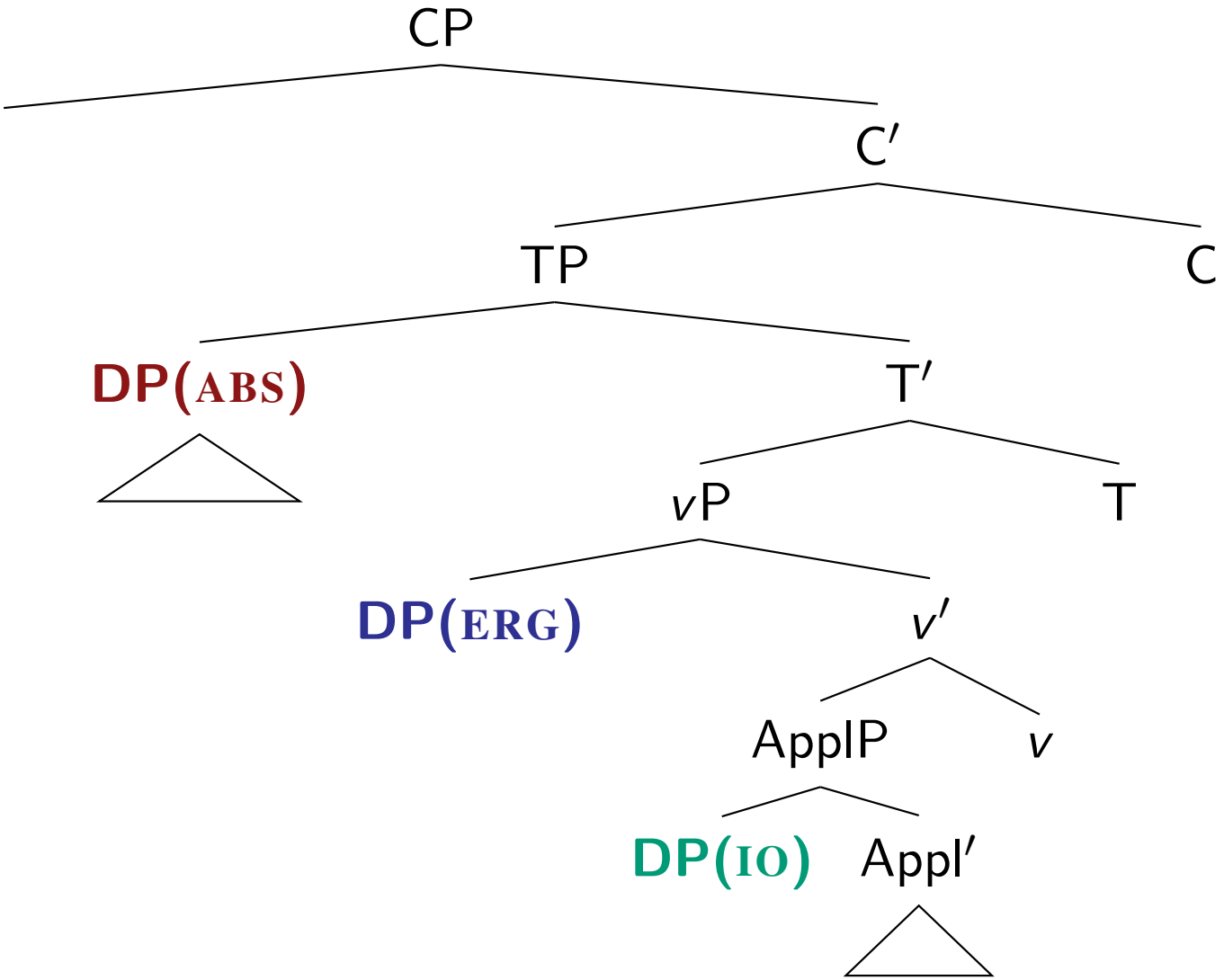
- wh-movement triggers wh-agreement on the predicate
- if there is a co-referent possessor pronoun
  it may be replaced by parasitic gap
- parasitic gap triggers **additional wh-agreement**



'the cat who doesn't eat its food'

Parasitic gaps are subject to the anti-c-command condition

ERG or **IO** trace can license a parasitic gap in **ABS** DP:



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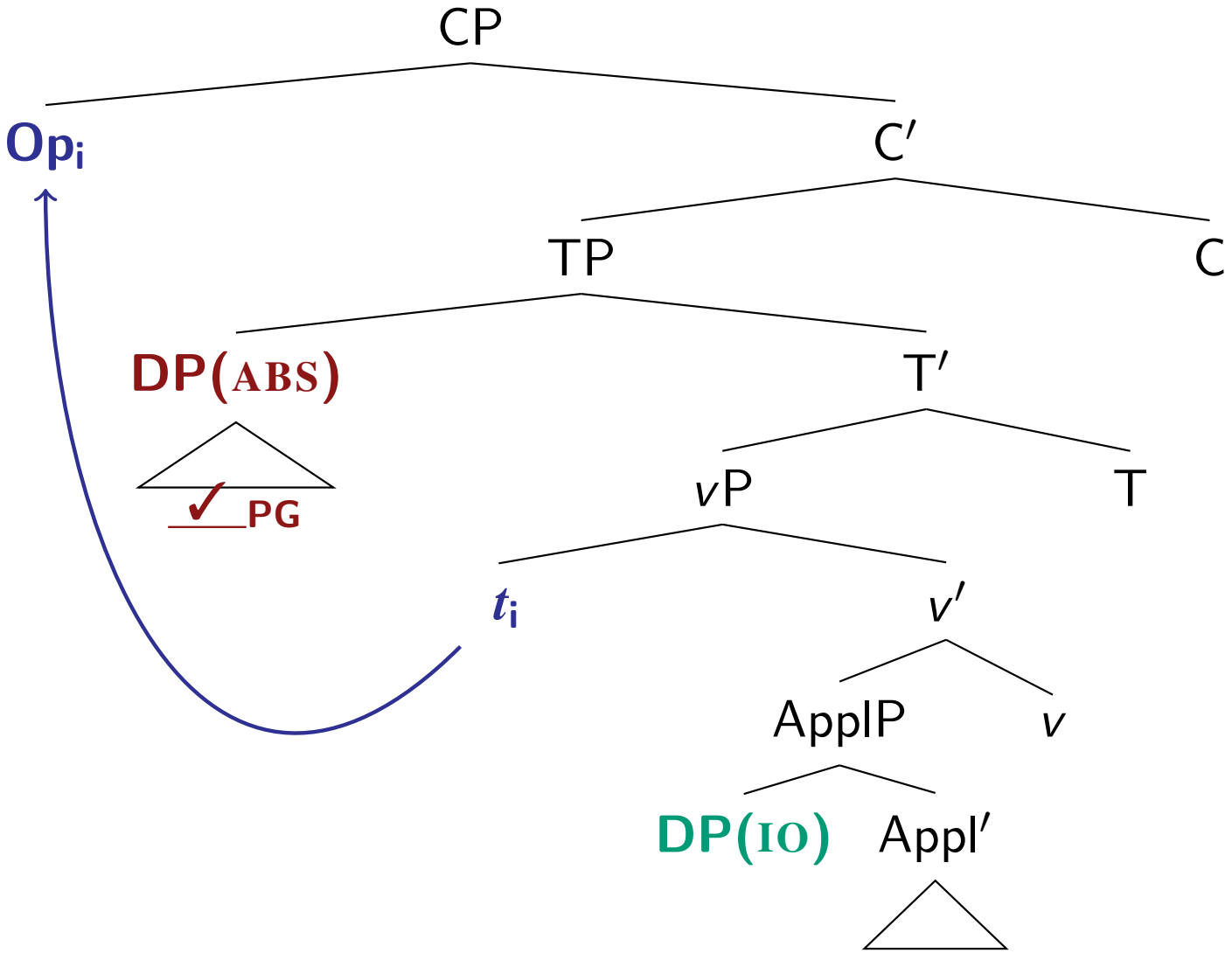

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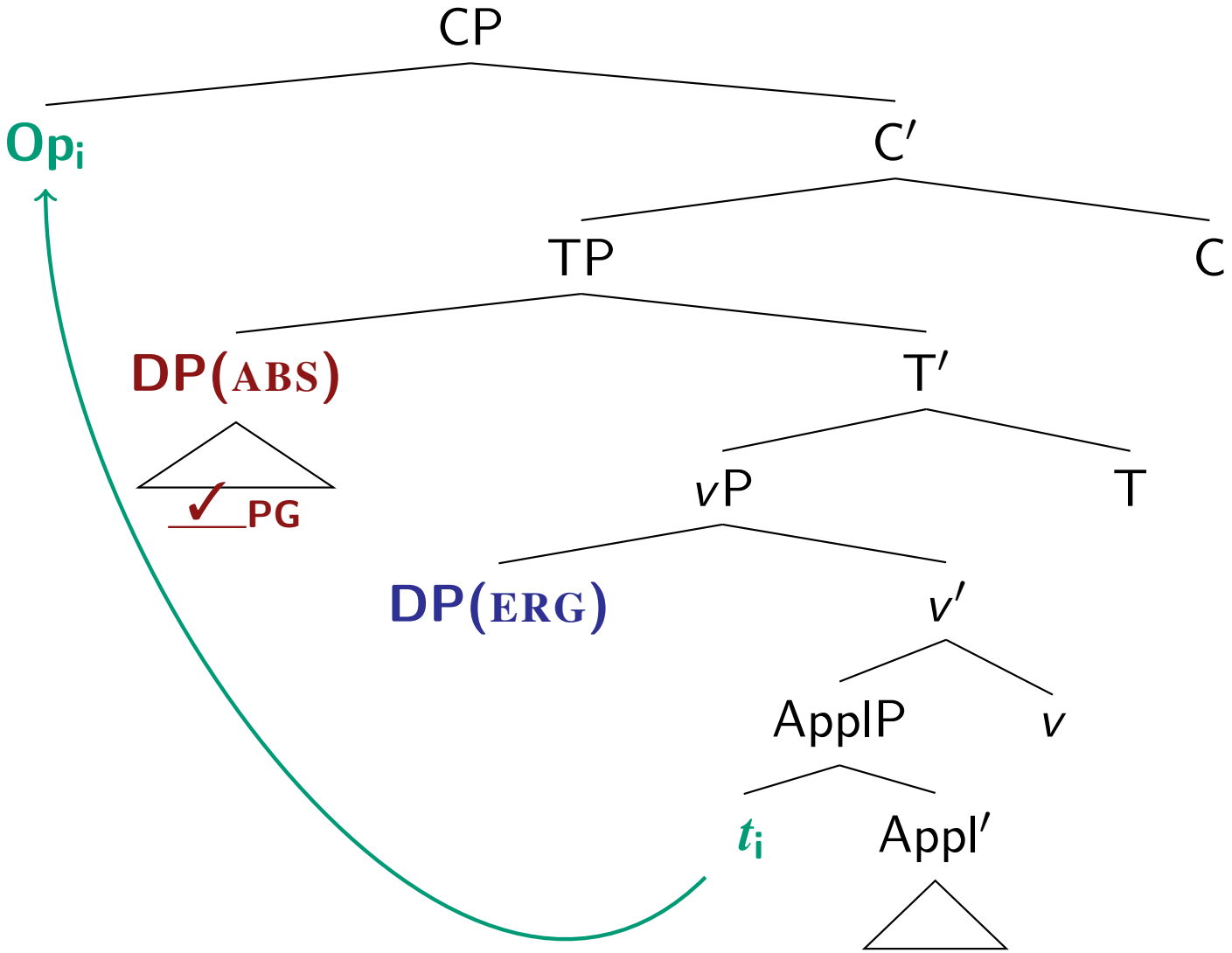

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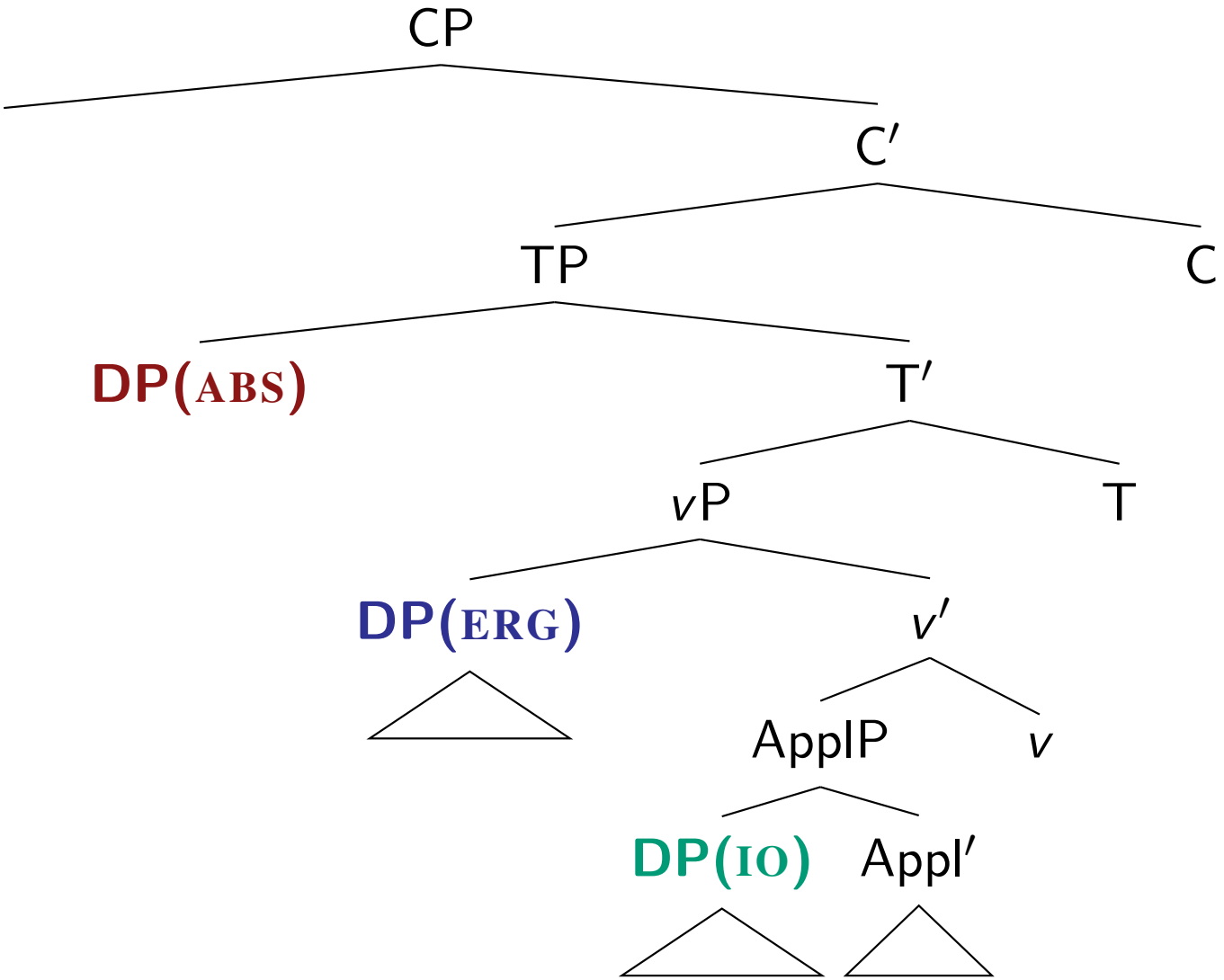

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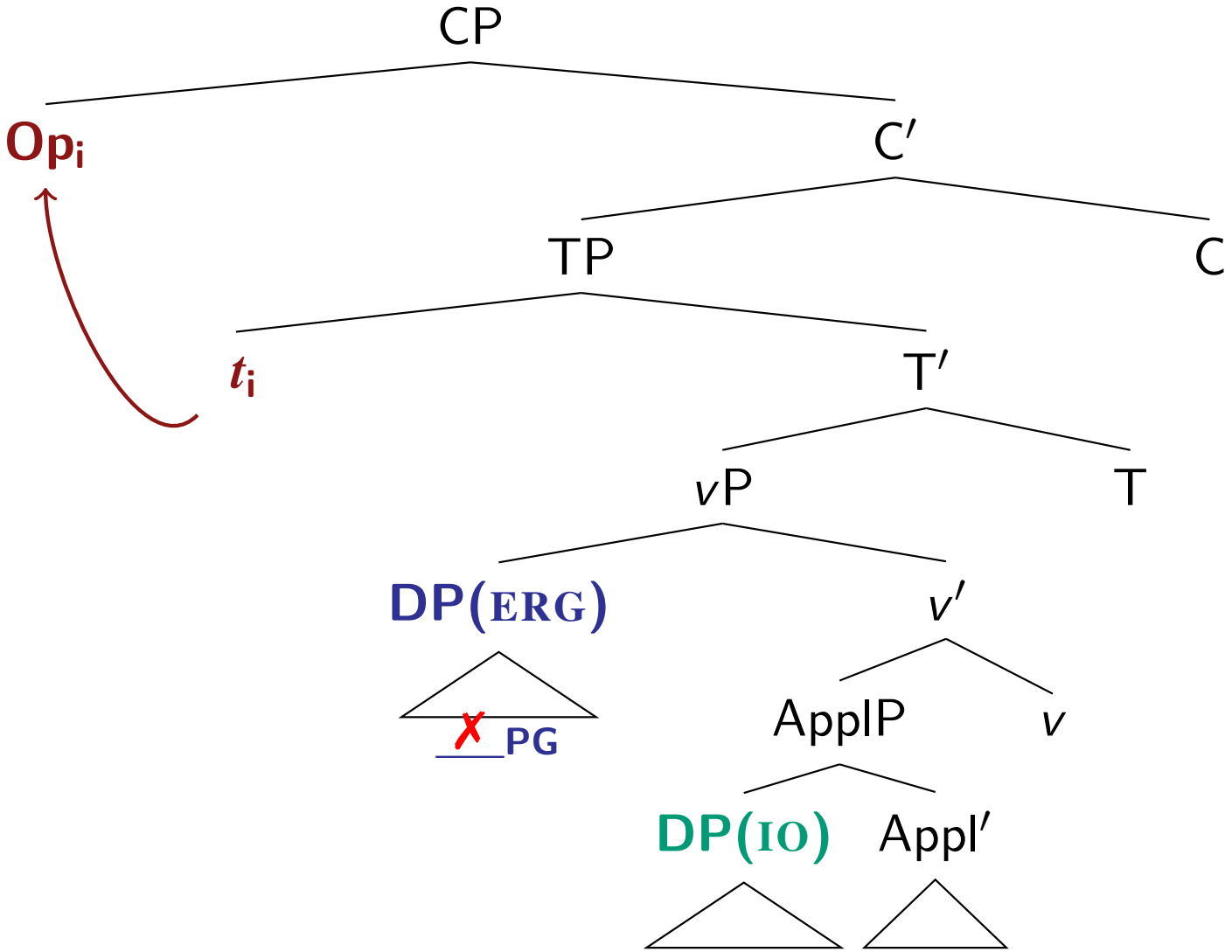

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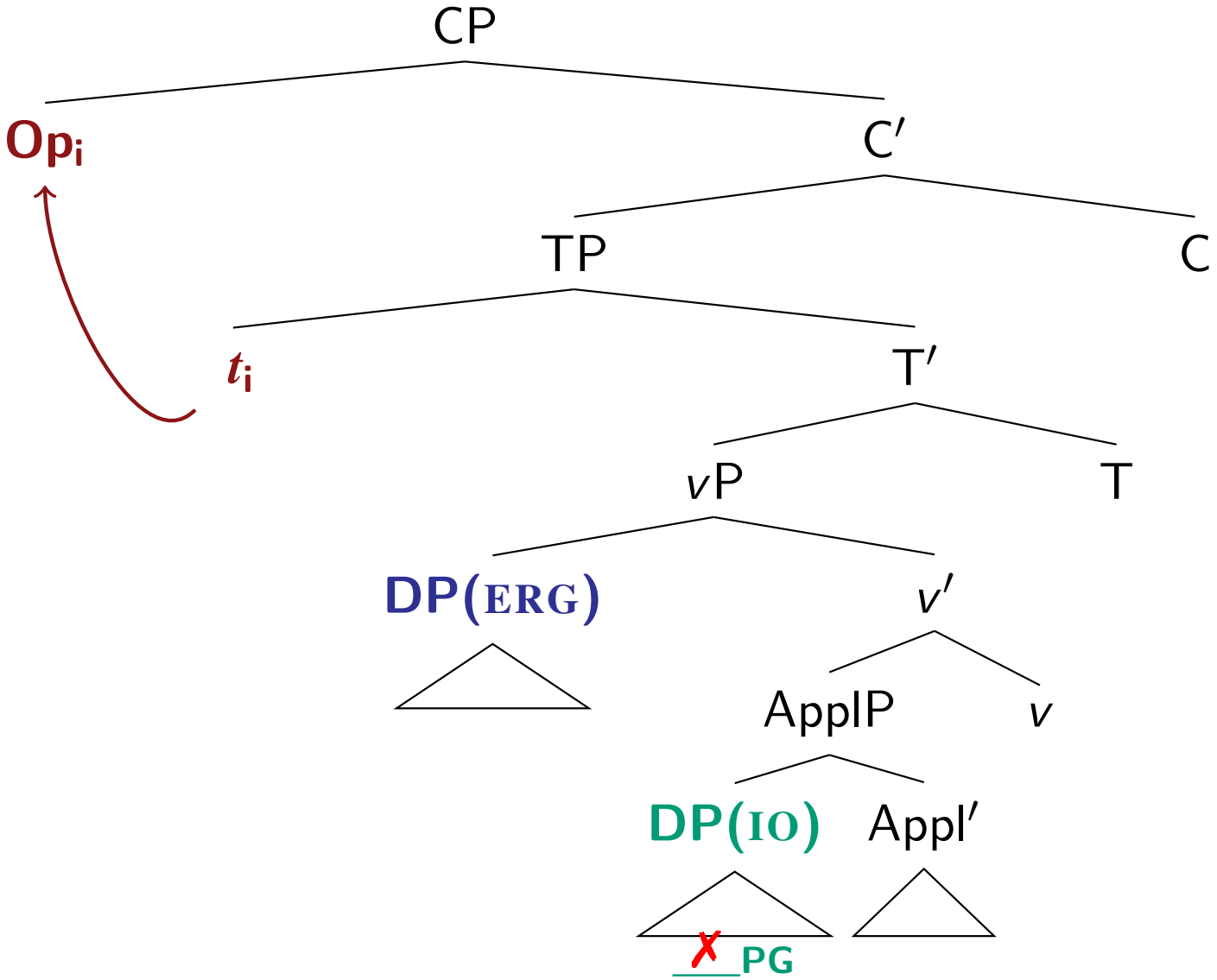

Absolutive trace cannot license parasitic gaps in clausemate DPs

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ABS theme cannot license parasitic gap in **ERG** DP:

* Op$_i$	t_i	[**_PG**	**z-**	jane]	**Ø-**	ə-	məʁašxere
			WH.POSS-	mother	**WH.ABS-**	3SG.ERG-	NEG.feed.DYN

haẑ^{w}əš'ərxem
puppies

Intended: 'the puppies whom their mother doesn't feed'

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* haw$_i$	t_i**(ABS)**	[***_PG**	**Z-**	jəx^{w}ezjajən]
dog			**WH.POSS-**	owner
Ø-	Ø-	jeceqež'əʁem		
WH.ABS-	3SG.IO-	bite.PST.OBL		

Intended: 'the dog that bit its owner'

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Diagnosing the lower subject

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Diagnostics for the lower subject position – the highest position in the theta-domain:

- reflexives
- control constructions

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

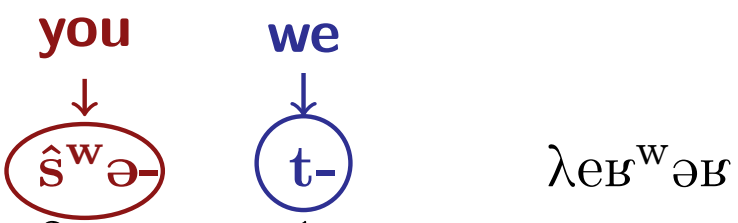
- reciprocals ✓
- parasitic gaps ✓
- **reflexives**
- control

} **A-domain**

} **theta-domain**

Reflexives contrast with reciprocals

RECIPROCALS → **ABS** binds **ERG**



BASELINE

'We saw you(pl).'

Reflexives contrast with reciprocals

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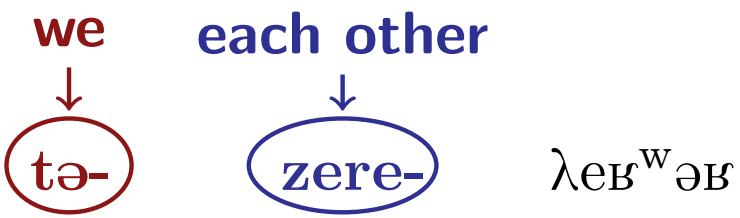

RECIPROCAL

'We saw each other.'

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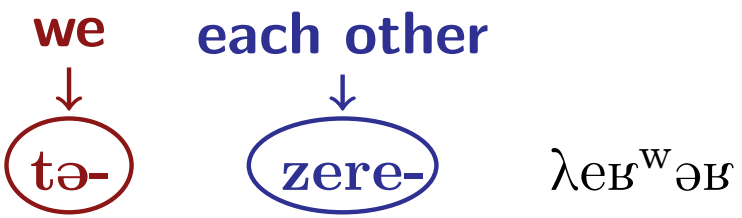

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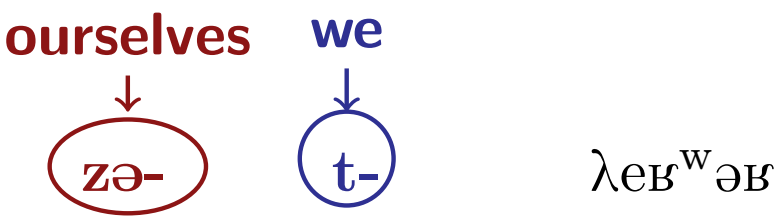

REFLEXIVE

'We saw ourselves.'

Conflicting results for subjecthood diagnostics

- Reciprocals and parasitic gaps $\rightarrow$ ABS c-commands ERG + **ABS is the subject**
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Reflexives are local subject oriented

$\Downarrow$

must be bound by highest DP in the theta-domain

Local subject oriented reflexives

- See e.g. Rizzi (1986); Lidz (1996, 2001); Labelle (2008); Sportiche (2014); Ahn (2015); Bhatia and Poole (2016)
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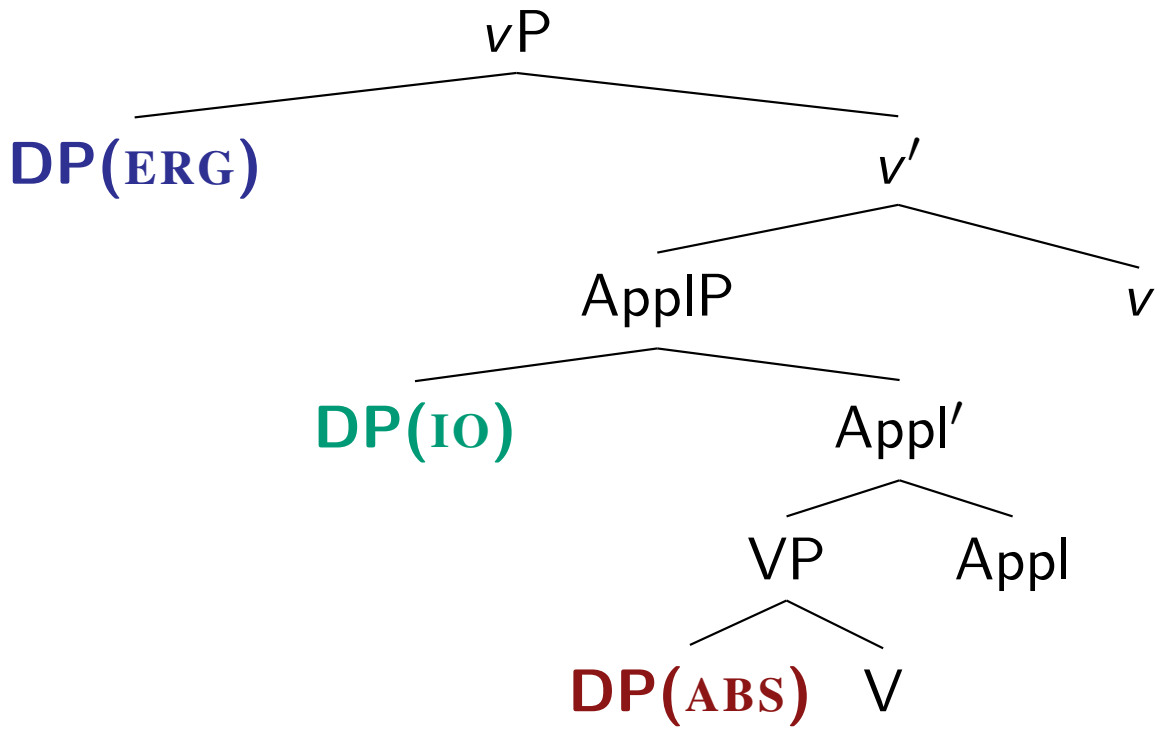

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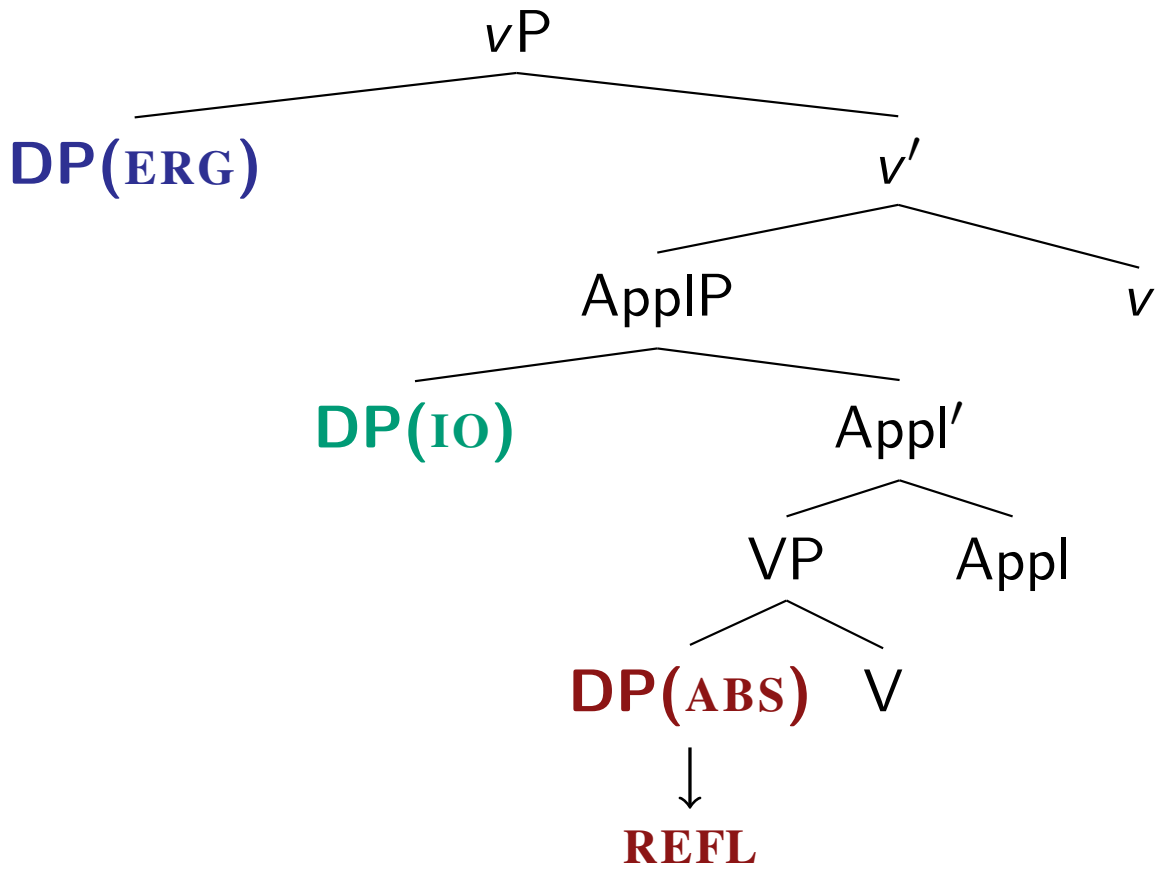

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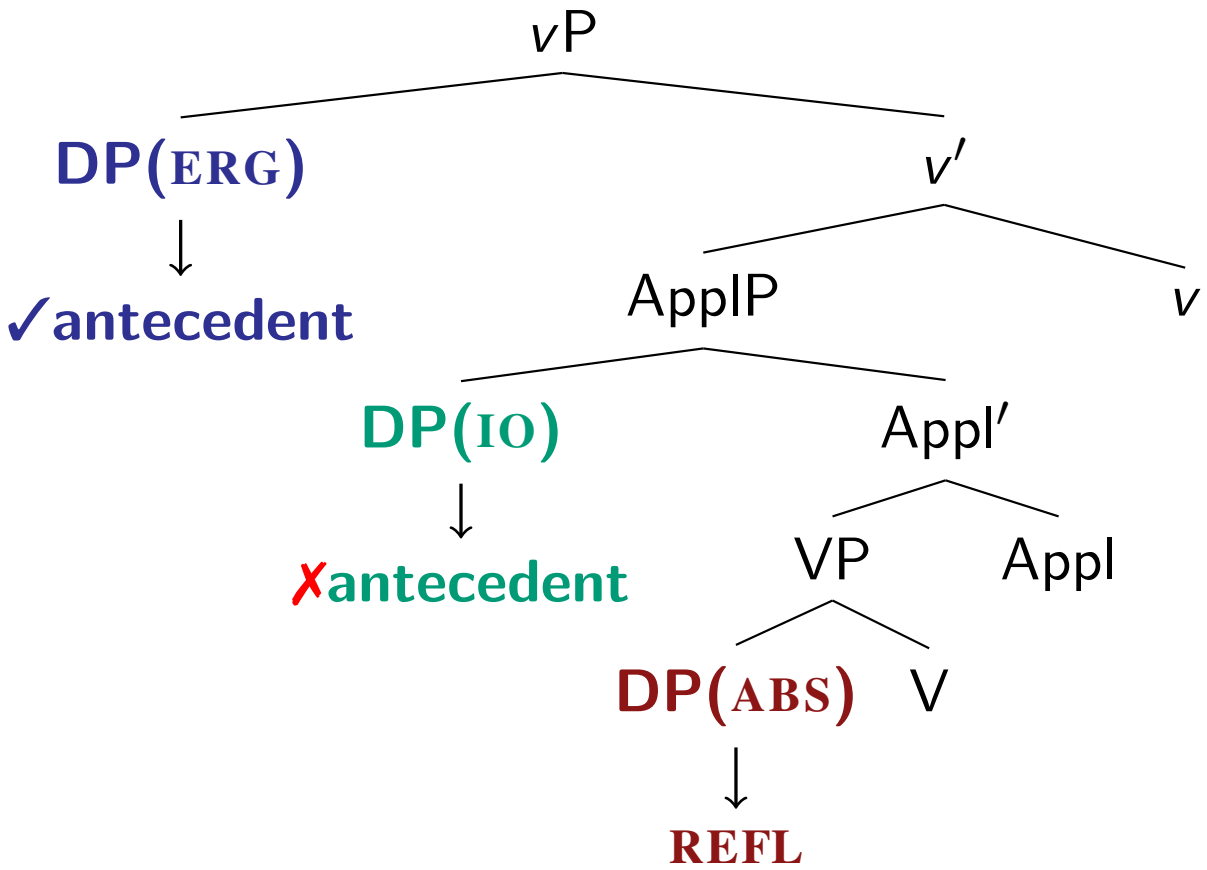

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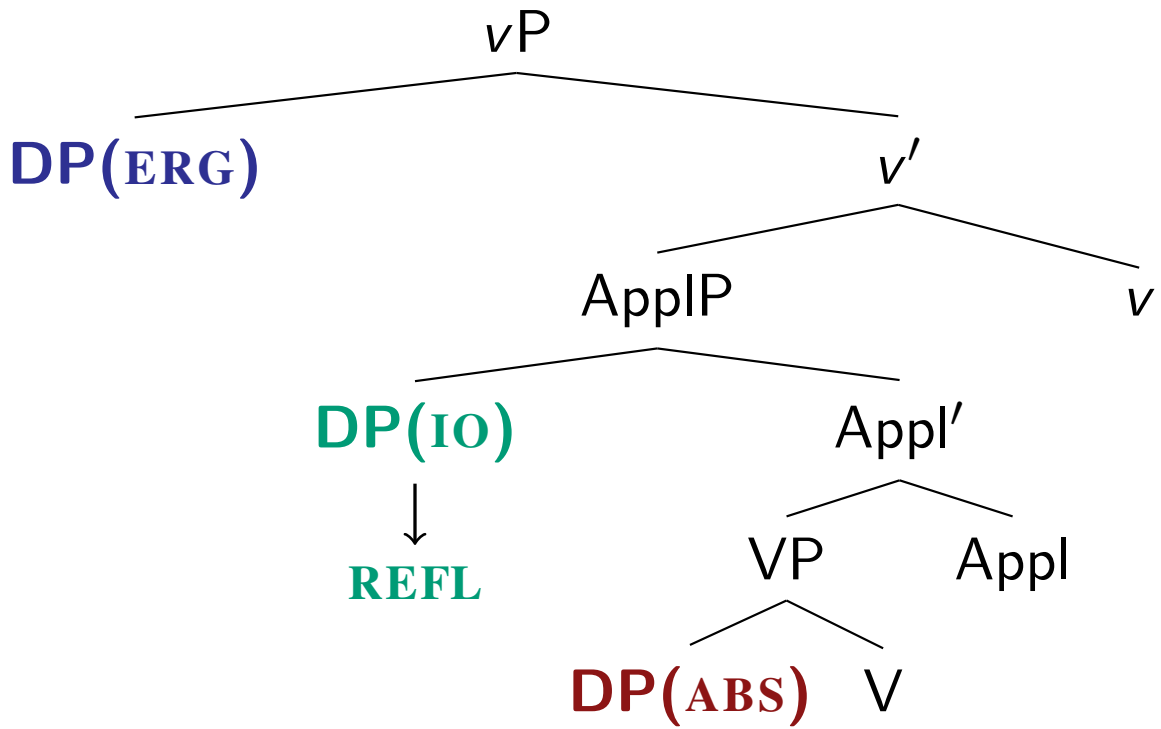

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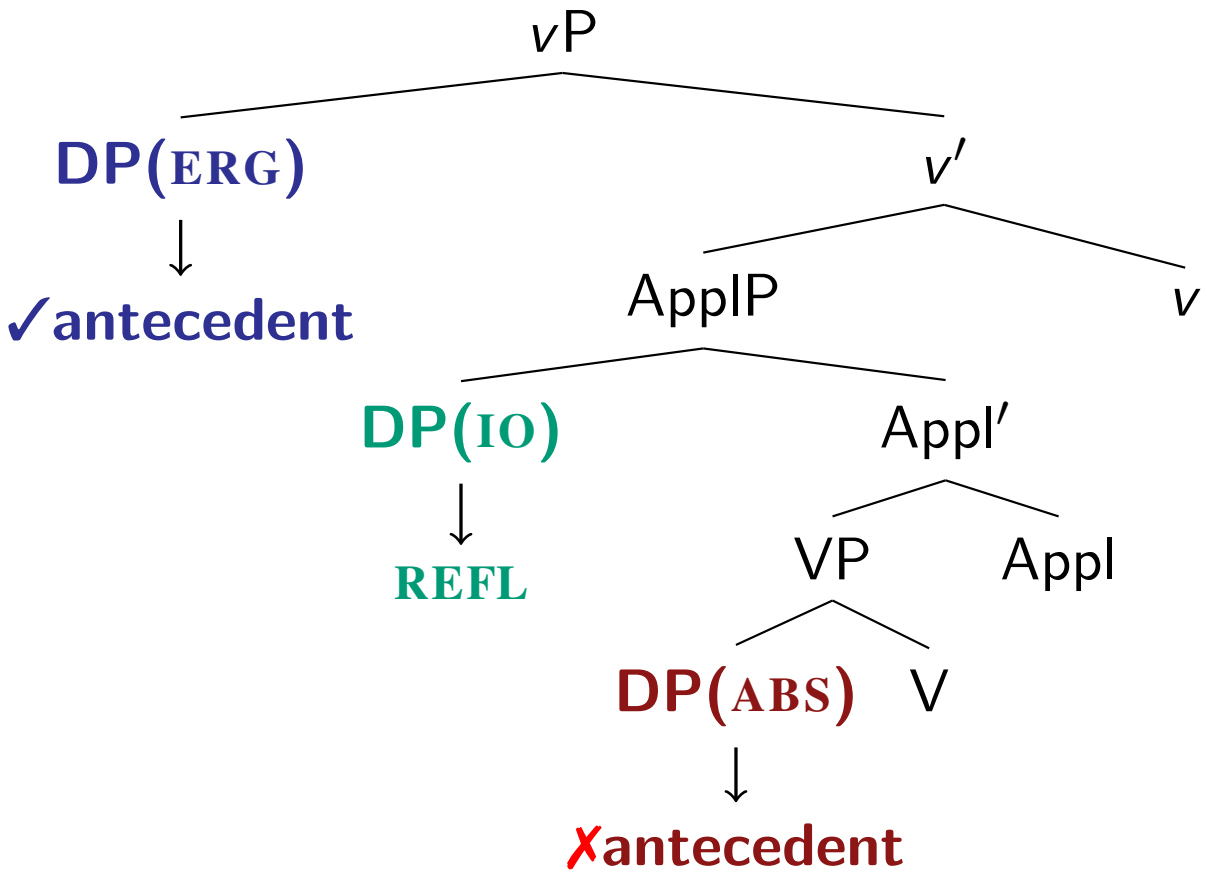

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z-	**a-**	fe-	**s-**	thaǯ’əʁ
REFL.ABS-	3PL.IO-	BEN-	1SG.ERG-	wash.PST

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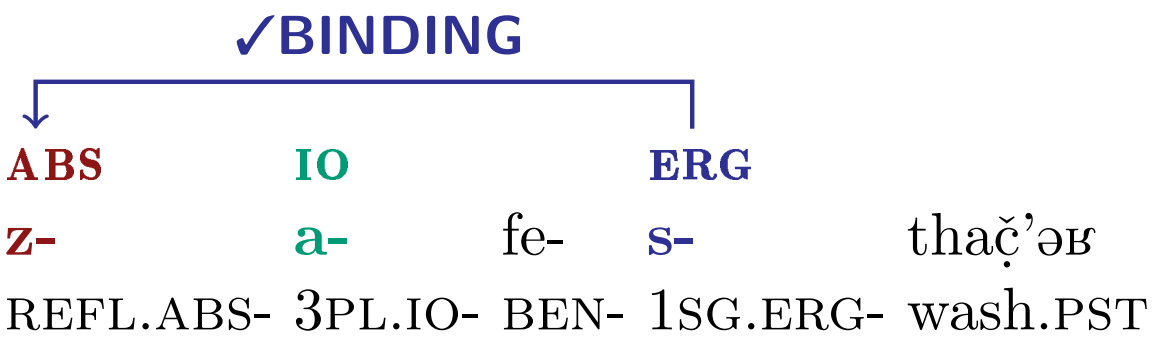

'I washed **myself** for them'

✓ **ERG** binds **ABS**

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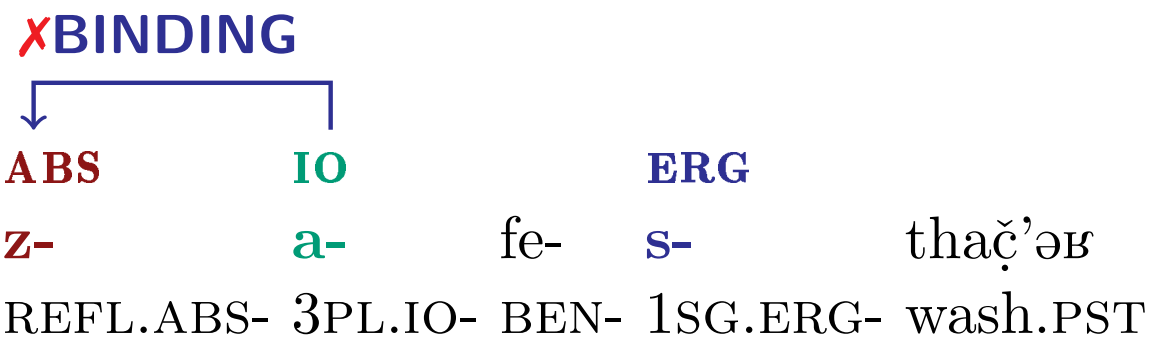

* 'I washed **for them themselves**.'

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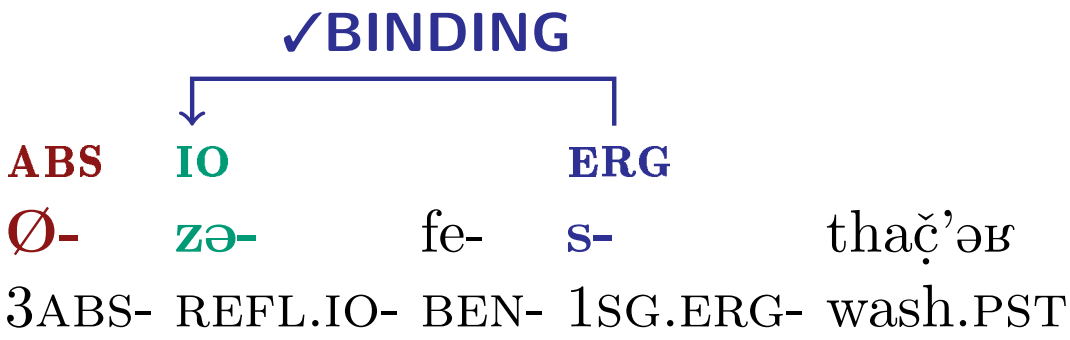

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✗BINDING

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Highest nominal in theta-domain as the subject

- reflexives must be bound by **highest nominal in *v*P**

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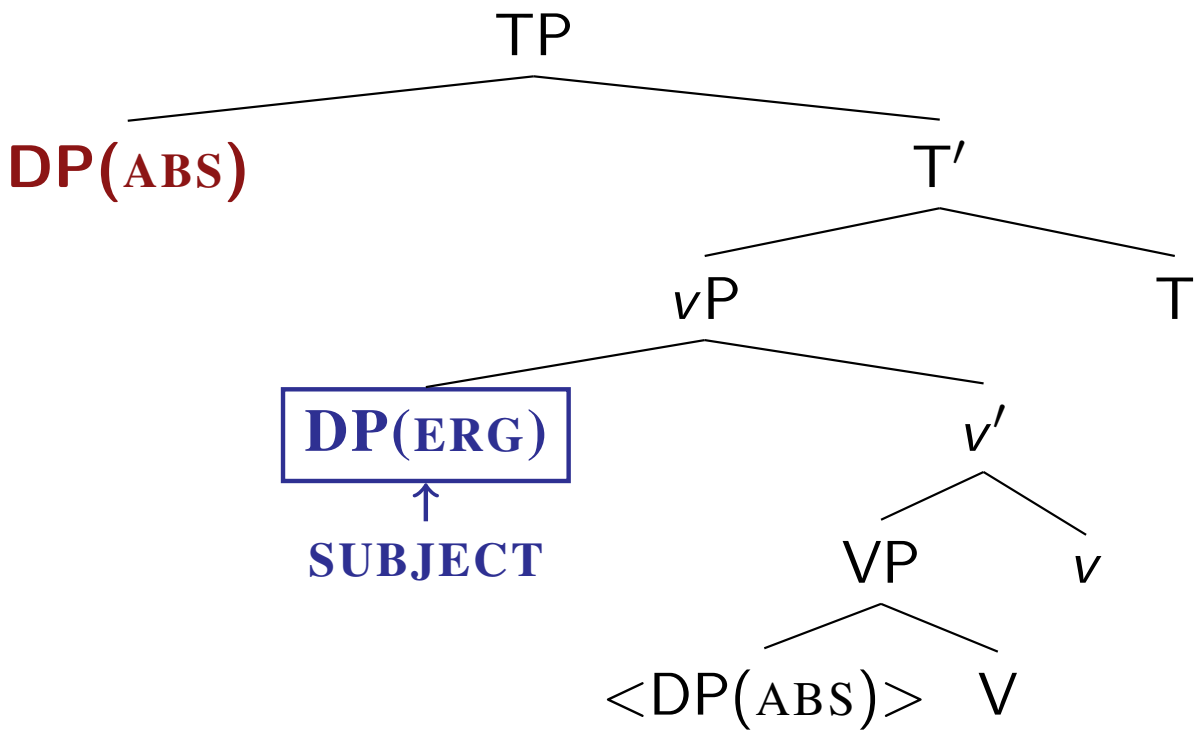


The explanation

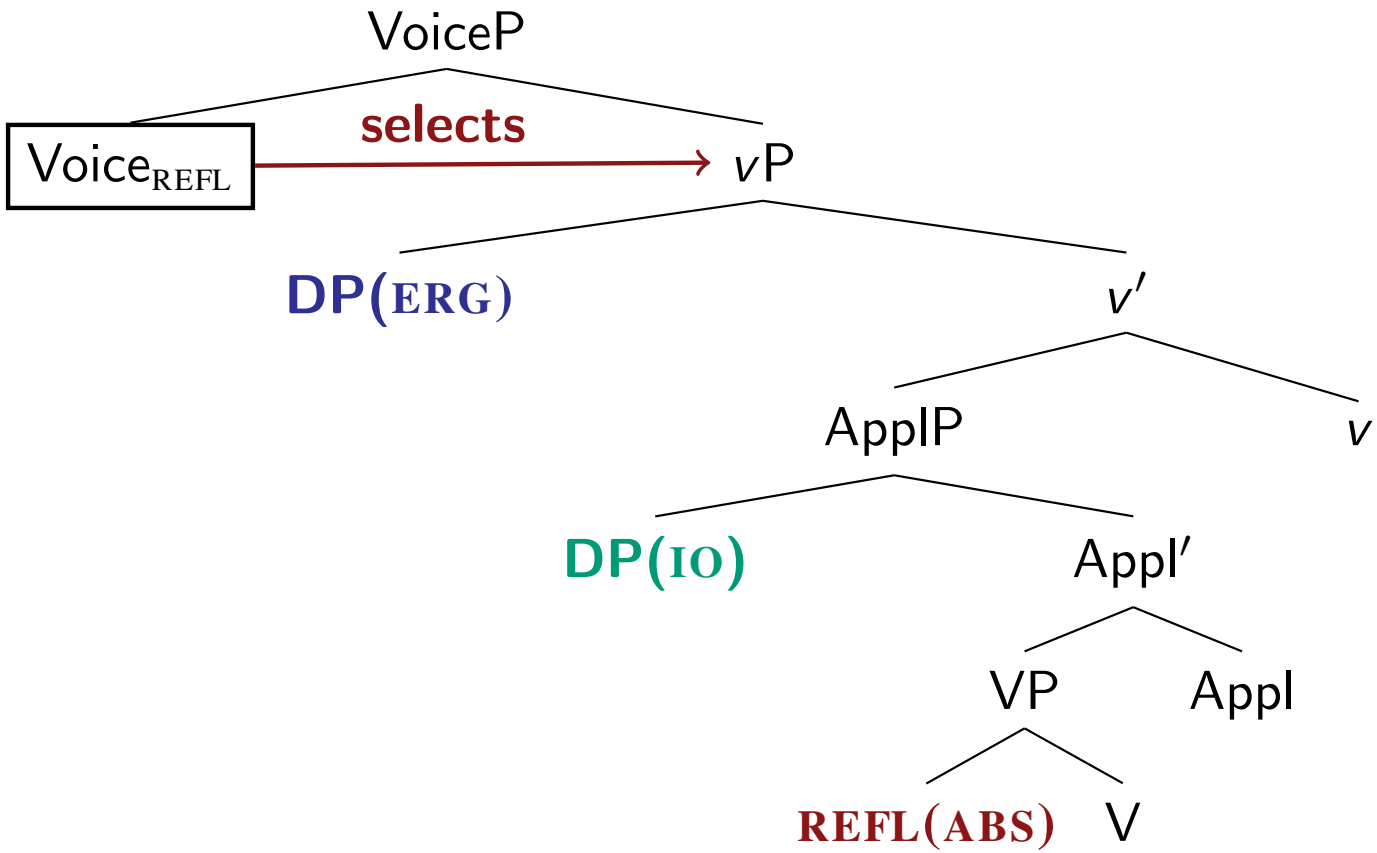
Reflexive binding is constrained by Voice^0.

- See e.g. Labelle 2008; Ahn 2015; Bhatia and Poole 2016.

Reflexive Voice

Reflexive Voice

- selects for *v*P



Reflexive Voice

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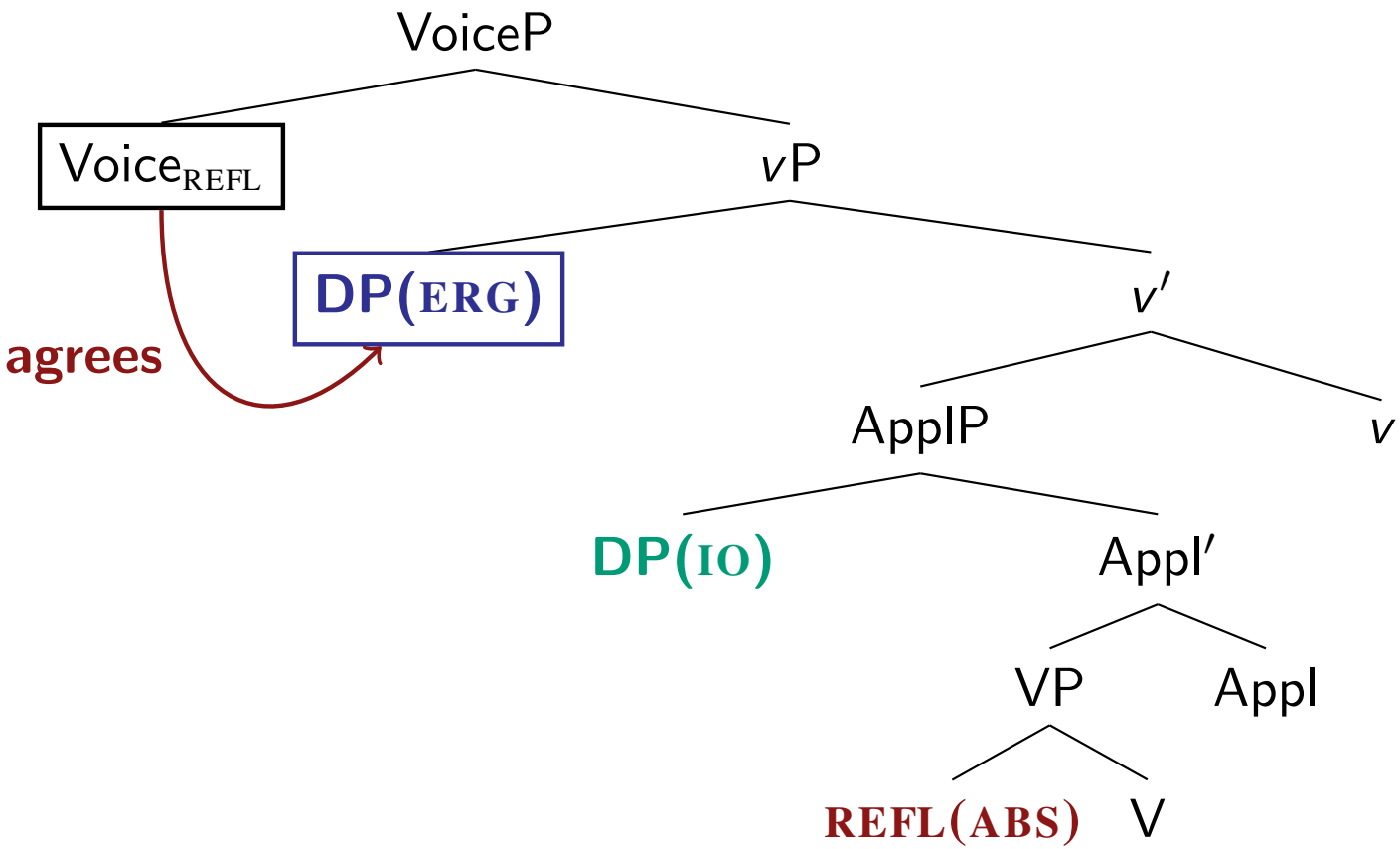

Reflexive Voice

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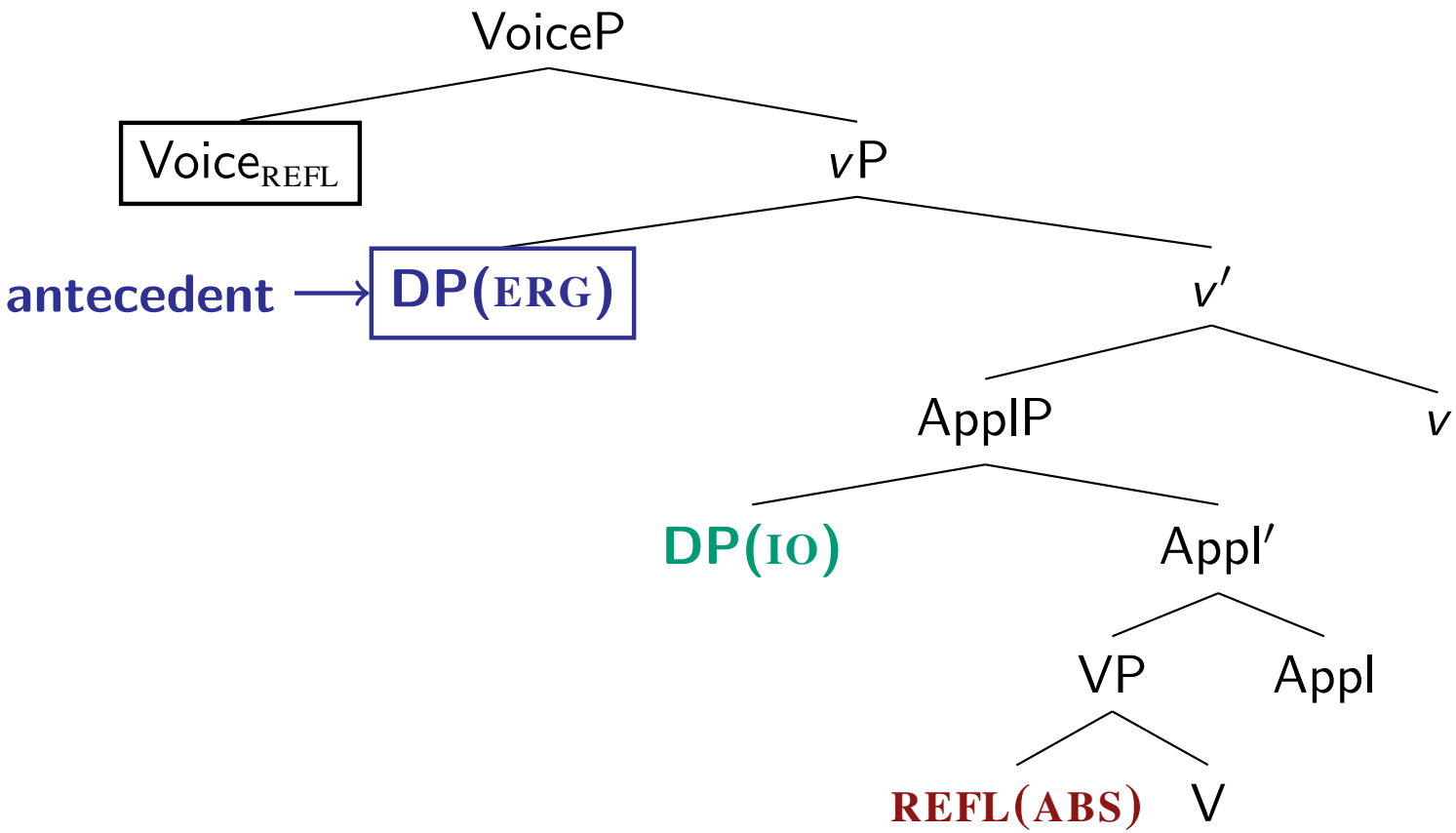

Reflexive Voice

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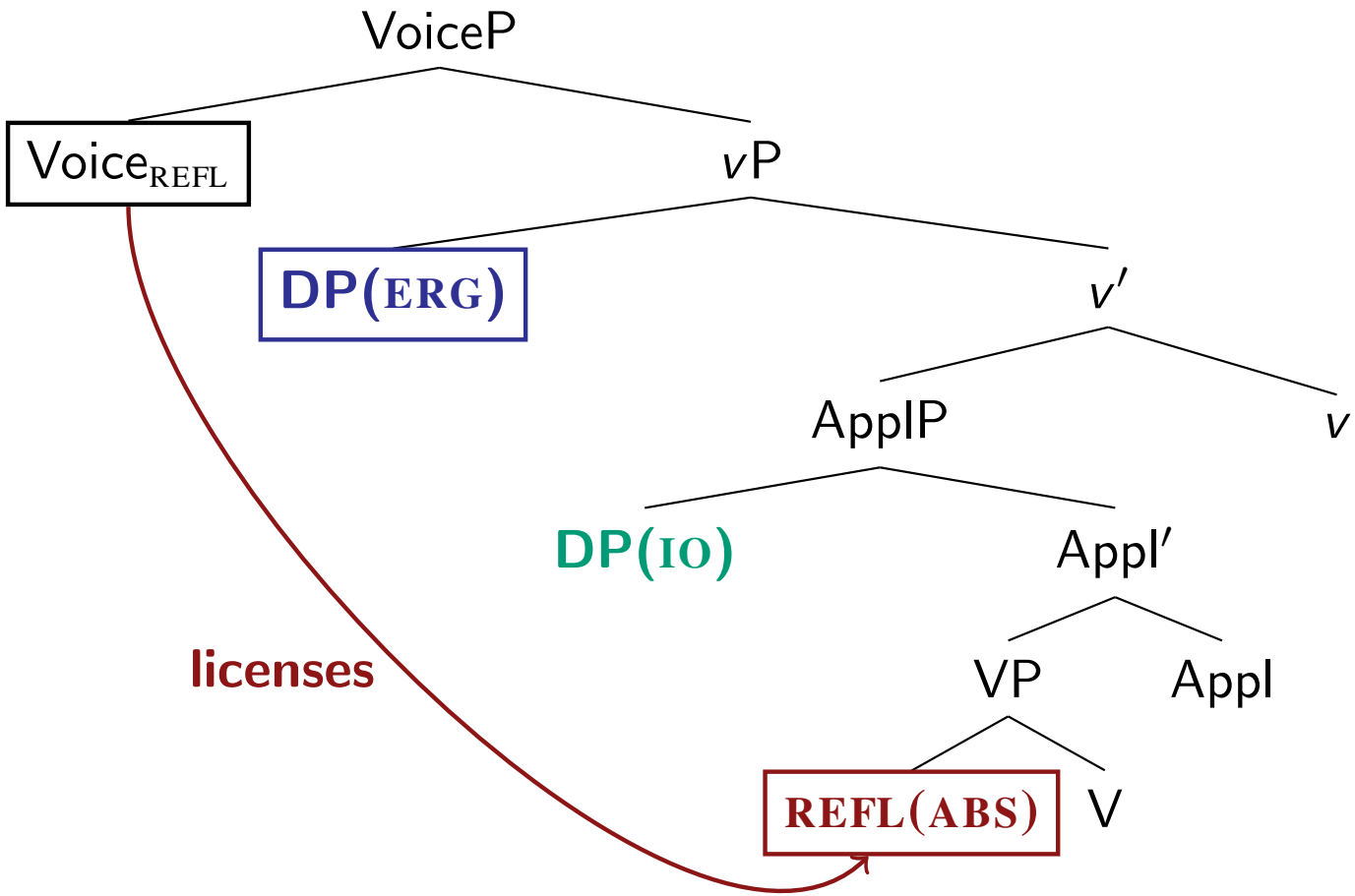

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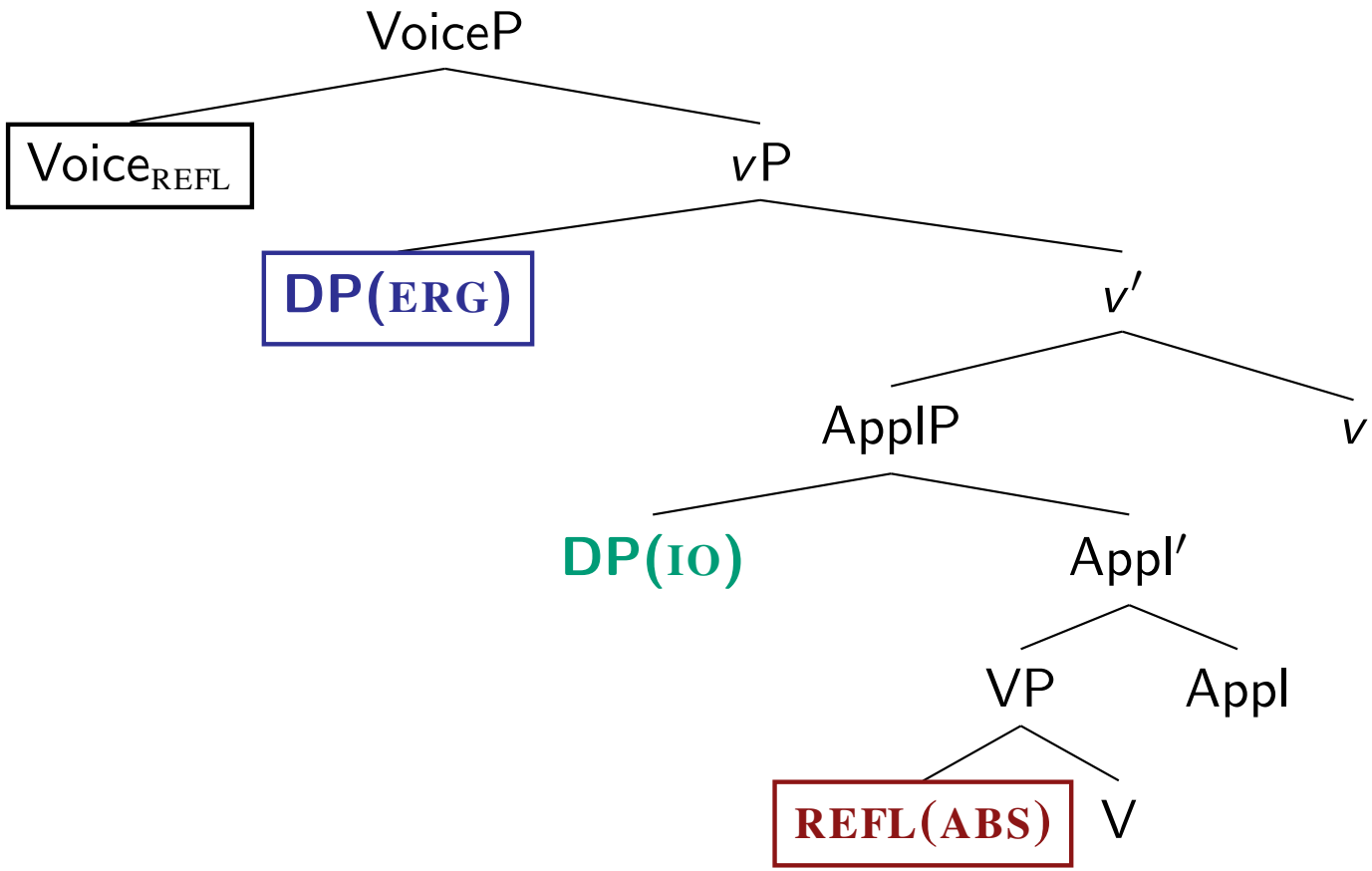
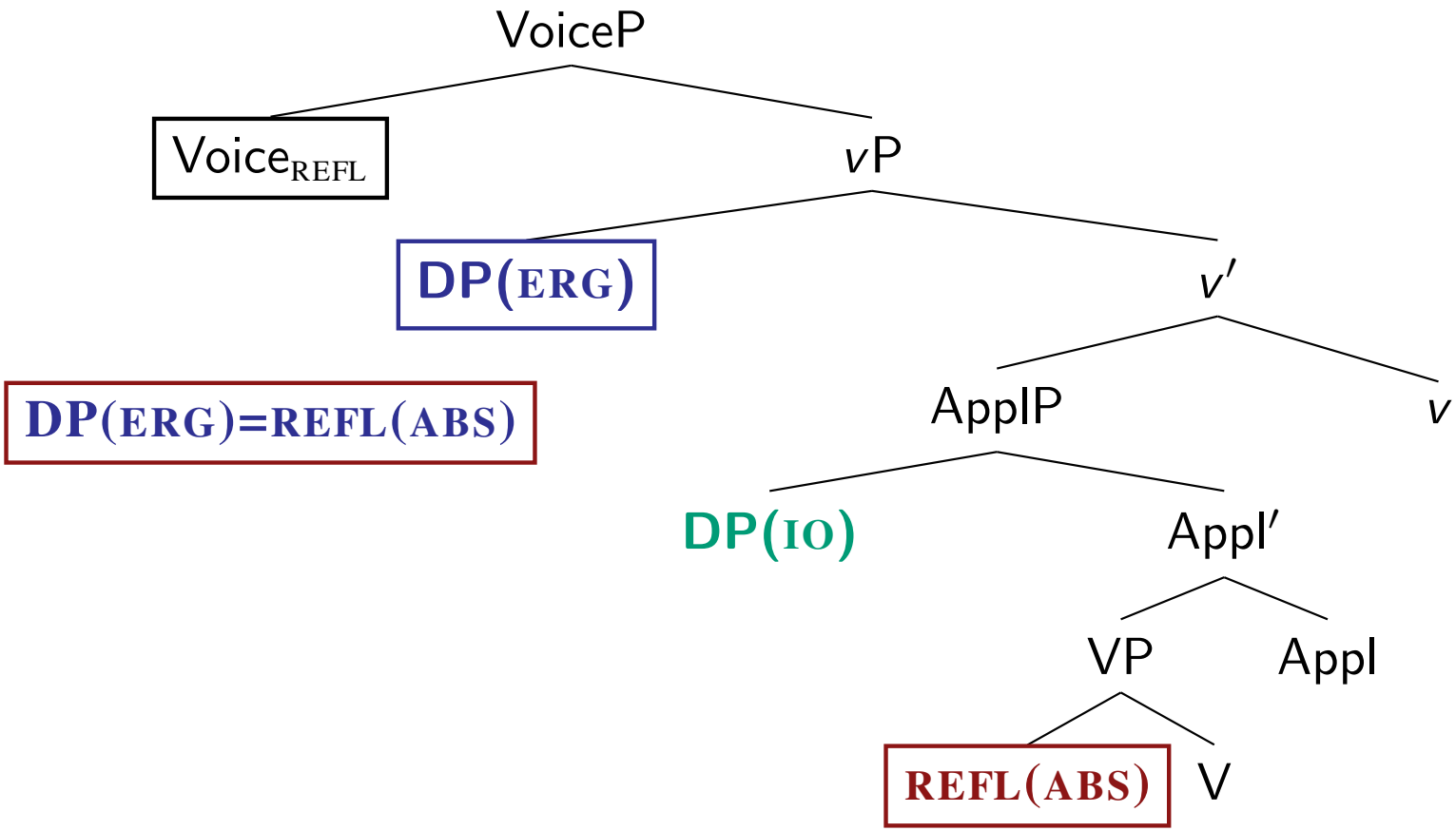


Reflexive Voice

- selects for *v*P
- agrees with **highest DP in *v*P** → **antecedent**
- licenses the reflexive pronoun → **reflexive**
- imposes co-identity on the two arguments



Voice and the theta-domain

reflexives must be licensed by **Voice**

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Voice selects for *v***P** = **theta-domain**

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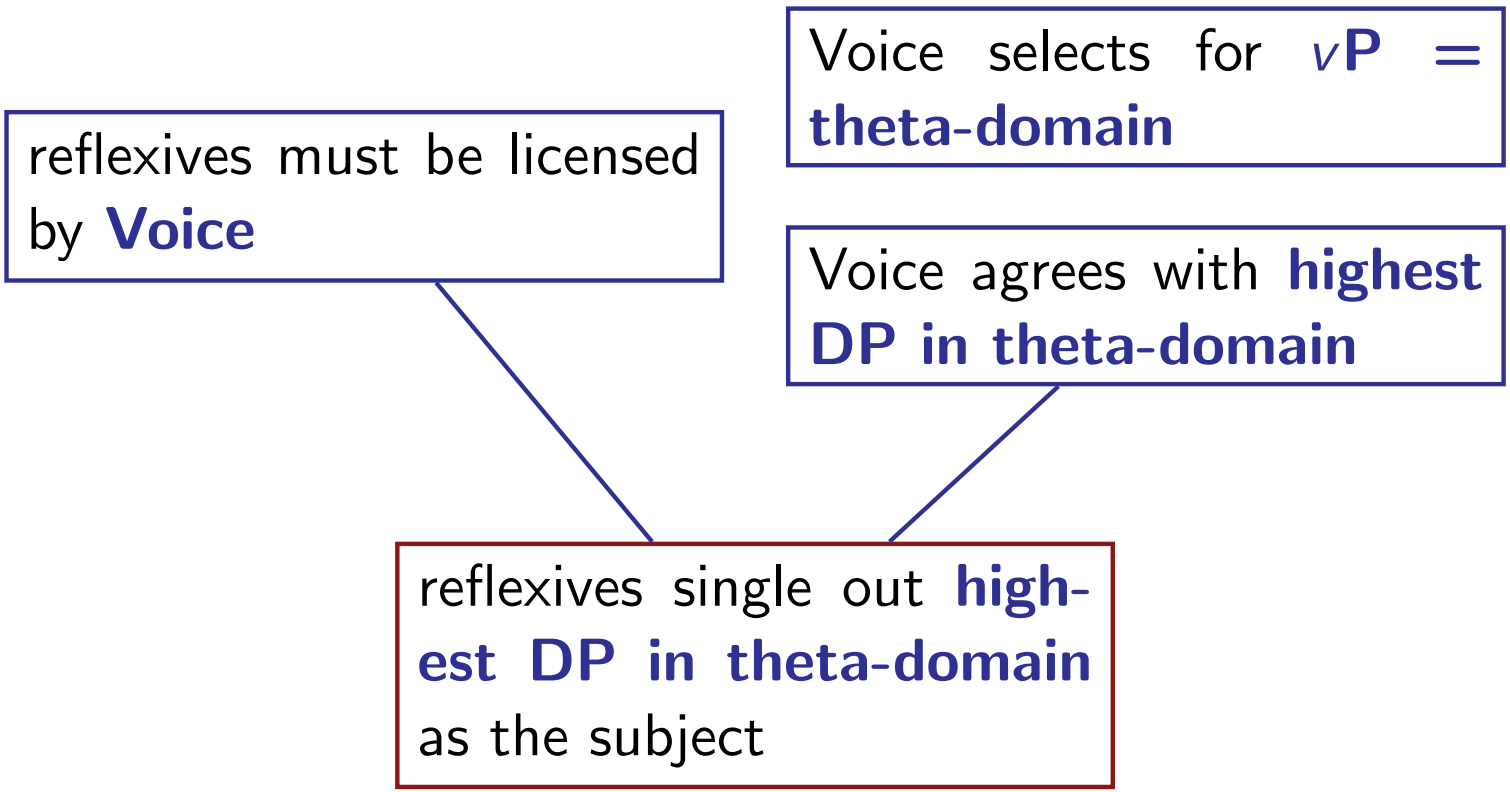

Returning to contrast with reciprocals

The question: Why do reflexives and reciprocals behave differently?

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RECIPROCALS **REFLEXIVES**

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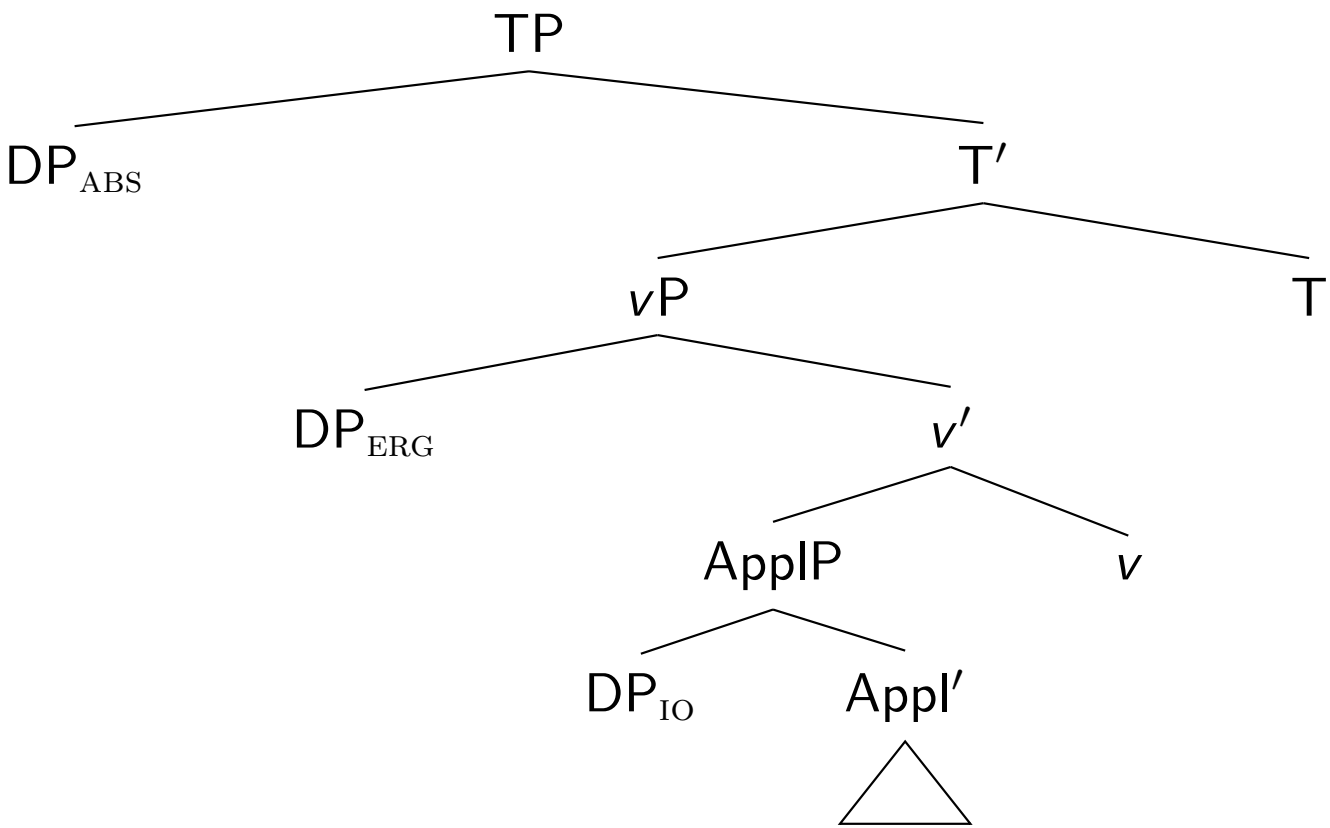
The answer: Reciprocals are **not** licensed by Voice
$\Rightarrow$ they are only sensitive to clause-level prominence

Any c-commanding nominal can bind reciprocal

E.g. for ditransitive verb (**ERG-IO-ABS**):



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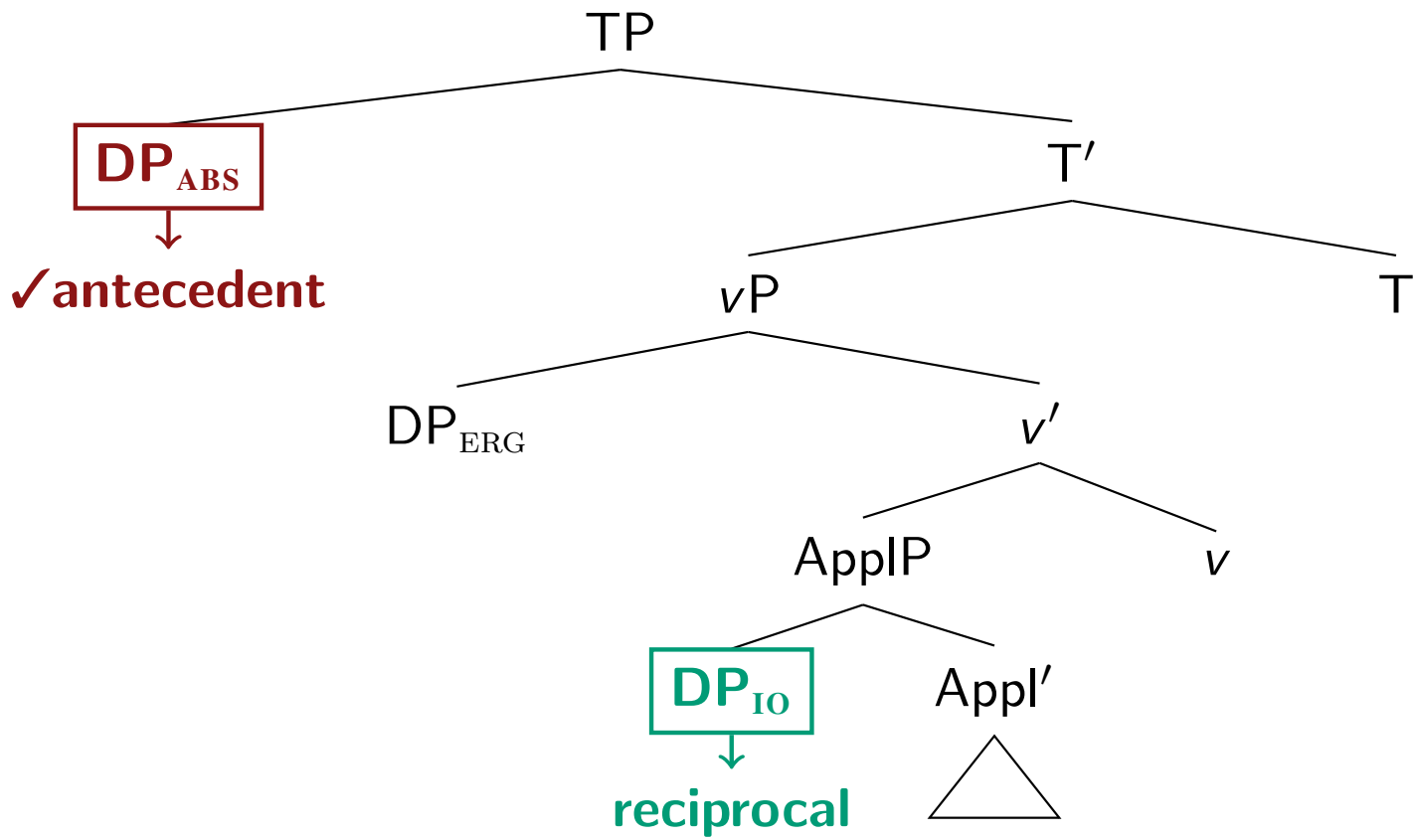

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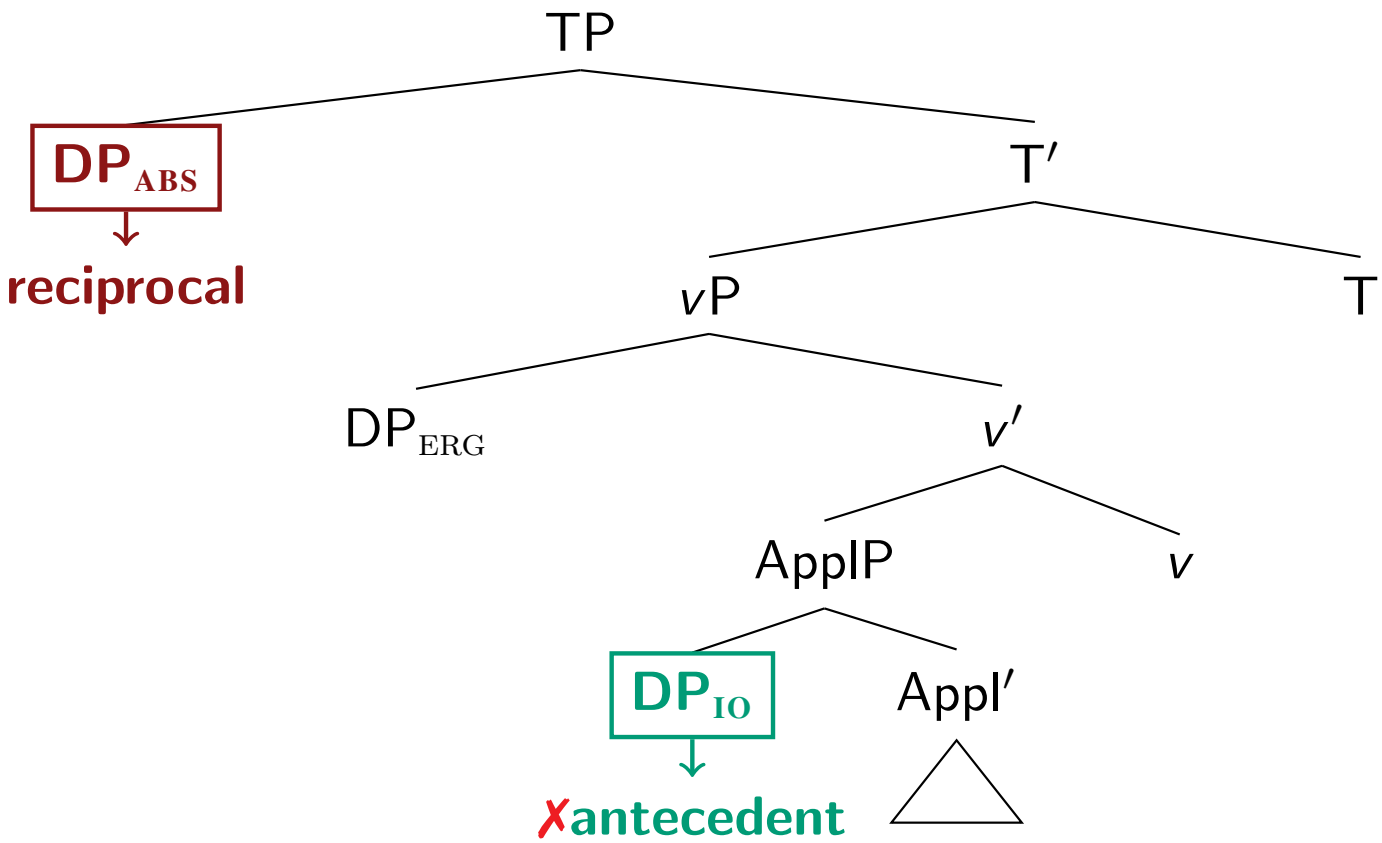
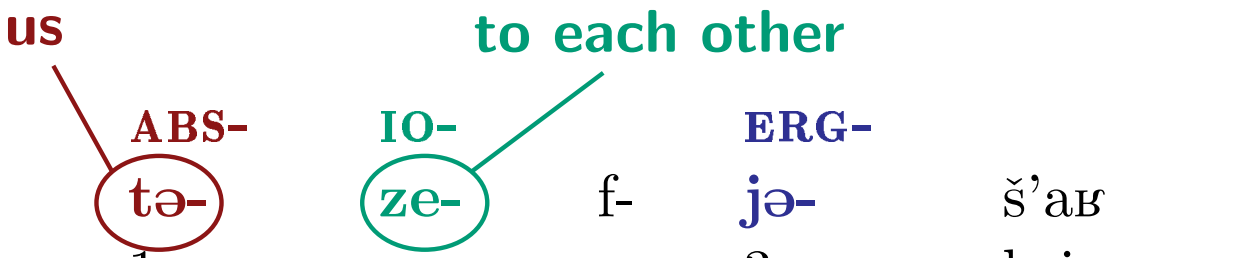


Absolutive theme can bind applied object

ABS-	**IO-**		**ERG-**	
tə-	**ze-**	f-	**jə-**	š’aʁ
1PL.ABS-	REC.IO-	BEN-	3SG.ERG-	bring.PST

‘S/he brought **us** **to each other** (= together).’

Absolutive theme can bind applied object



'S/he brought **us** **to each other** (= together).'

Applied object cannot bind absolutive reciprocal

	ABS-	**IO-**		**ERG-**	
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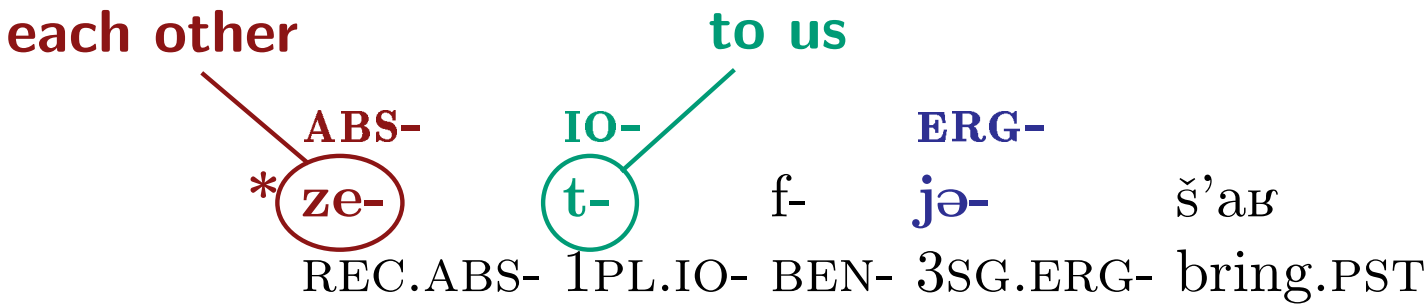
	REC.ABS-	1PL.IO-	BEN-	3SG.ERG-	bring.PST

Intended: 'S/he brought **to us each other**.'

Applied object cannot bind absolutive reciprocal



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Reflexives versus reciprocals: summary

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RECIPROCALS **REFLEXIVES**

Reflexives versus reciprocals: summary

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RECIPROCALS

bound by c-commanding antecedent

REFLEXIVES

bound by highest DP in *v*P

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RECIPROCALS	**REFLEXIVES**
bound by c-commanding antecedent	bound by highest DP in *v*P
A-domain	**theta-domain**

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- clause-level (A-domain) subjecthood is confirmed by parasitic gaps

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A-domain	**theta-domain**

- clause-level (A-domain) subjecthood is confirmed by parasitic gaps
- **NEXT:** theta-domain subjecthood is confirmed by **control constructions**

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- reciprocals ✓
- parasitic gaps ✓
- reflexives ✓
- **control**

} **A-domain**

} **theta-domain**

Control singles out highest nominal in theta-domain

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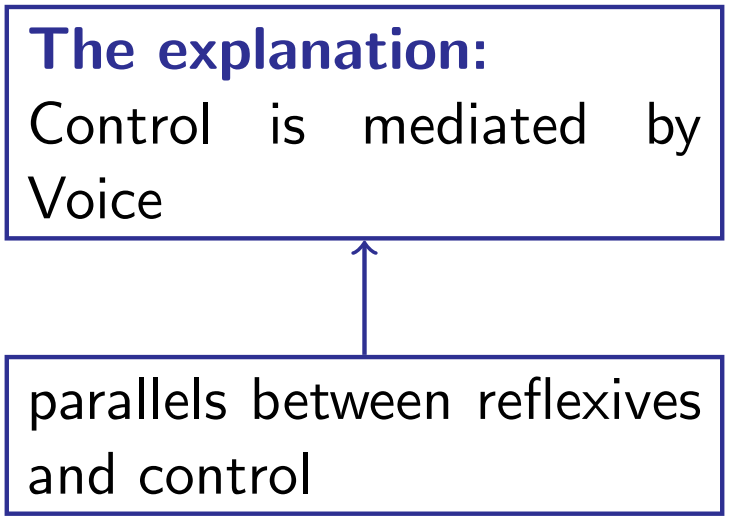
The explanation:
Control is mediated by Voice

Control singles out highest nominal in theta-domain



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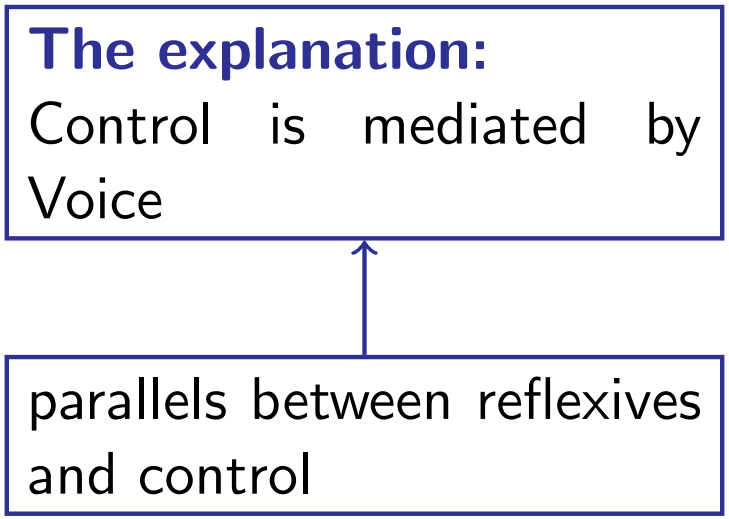
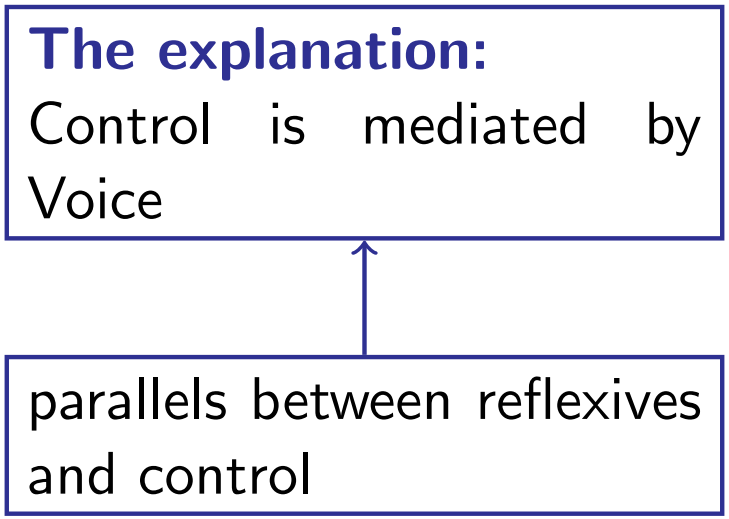


- confirms importance of Voice in subjecthood diagnostics

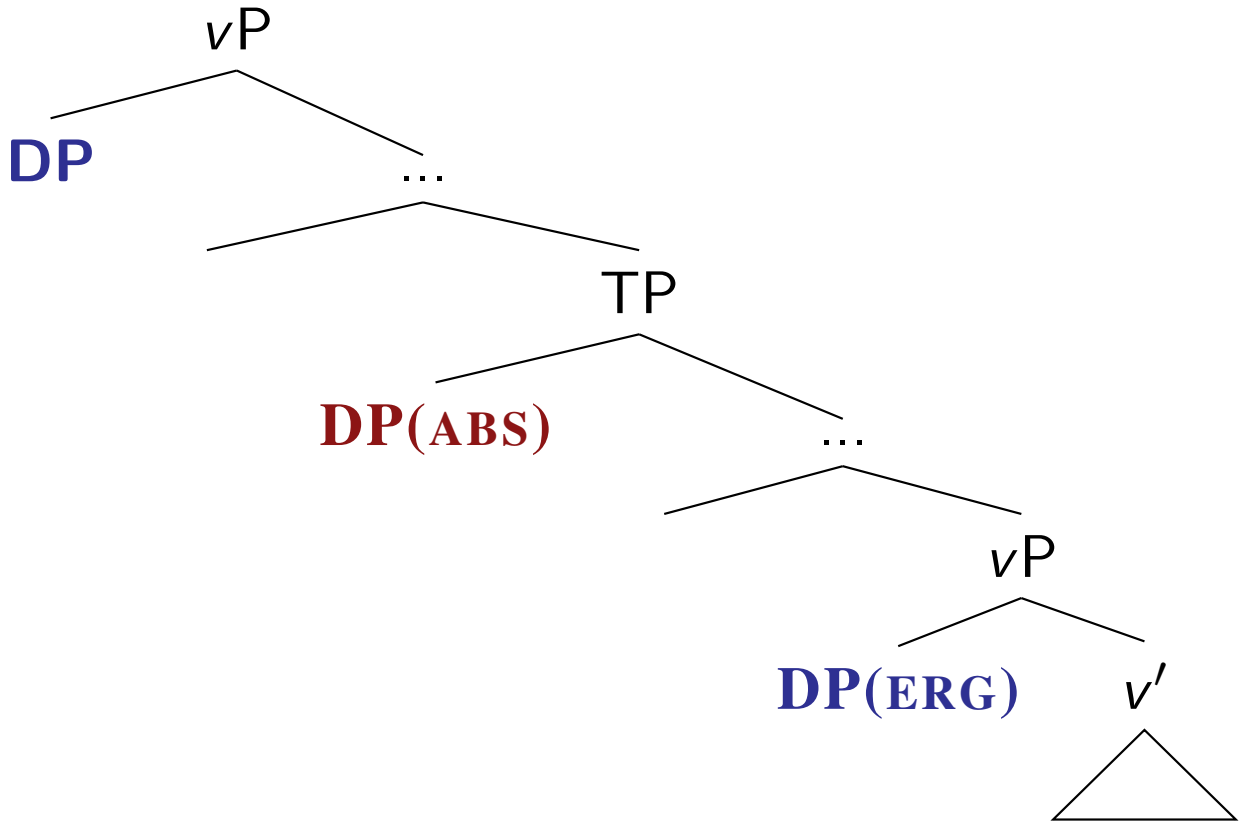
Control singles out highest nominal in theta-domain



- confirms importance of Voice in subjecthood diagnostics
- explains lack of sensitivity to clause-level structural prominence

Control singles out ergative agent as subject

- (Ershova 2019b): control verbs embed CP with high **ABS**



Control singles out ergative agent as subject

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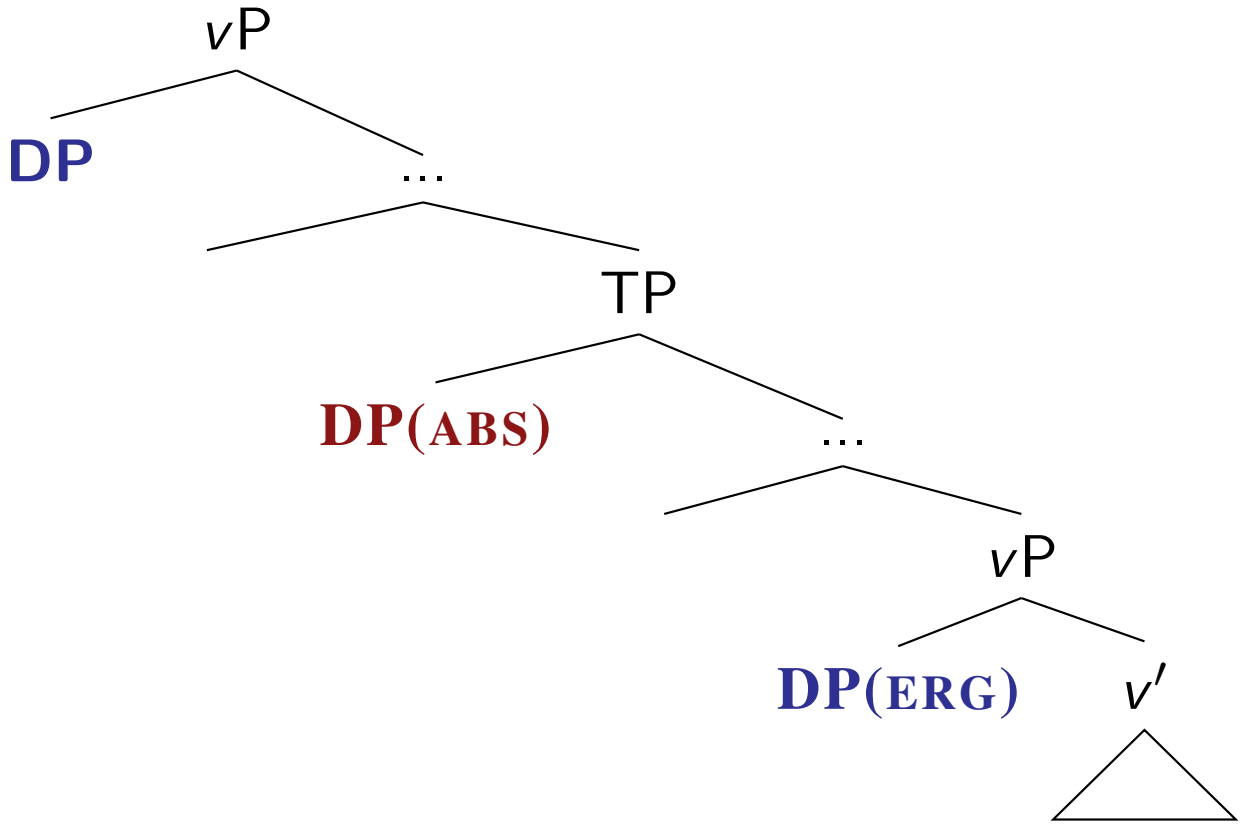
- for transitive verb (**ERG**-**ABS**):



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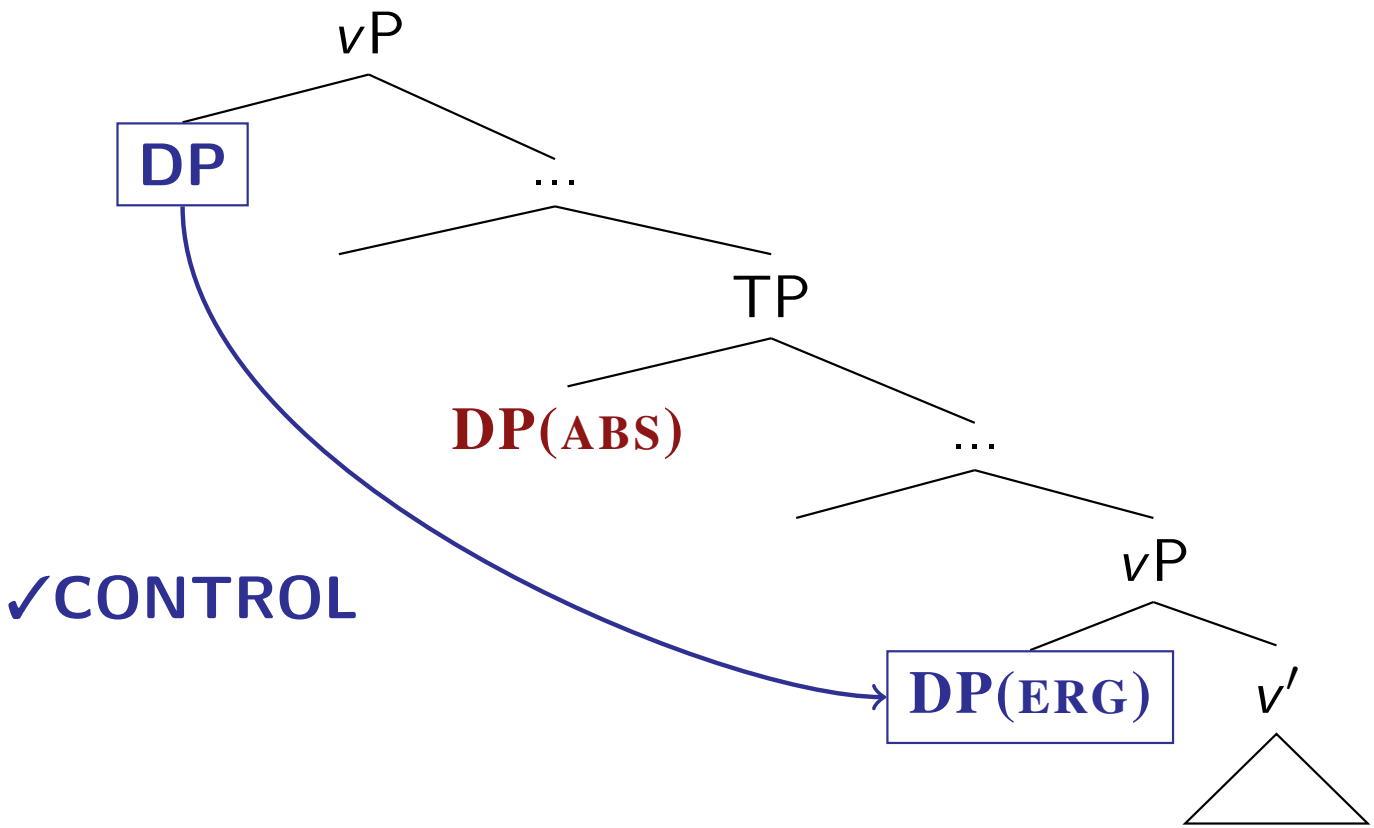
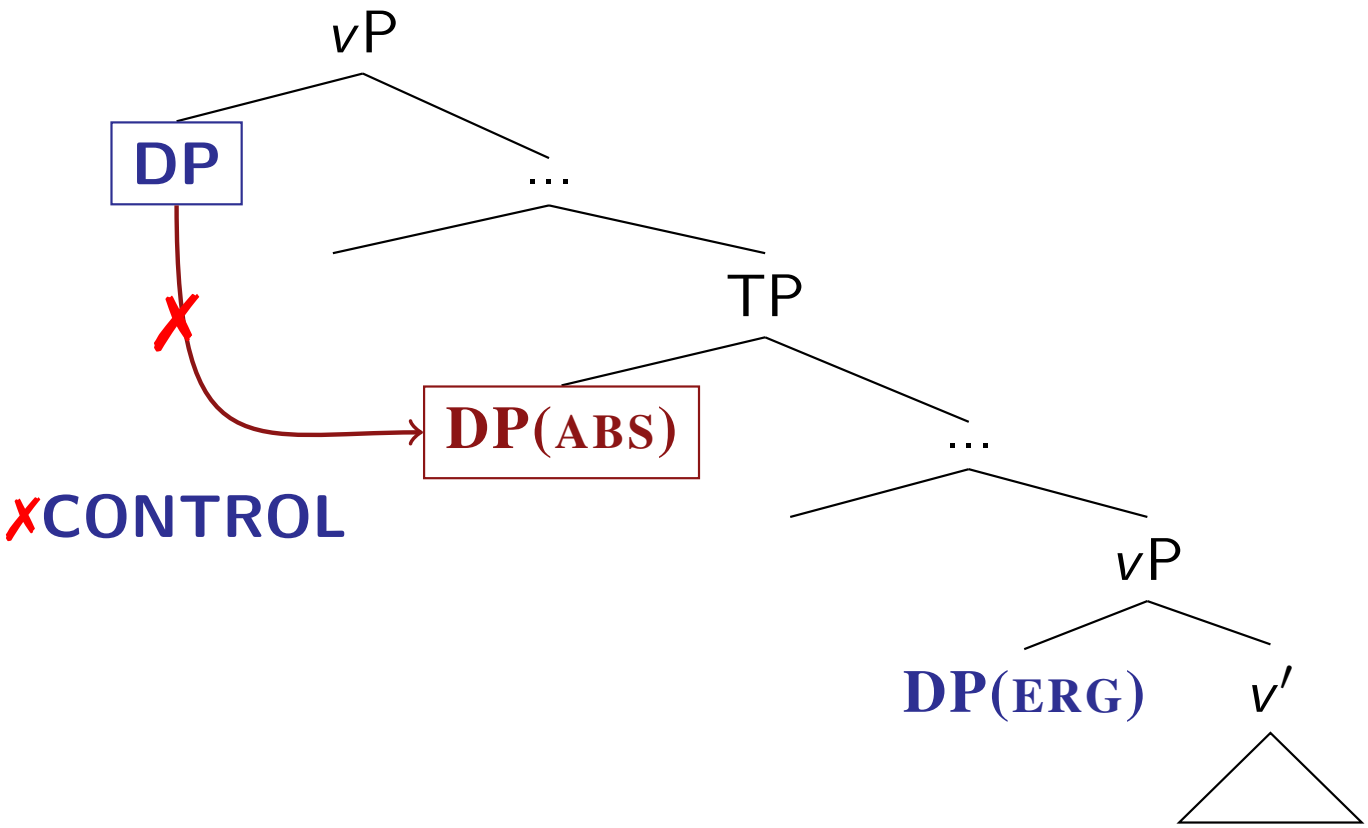


Control singles out ergative agent as subject

- (Ershova 2019b): control verbs embed CP with high **ABS**
- for transitive verb (**ERG**-**ABS**):
  - **ERG** is controlled
  - **ABS** cannot be controlled



Control targets ergative agent

controller		**ABS**	**ERG**	
ç̣’elejeʁaʒem$_i$	[$_{\text{CP}}$	ç̣’alexe-r(ABS)	**PRO$_i$(ERG)**	əλətenew]
teacher.OBL		boy.PL-ABS		to count
rjəʁež’aʁ				
began				

‘The teacher began to count the children.’

Control cannot target absolutive theme of transitive verb

* **č̣'alexem$_i$**	[$_{CP}$ **PRO$_i$(ABS)**	č̣'elejeʁaǯe-m(ERG)	əλətenew]
boys.OBL		teacher-OBL	to count

raʁež'aʁ
began

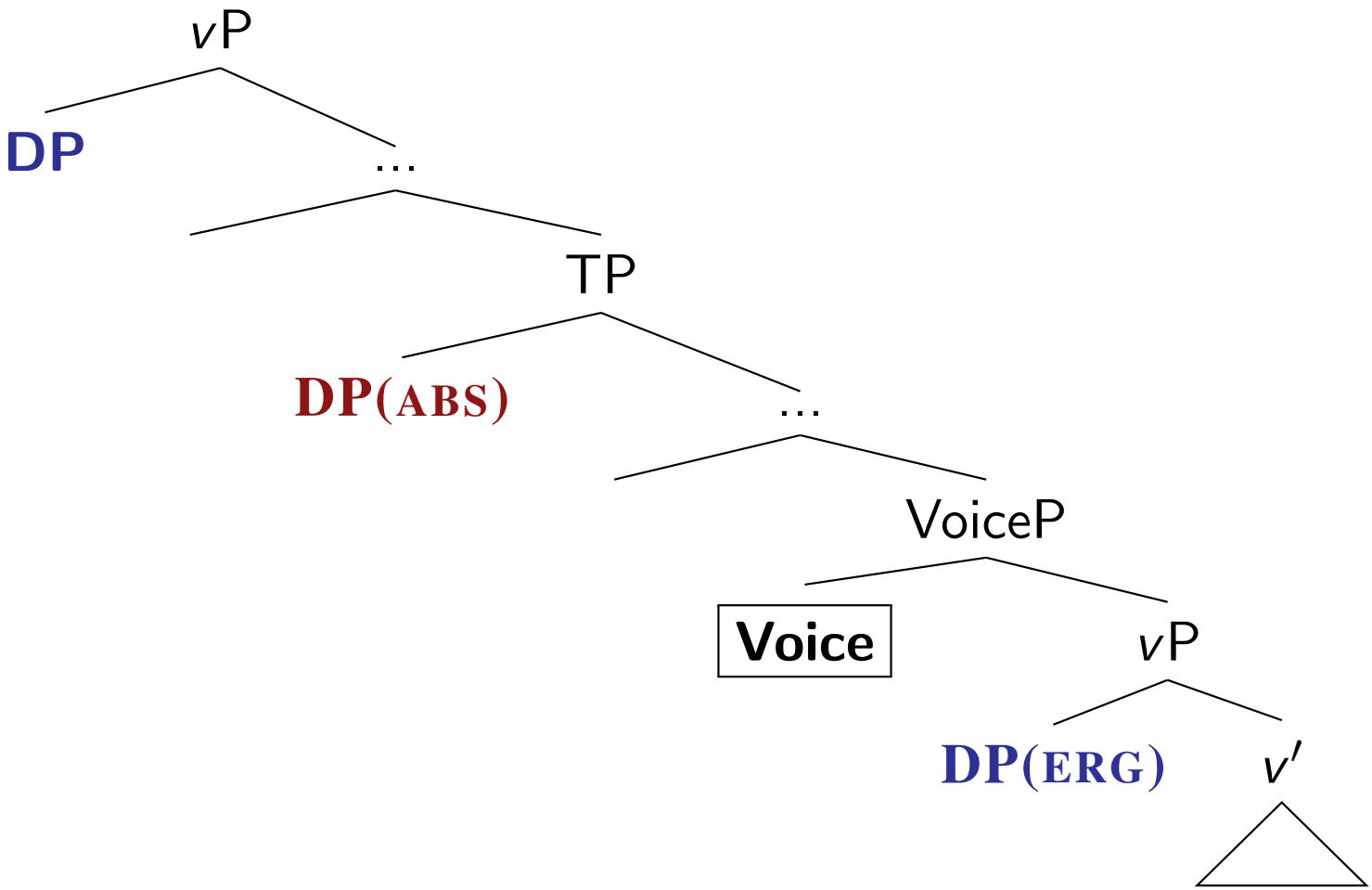
lit. 'The children began for the teacher to count [them].'

Why does control target the ergative agent?

- Why is ERG eligible for control?
- why doesn't ABS act as an intervener?

Control is mediated by Voice

Control is mediated by Voice



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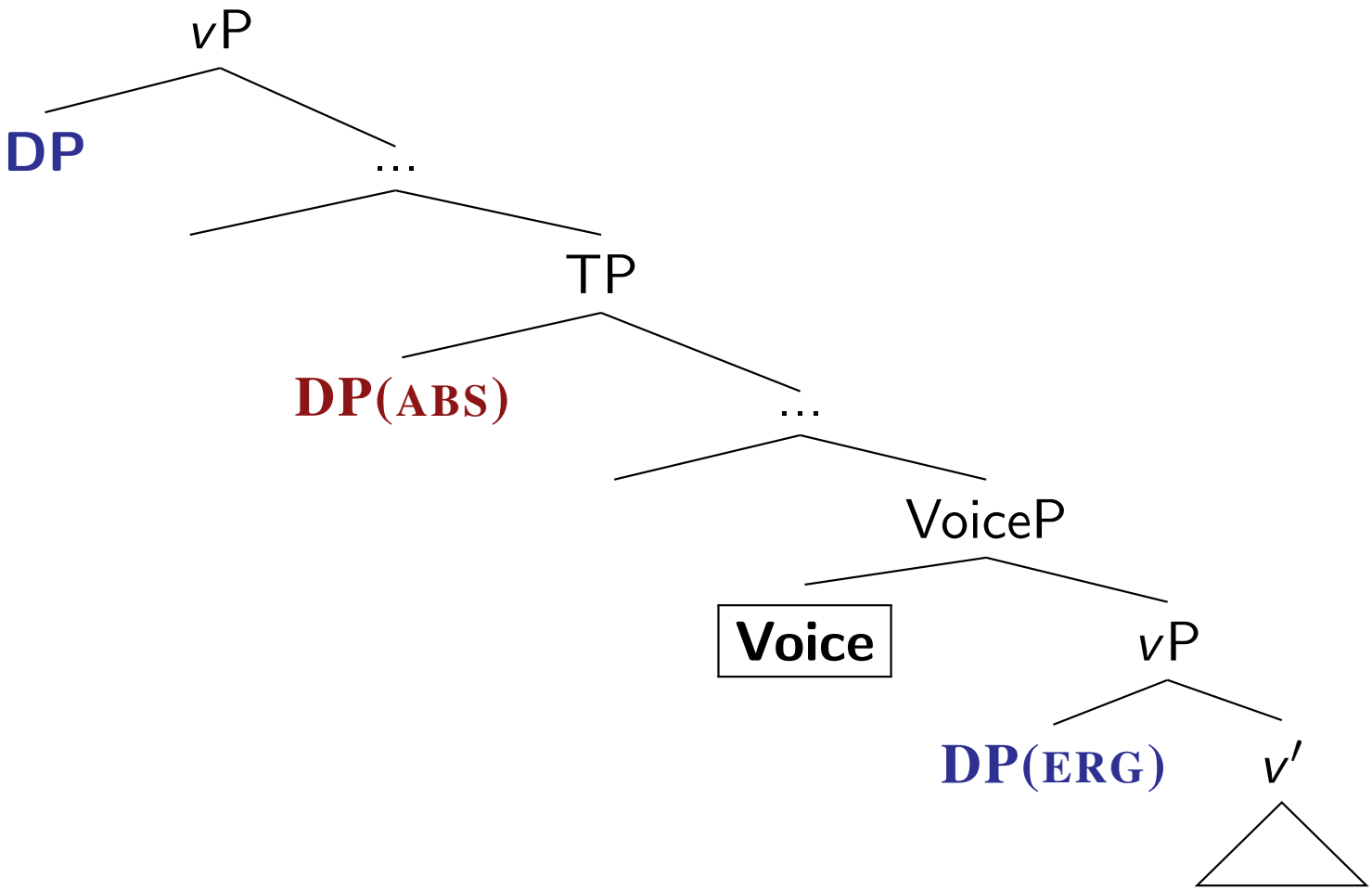
- Voice^0 agrees with highest nominal in *v*P



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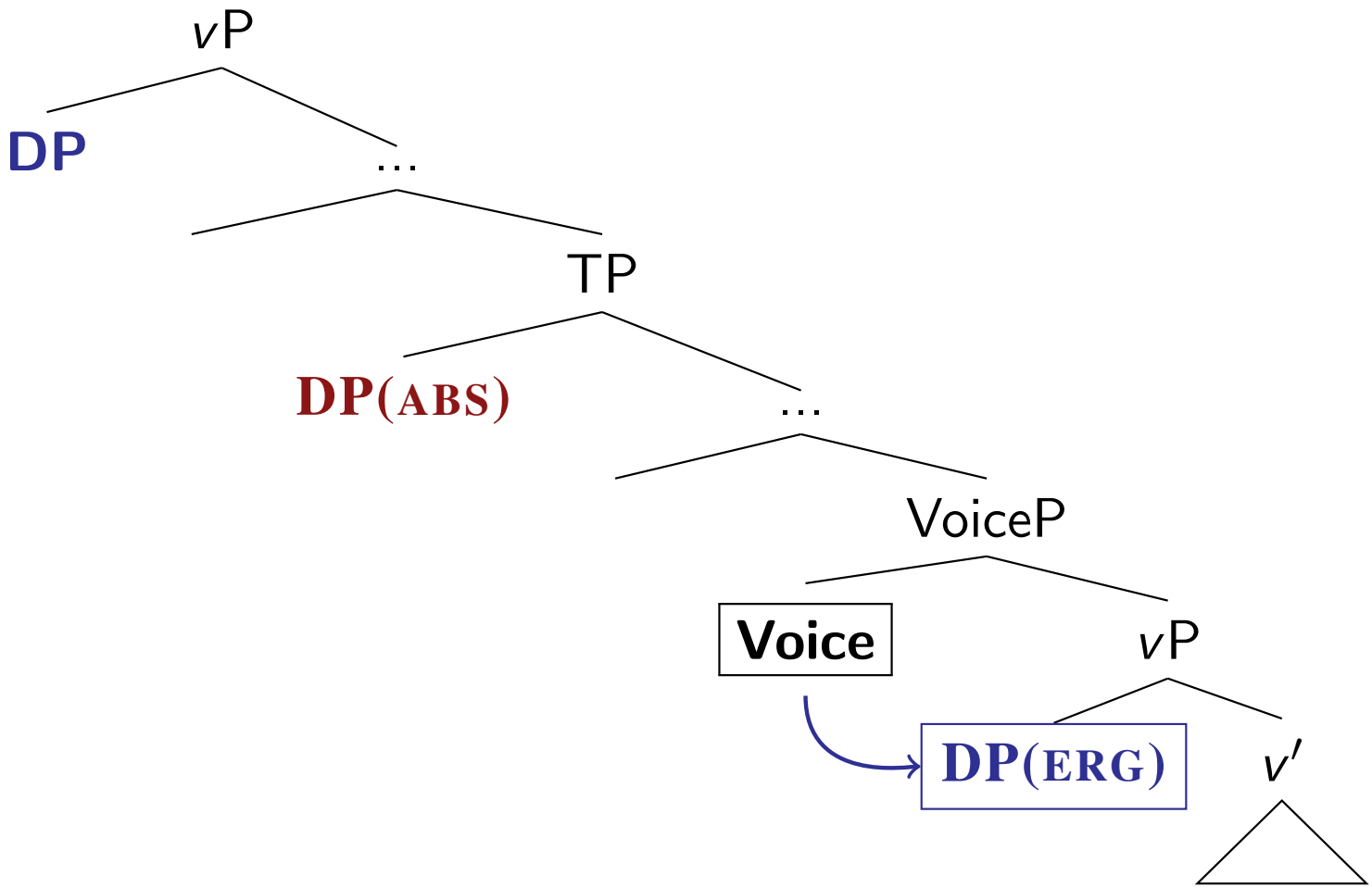

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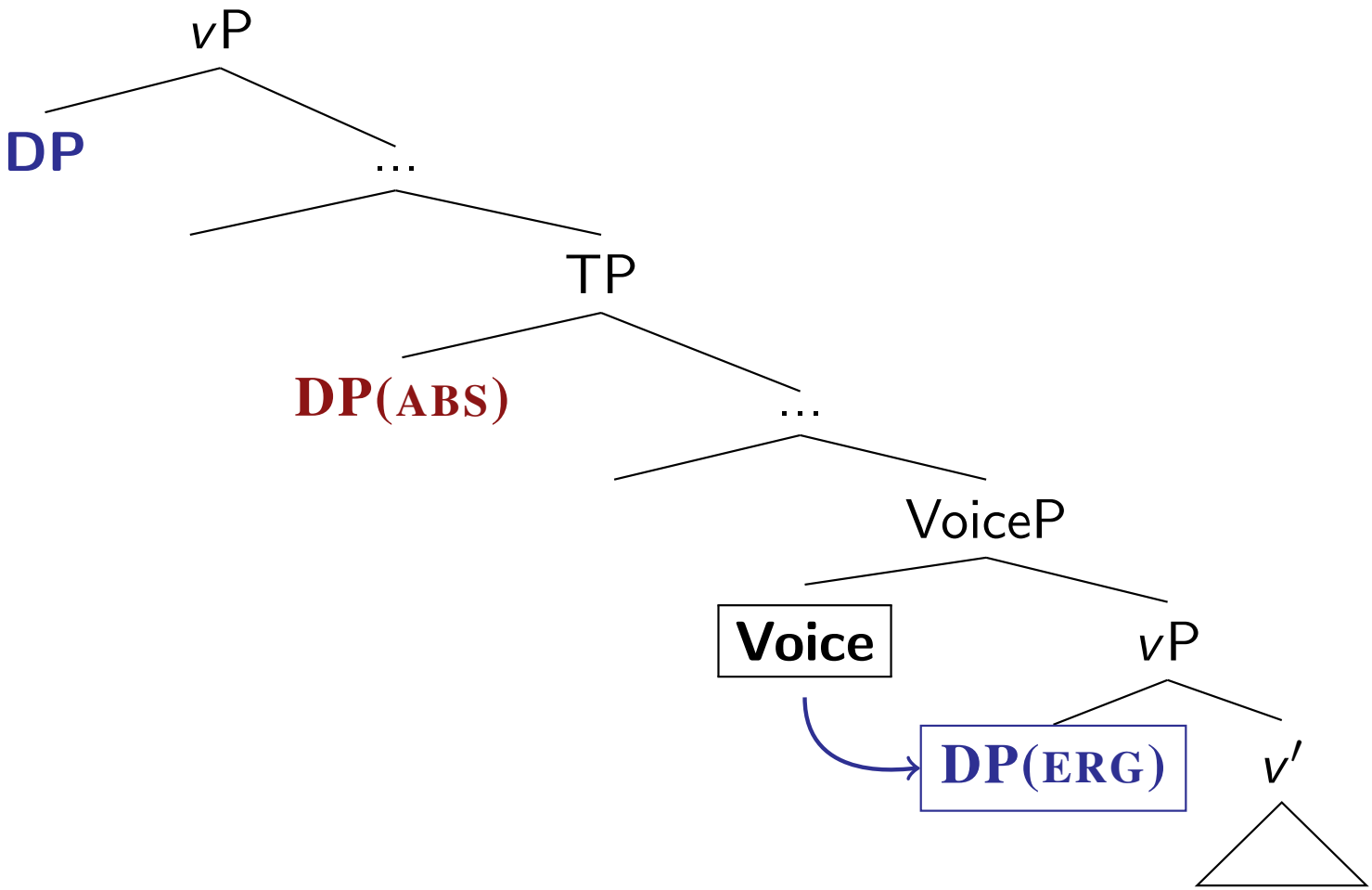

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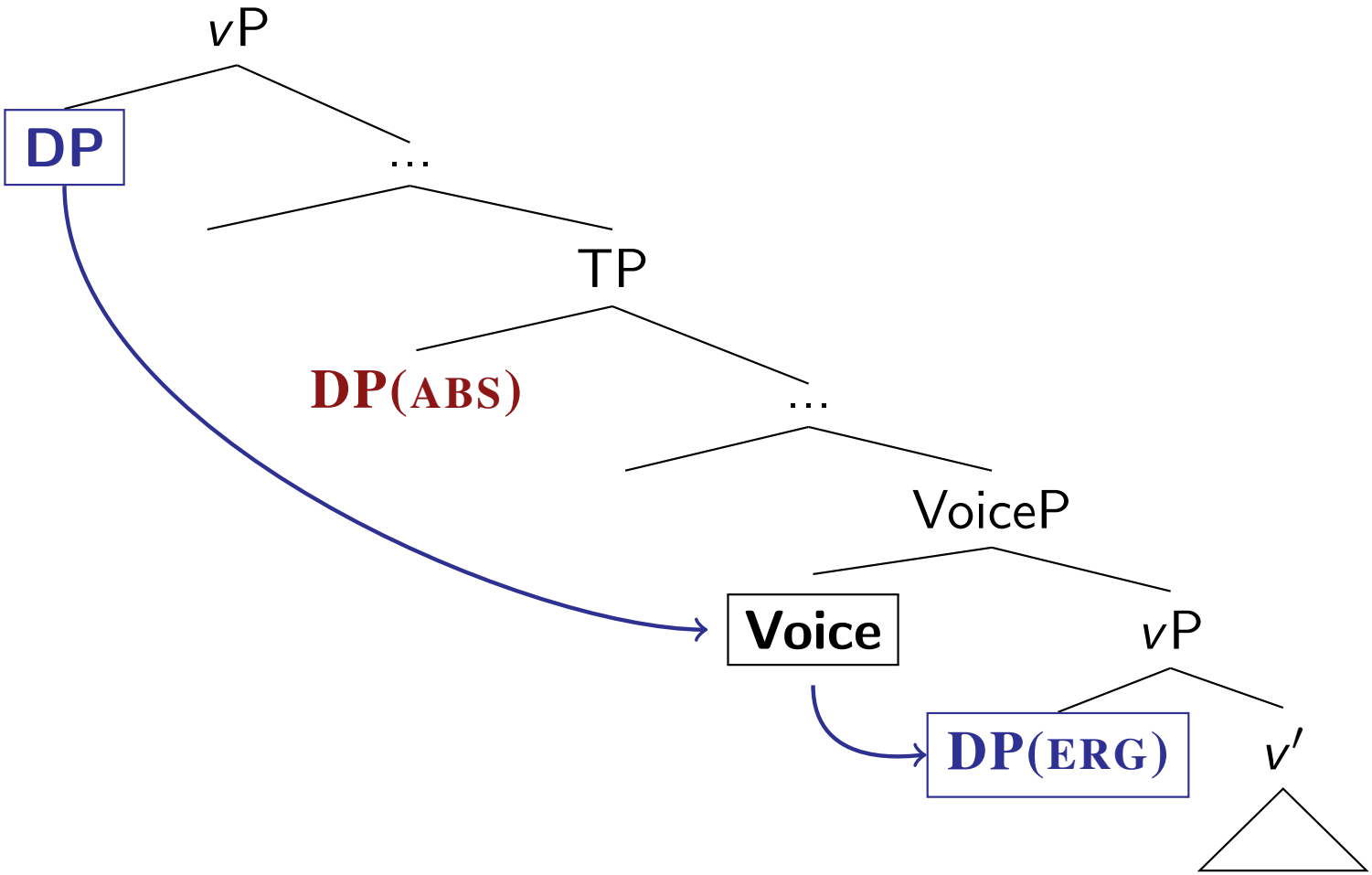
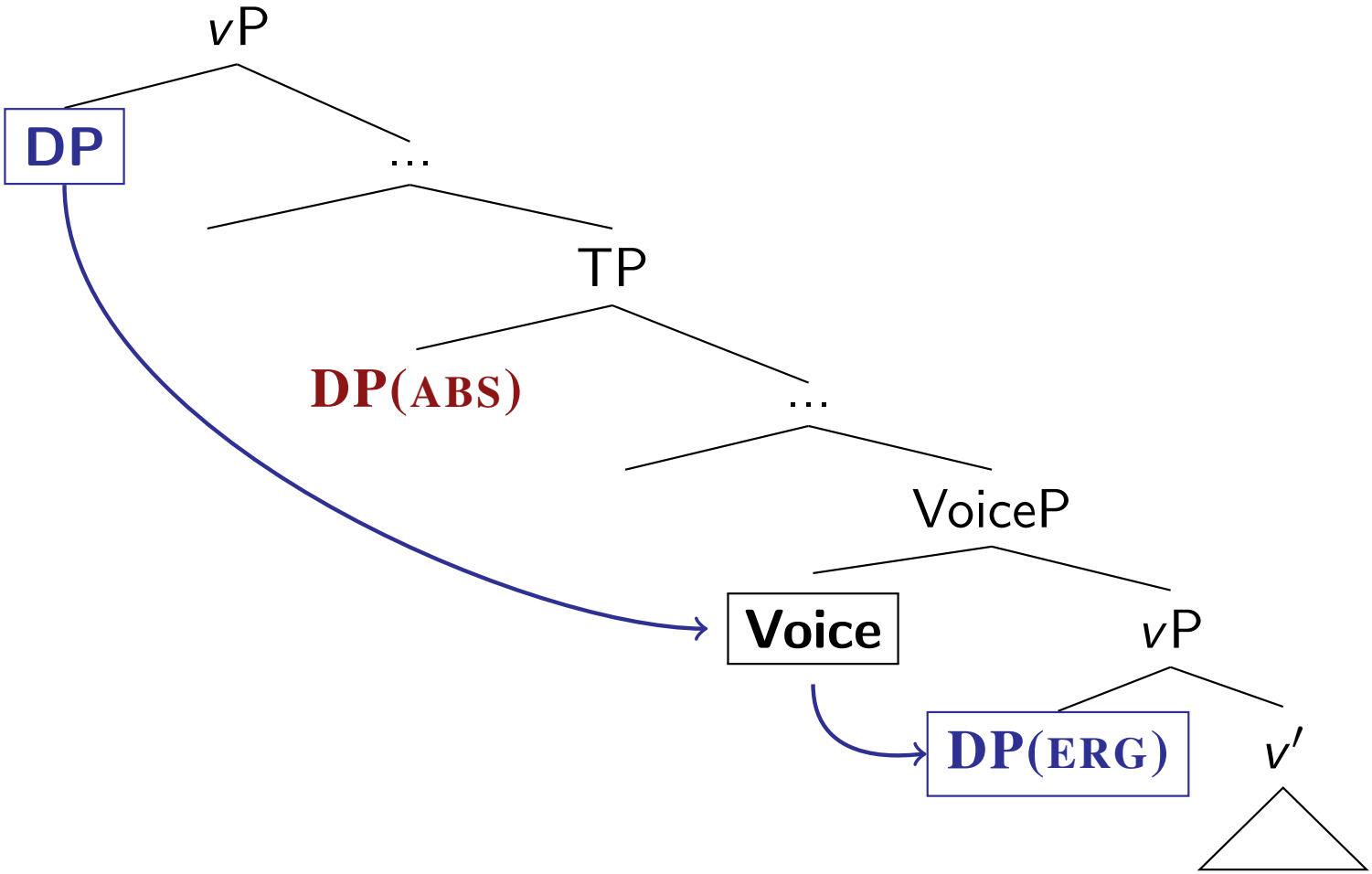


Control is mediated by Voice

- Voice^0 agrees with highest nominal in vP
- the controller agrees with Voice^0 (a lá Landau 2000)
- nominals above Voice^0 are invisible to control



Parallels between control and reflexives

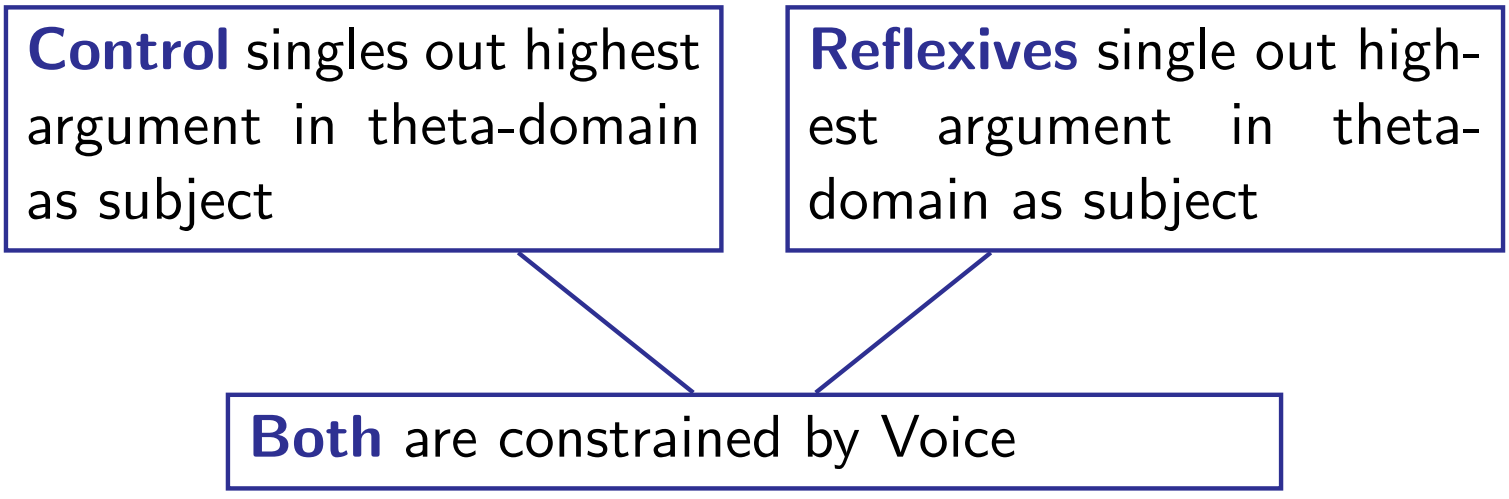
Control singles out highest argument in theta-domain as subject

Parallels between control and reflexives

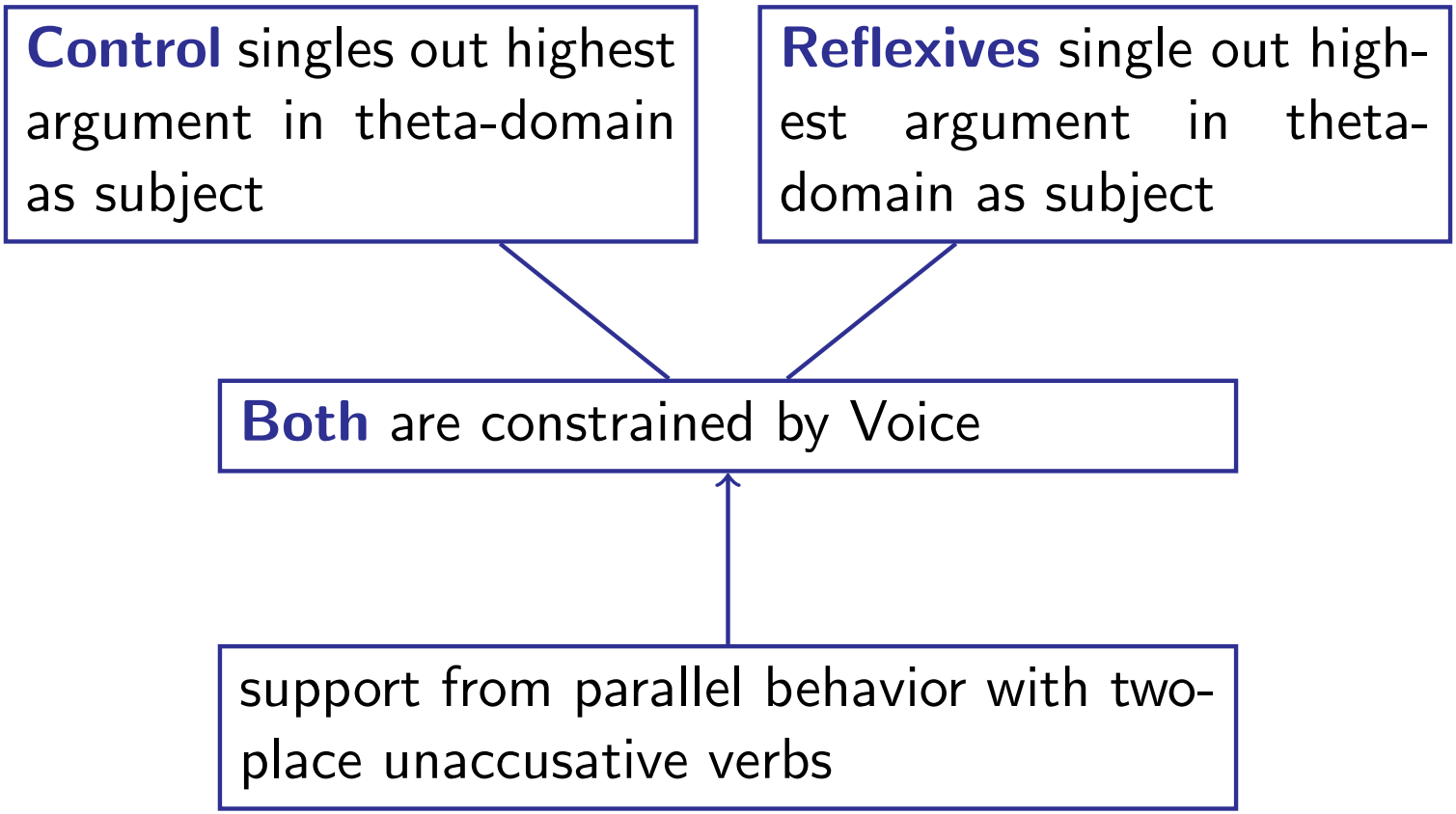
Control singles out highest argument in theta-domain as subject

Reflexives single out highest argument in theta-domain as subject

Parallels between control and reflexives

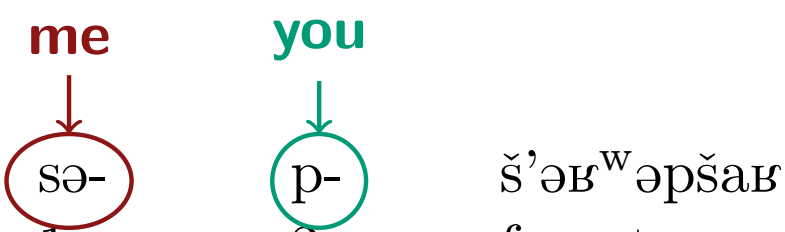


Parallels between control and reflexives



Two-place unaccusative verbs

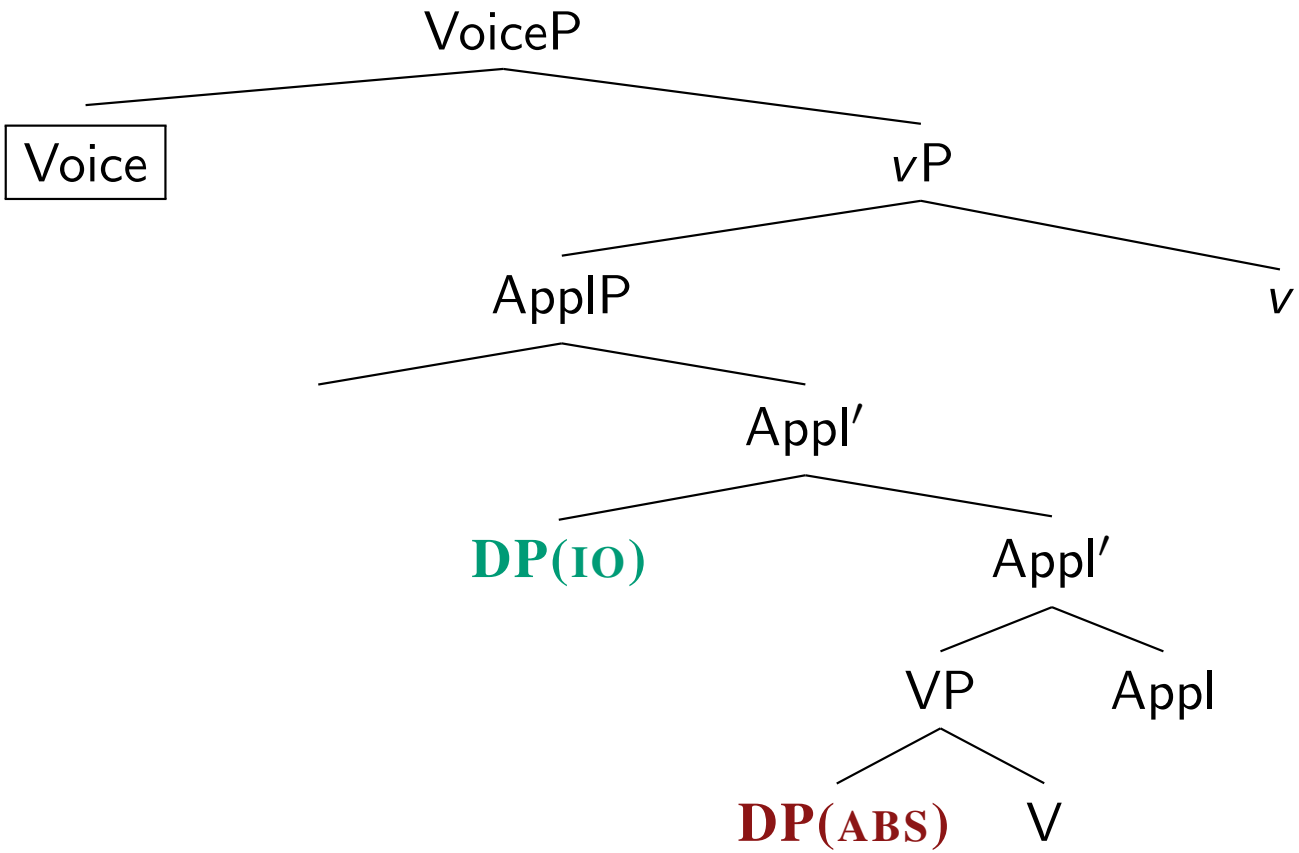
E.g. *š'əʁʷəpšen* 'forget':



'You forgot about me.'

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant from Voice

- Absolutive theme moves to Spec,ApplP (McGinnis 2000, 2001)



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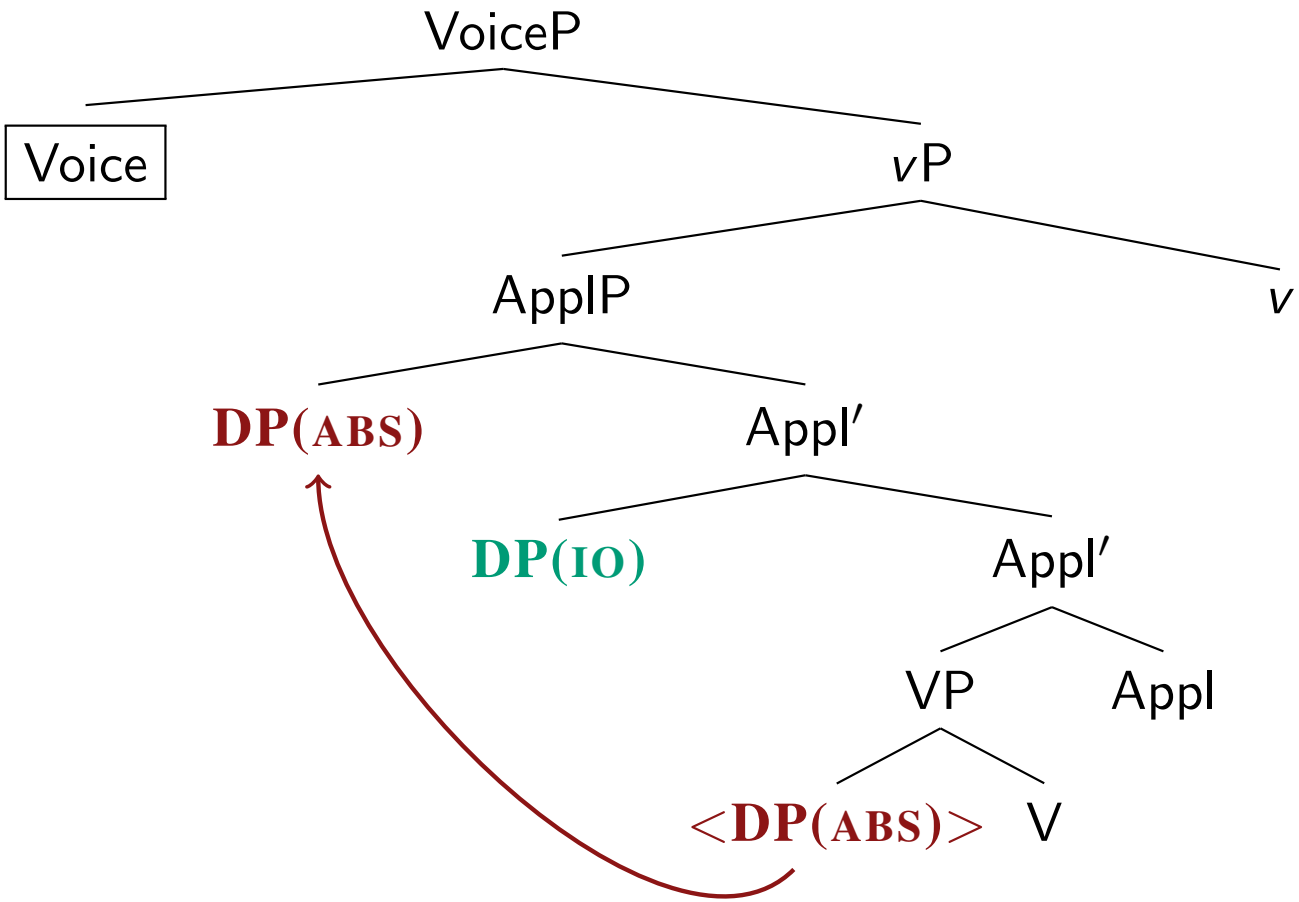

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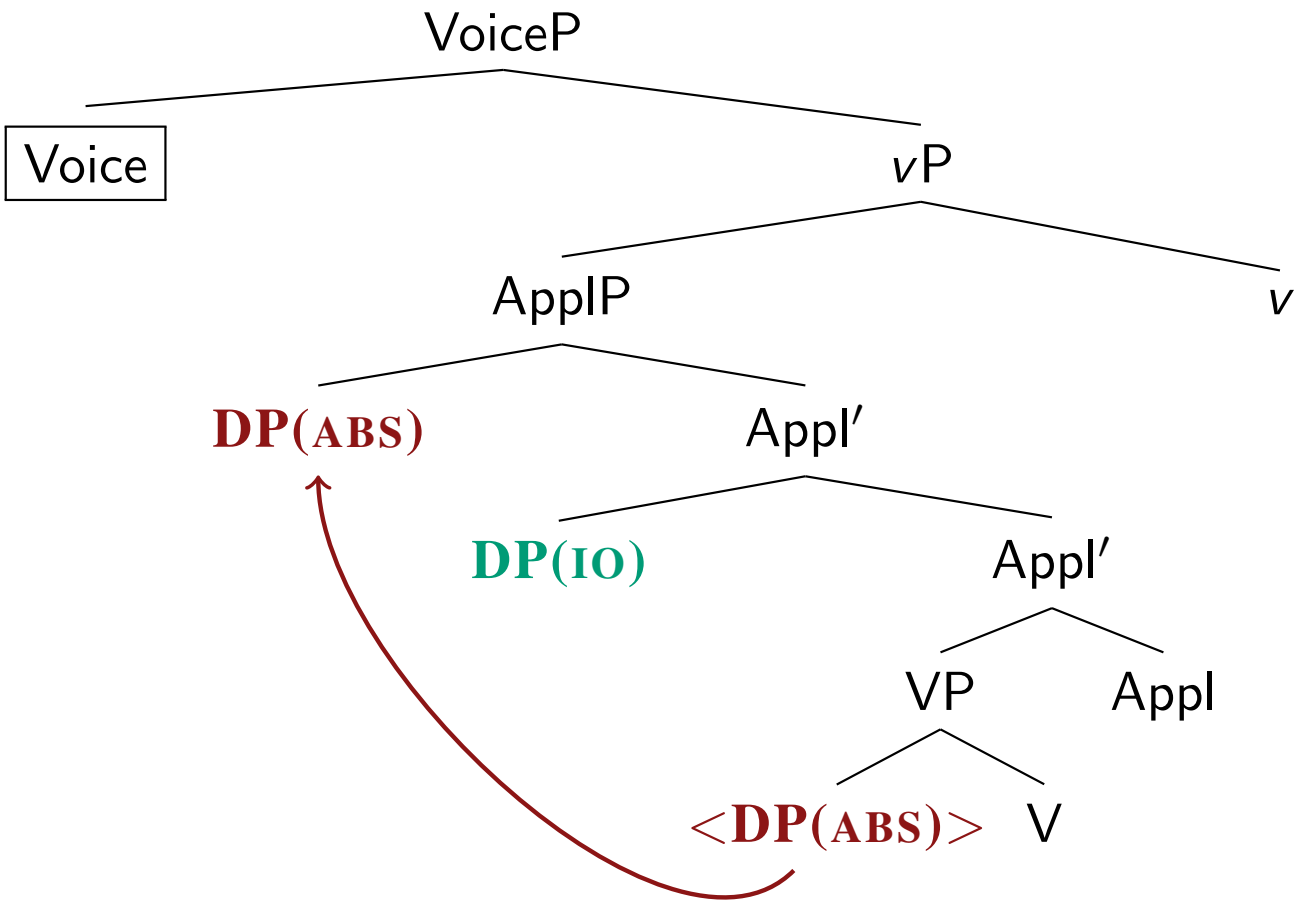

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- Absolutive theme moves to Spec,ApplP (McGinnis 2000, 2001)
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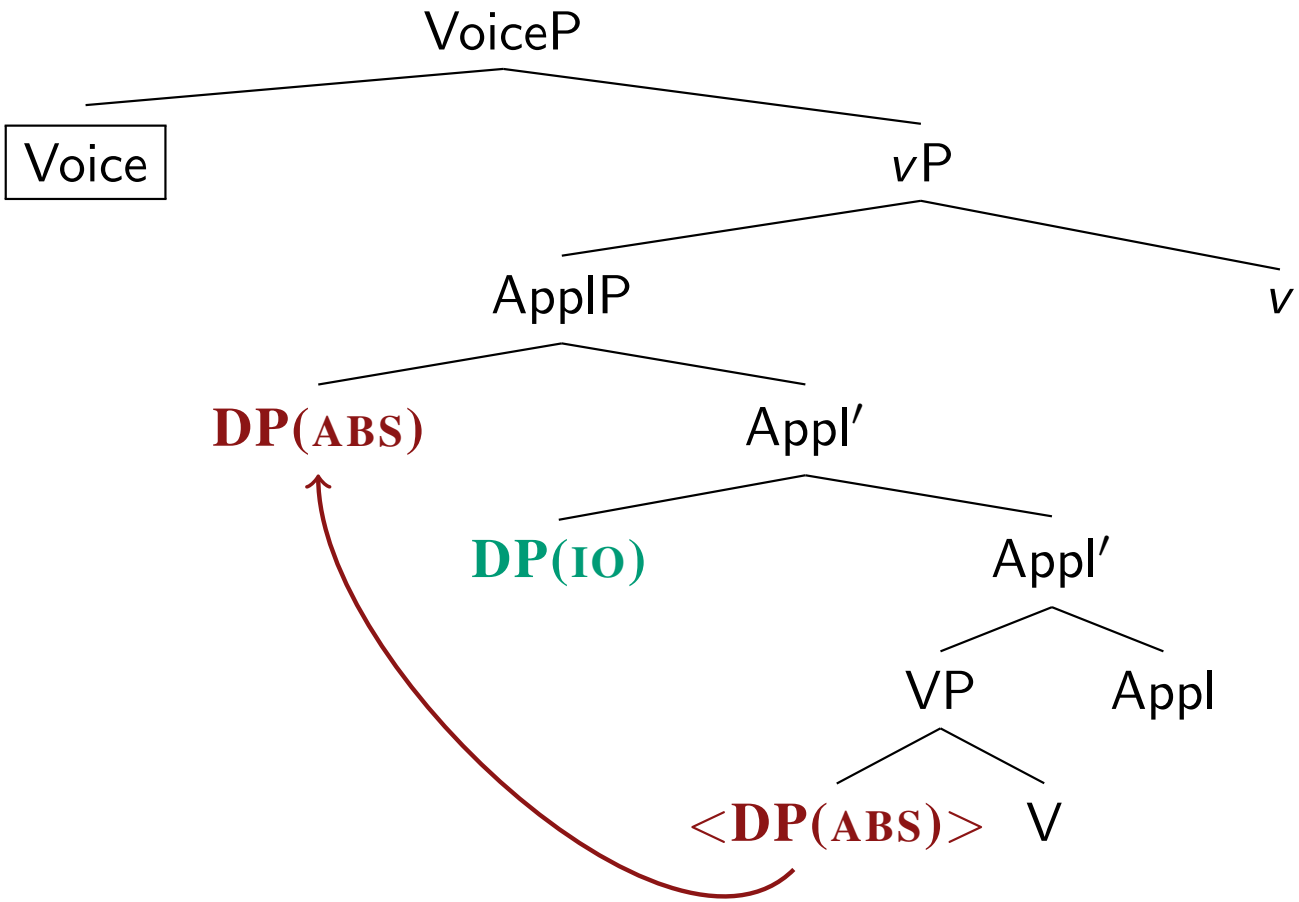

Both absolutive theme and applied argument can bind reflexive

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IO binds **ABS**:

zə-	s-	š'əʁʷəpšež'əʁ
REFL.ABS-	1SG.IO-	forgot.PST

'I forgot about myself.'

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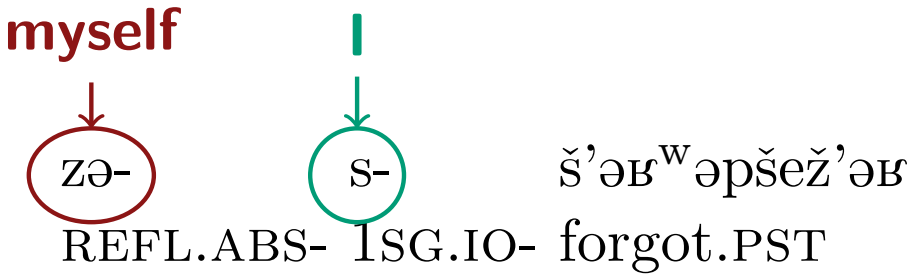

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ABS binds **IO**:

sə-	z-	š’əʁʷəpšež’əʁ
1SG.ABS-	REFL.IO-	forgot.PST

lit. ‘Myself forgot about me.’

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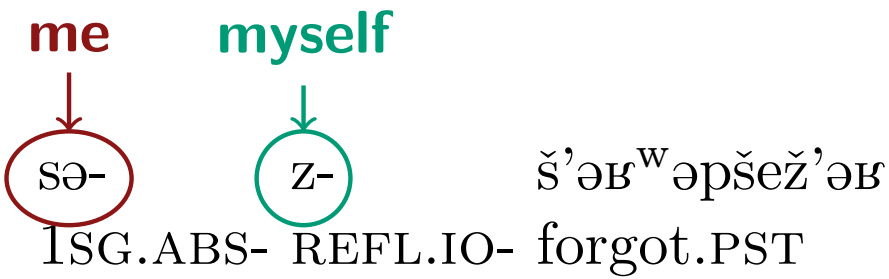
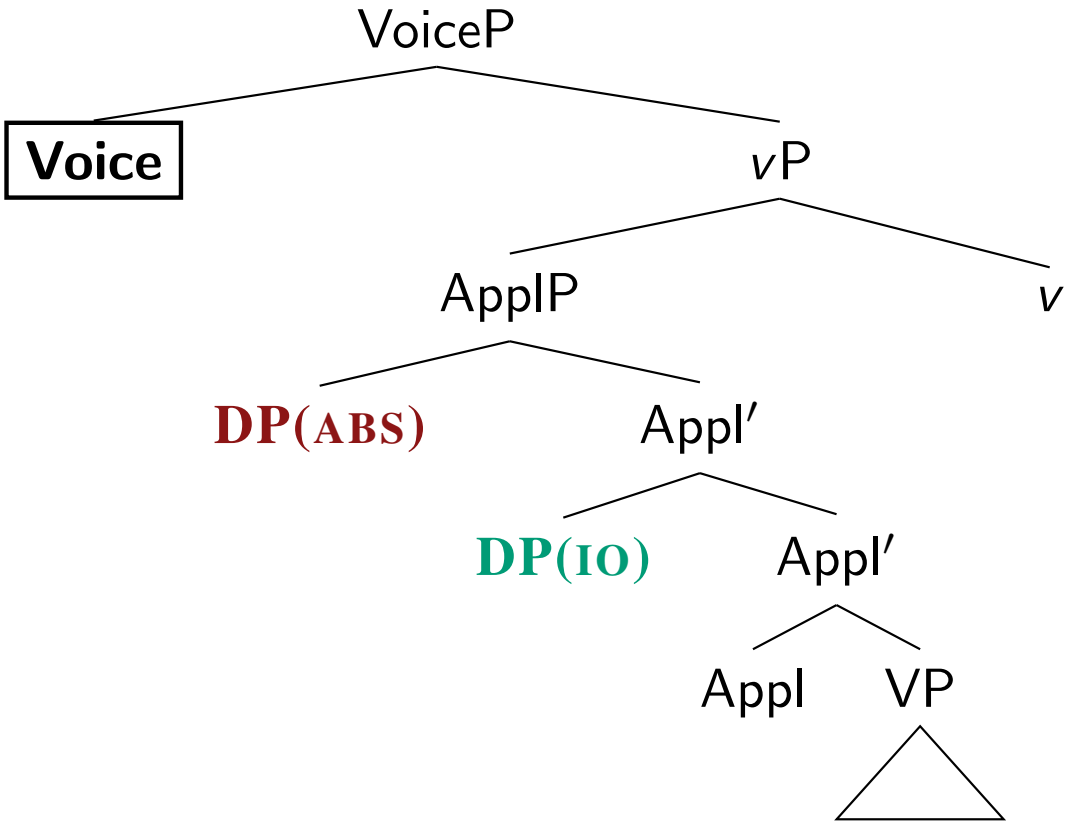


lit. 'Myself forgot about me.'

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

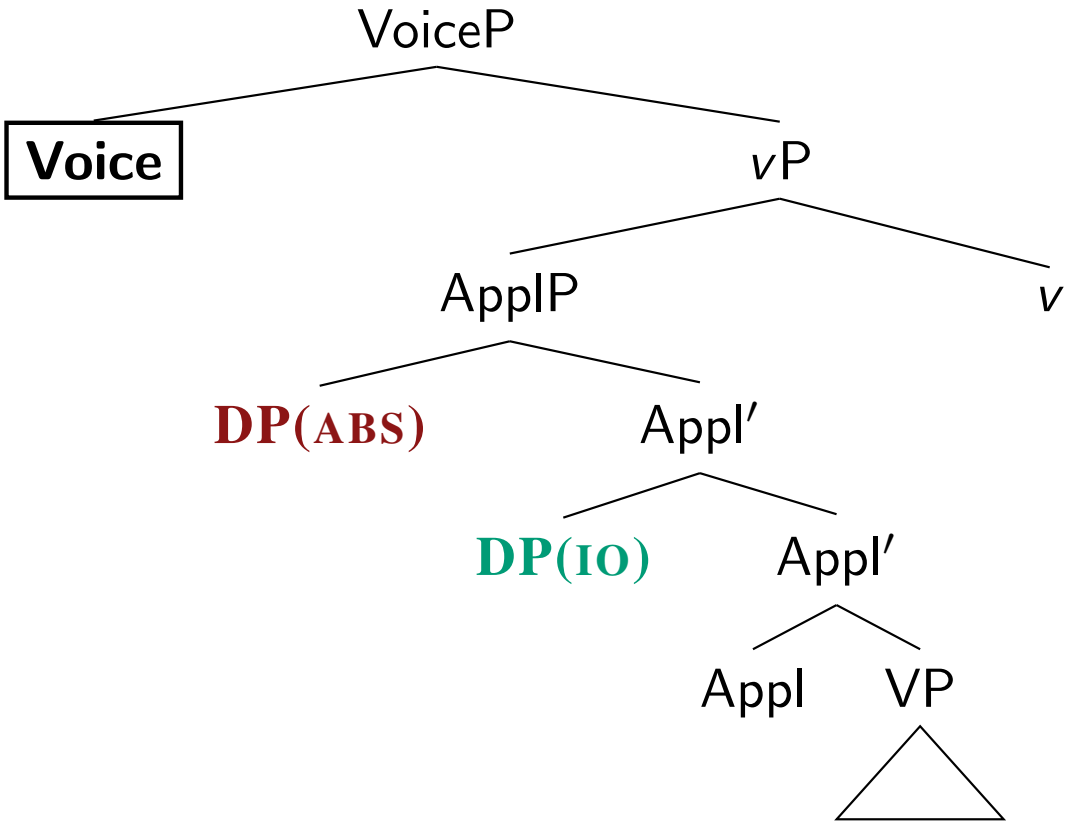
ABS and **IO** are equidistant from Voice



Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

ABS and **IO** are equidistant from Voice

Voice mediates control



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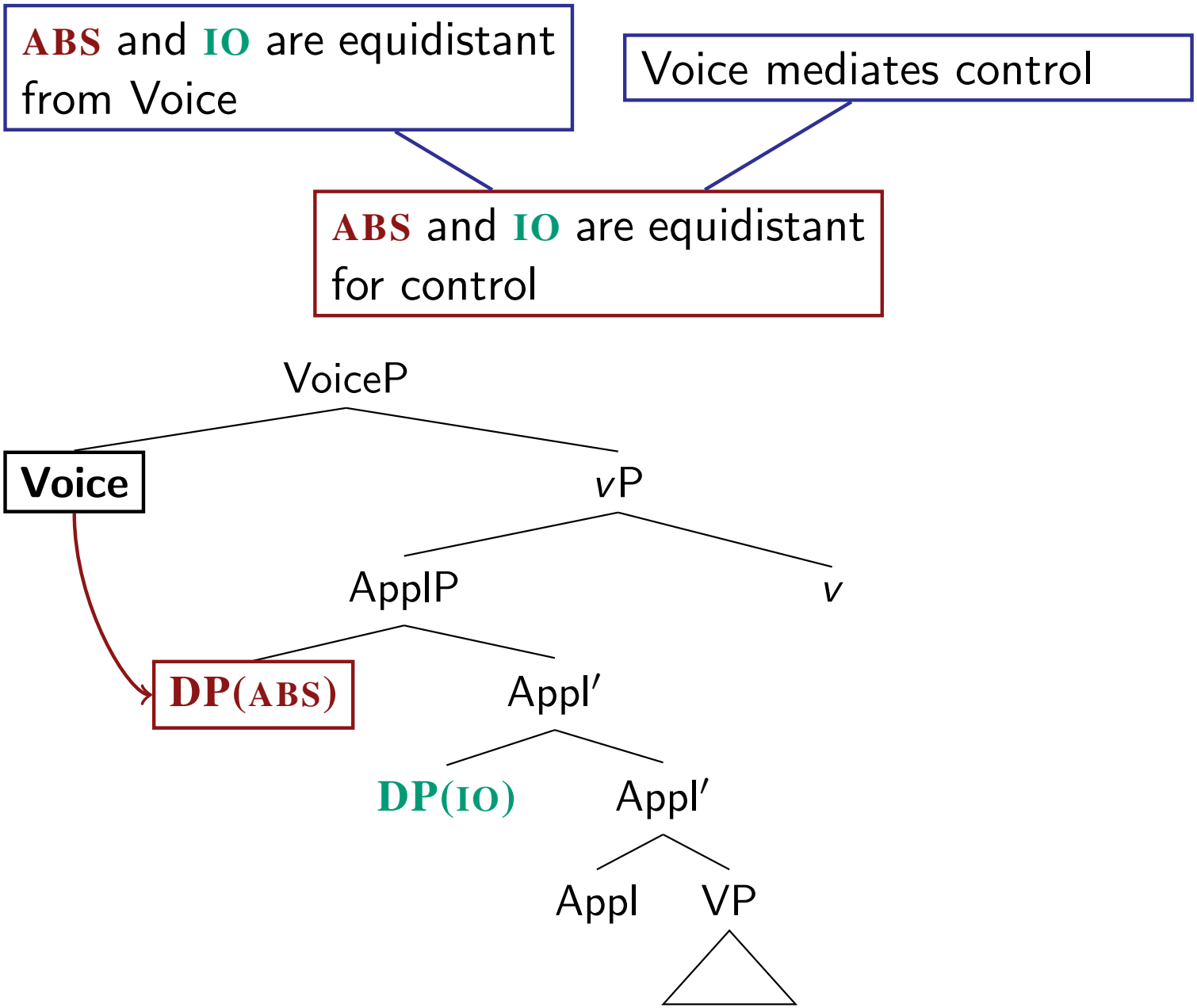

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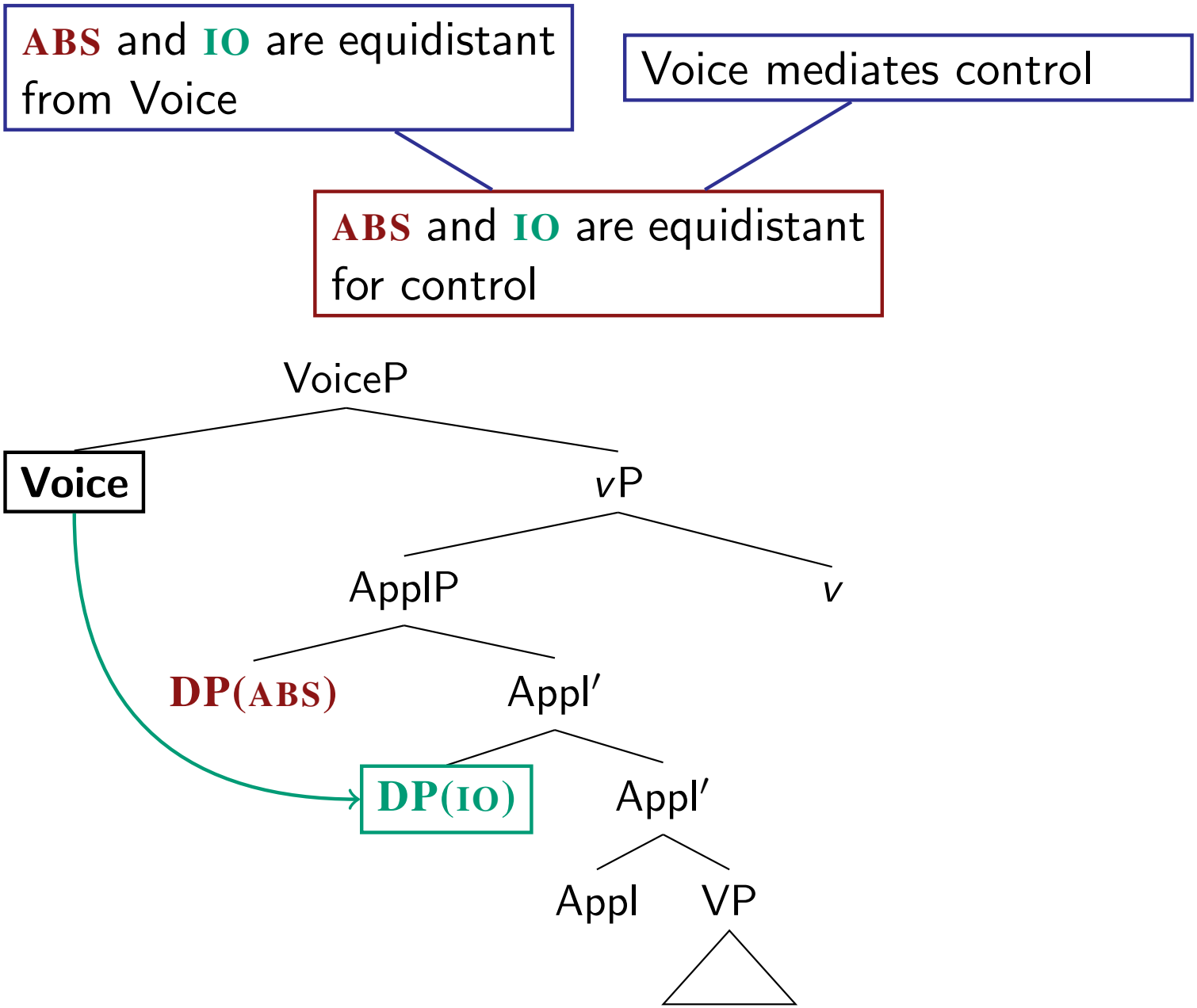

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

- **IO** may be controlled

pro$_{\text{i}}$ [$_{\text{CP}}$ sjənəbž'əč'eʁʷəm qəsš'əŝəʁexe-r](ABS)		**PRO$_{\text{i}}$(IO)**
	my childhood happenings-ABS	
sš'əʁʷəpšenew]	jeseʁaž'e	
to forget	I am beginning	

'I am starting to forget events from my childhood.'

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

- **IO** may be controlled

CONTROL

pro$_{\text{i}}$	[$_{\text{CP}}$ sjənəbž'əč'eʁʷəm	qəsš'əŝəʁexe-r](ABS)		**PRO$_{\text{i}}$(IO)**
	my childhood	happenings-ABS		
sš'əʁʷəpšenew]	jeseʁaž'e			
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'I am starting to forget events from my childhood.'

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

- **IO** may be controlled
- **ABS** may be controlled

gʷəš'əʔeč̣'əhaxem$_i$	[$_{CP}$ **PRO$_i$(ABS)**	sš'əʁʷəpšenew]
long words		to forget
raʁež'aʁ]		
they are beginning		

lit. 'Long words are beginning for me to be forgetting [them].'

Absolutive theme and applied argument are equidistant for control

- **IO** may be controlled
- **ABS** may be controlled

CONTROL

gʷəš’ə?eč’əhaxem$_i$ [$_{CP}$ **PRO$_i$(ABS)** sš’əʁʷəpšenew]
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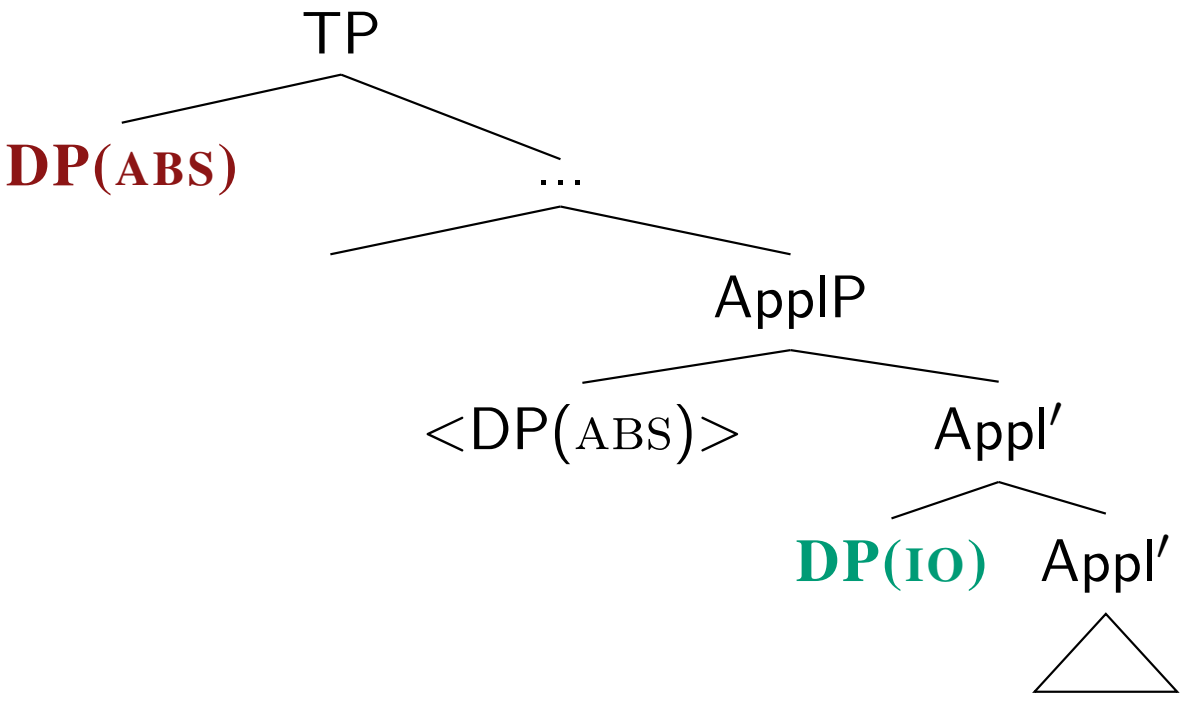
Control and reflexives versus reciprocals

- control and reflexives are constrained by Voice
- in two-place unaccusative verbs, **ABS** and **IO** are equidistant to Voice
- $\Rightarrow$ either argument can be controlled or bind a reflexive
- **Contrast** with reciprocals $\rightarrow$ only sensitive to full clause structure

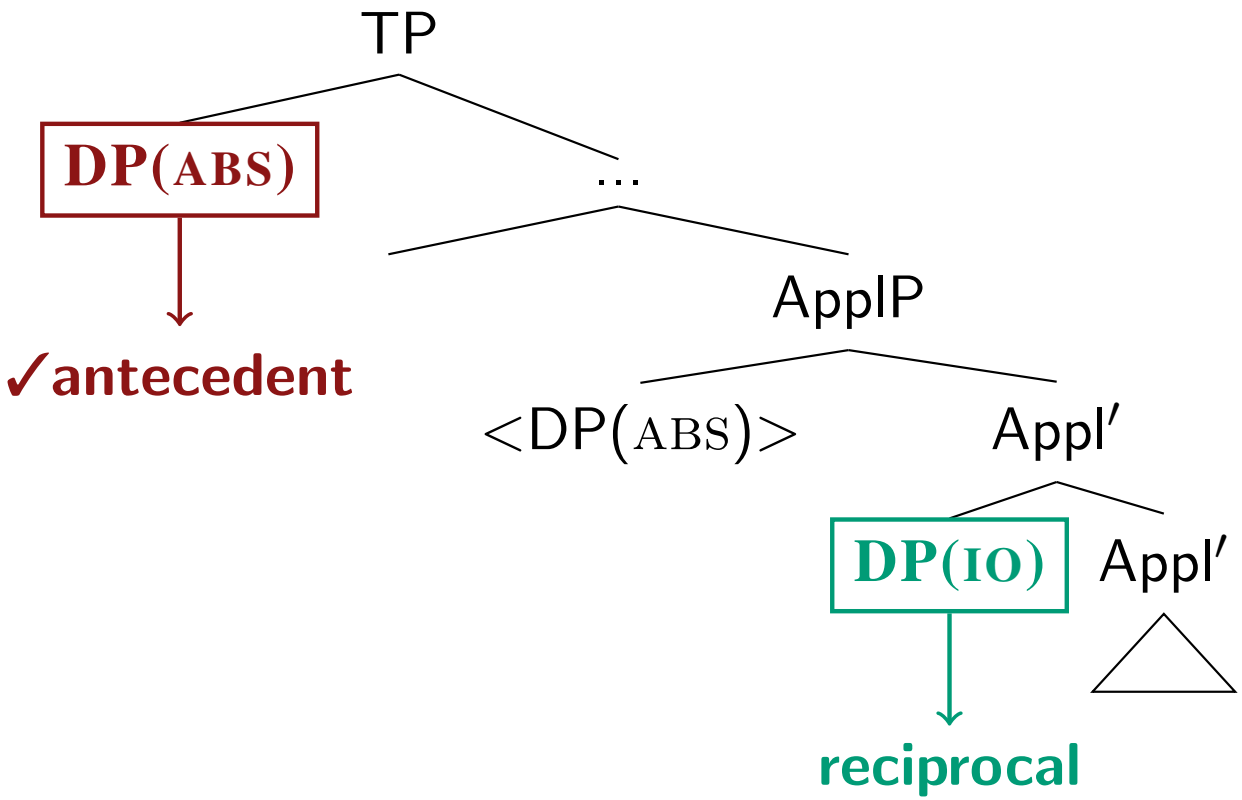
Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

- at level of TP, **ABS** asymmetrically c-commands **IO**



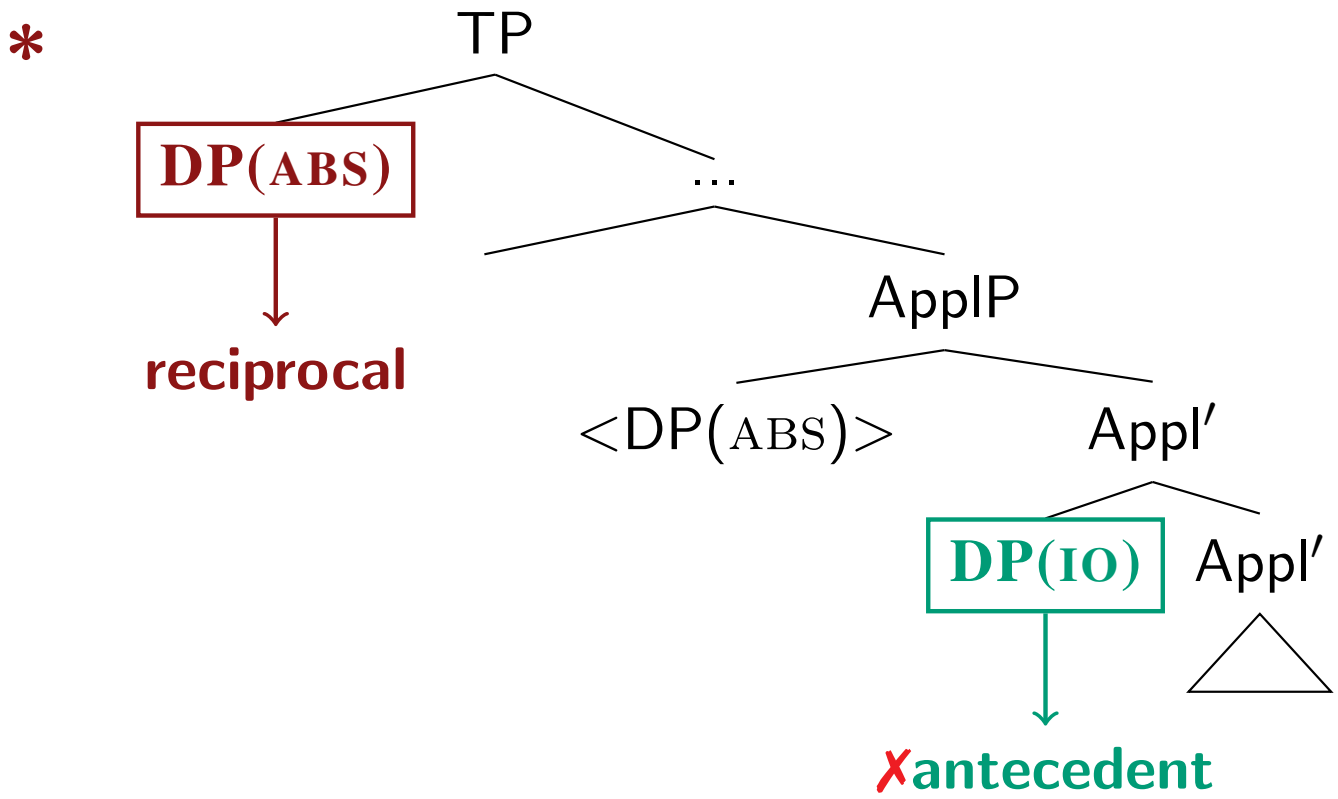
Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

- at level of TP, **ABS** asymmetrically c-commands **IO**
- $\Rightarrow$ **ABS** may bind **IO** reciprocal



Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

- at level of TP, **ABS** asymmetrically c-commands **IO**
- $\Rightarrow$ **ABS** may bind **IO** reciprocal
- **IO** may not bind **ABS** reciprocal



Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

- **ABS** can bind reciprocal in **IO** position

tə-	ze-	š'əʁʷəpšež'əʁ
1PL.ABS-	REC.IO-	forget.PST

'We forgot about each other.'

Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

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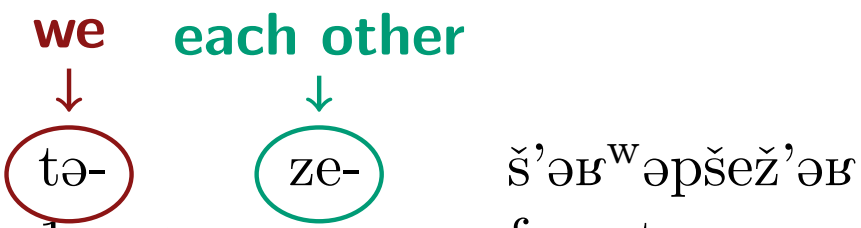

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Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

- **ABS** can bind reciprocal in **IO** position
- **IO** cannot bind reciprocal in **ABS** position

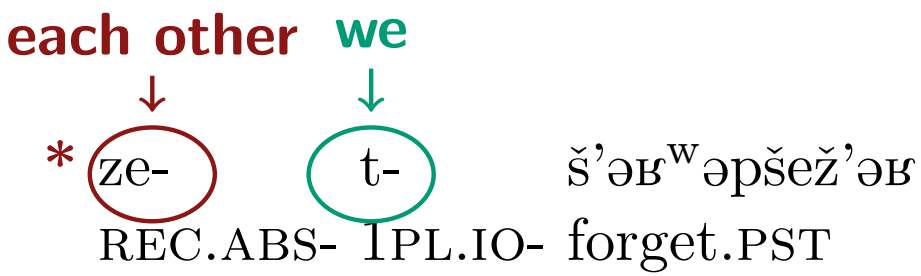
* ze- t- šʼəʁʷəpšežʼəʁ
REC.ABS- 1PL.IO- forget.PST

Intended: 'We forgot about each other.'

Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

- **ABS** can bind reciprocal in **IO** position
- **IO** cannot bind reciprocal in **ABS** position
- $\Rightarrow$ reciprocals are only sensitive to clause-level c-command



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Reciprocals: absolutive theme binds applied argument

Two-place unaccusative verbs:

- **ABS** can bind reciprocal in **IO** position
- **IO** cannot bind reciprocal in **ABS** position
- ⇒ reciprocals are only sensitive to clause-level c-command
- **CONTRAST** with reflexives and control

each other **we**

* ze- t- š'əʁʷəpšež'əʁ

REC.ABS- 1PL.IO- forget.PST

Intended: 'We forgot about each other.'

Voice and subjecthood: Recap

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- accounts for distribution of subjecthood properties across several positions
- possible explanation for rarity of syntactic ergativity in control and binding (see e.g. Dixon 1994; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016)

Subject is not a theoretically meaningful notion

Roadmap: distributed subjecthood in West Circassian

- reciprocals ✓
- parasitic gaps ✓
- reflexives ✓
- control ✓

} **A-domain**

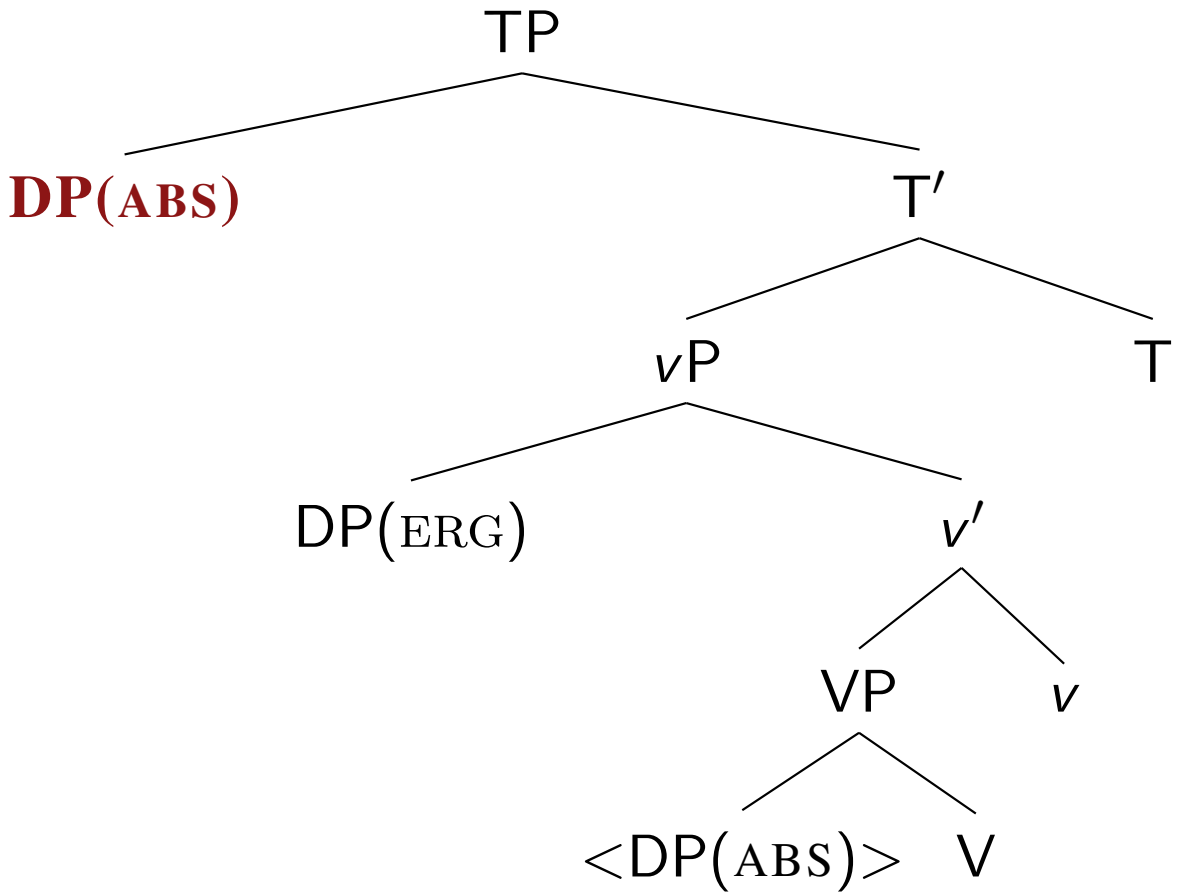
} **theta-domain**

Conclusion

In West Circassian, there are at least two subject positions:

- highest DP in the A-domain (TP)

E.g. for a transitive (ERG-ABS) verb:



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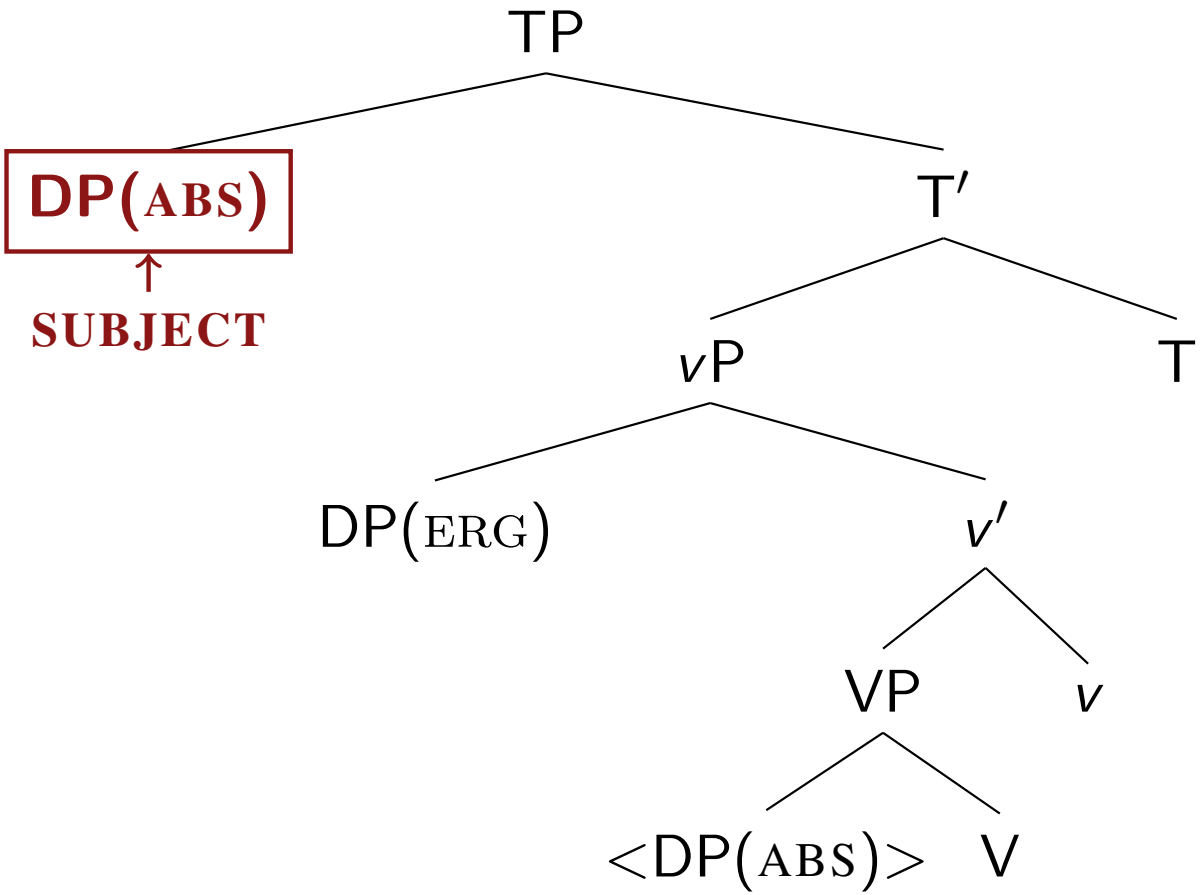

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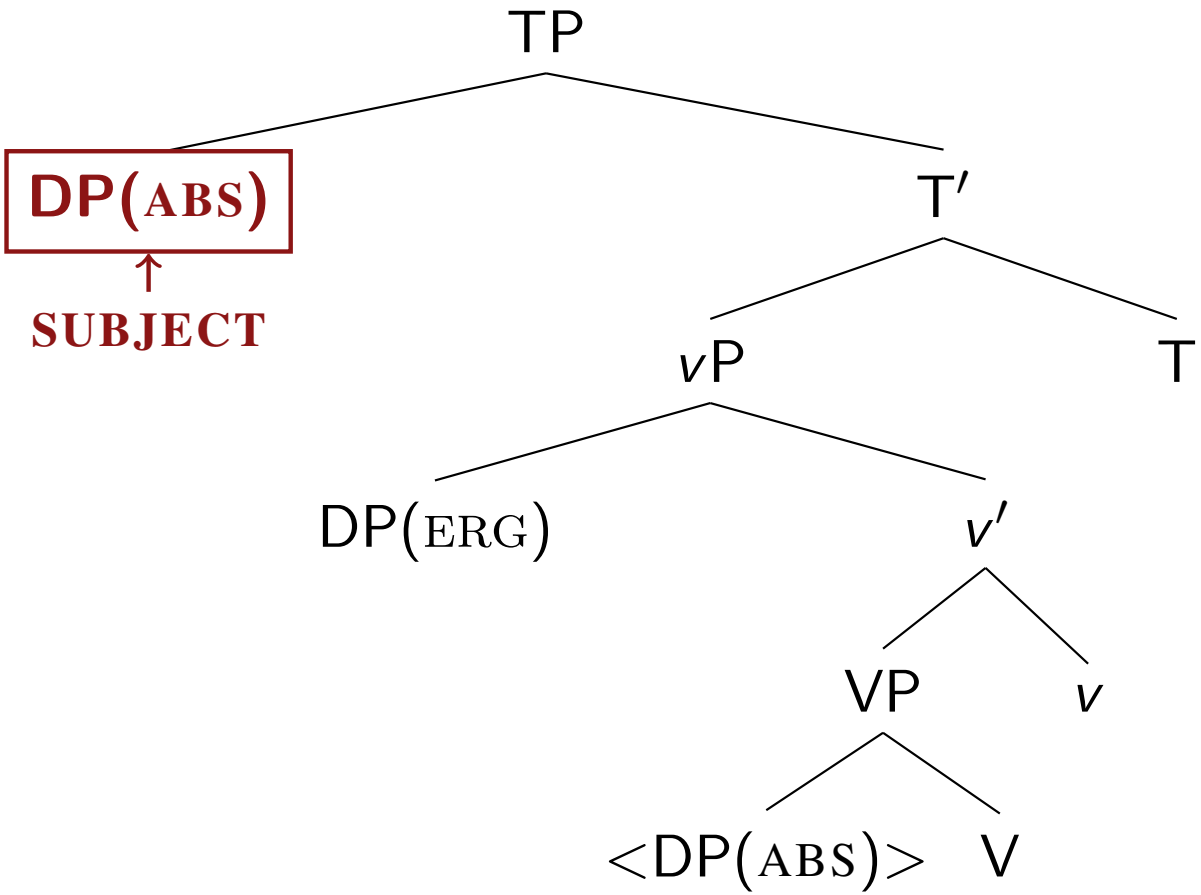

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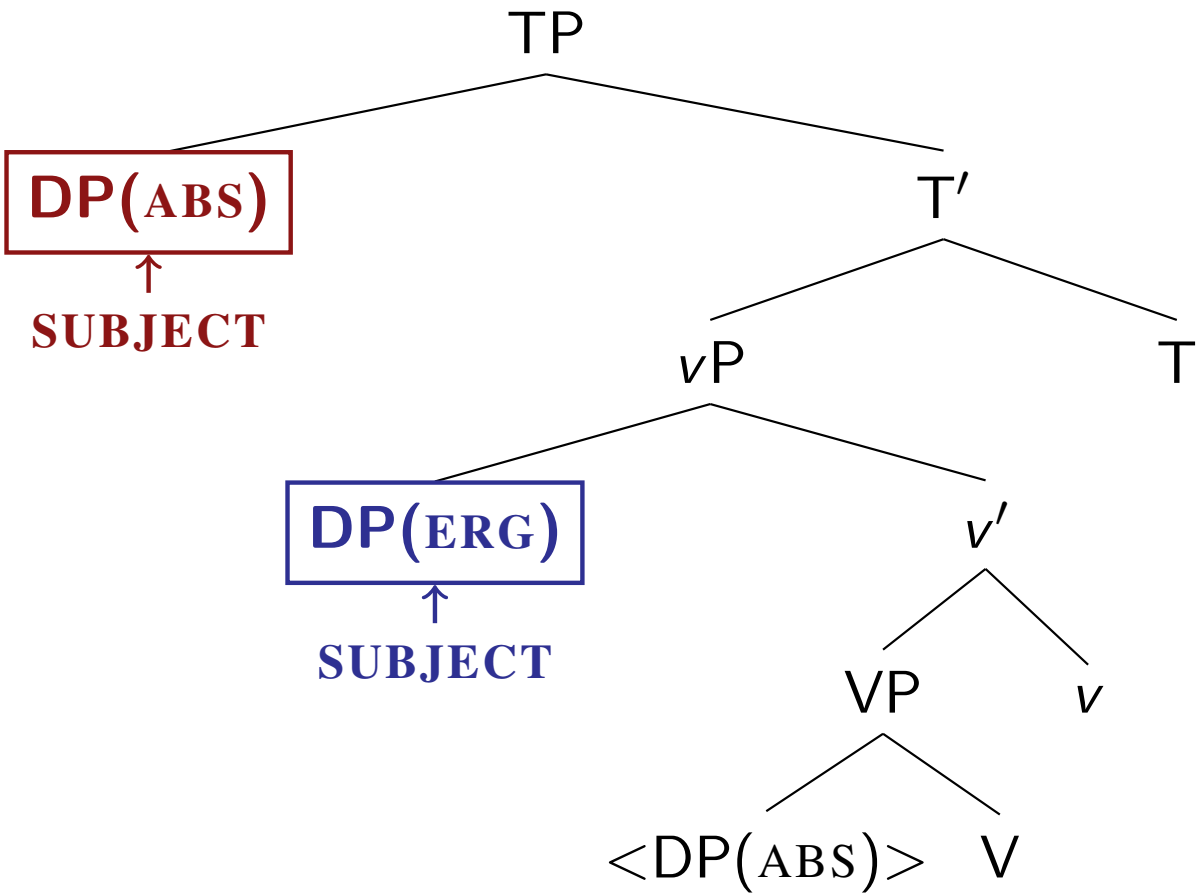

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- Conditions on parasitic gap licensing are stated in terms of **c-command**
- Control is sensitive to **structural prominence** rather than syntactic position.

Implications for syntactic ergativity

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- novel evidence for A-position status of high absolutive

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  $\Rightarrow$ fruitful testing ground for distribution of subjecthood properties

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$\Rightarrow$ **SUBJECT** is not a theoretically meaningful notion

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- **The bigger question:** why this contrast between reflexives and reciprocals?

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Current proposal:

- contribution to the empirical landscape
- dichotomy of subject types is not necessary
- subjecthood properties are defined by structural prominence and syntactic domain, not as primitives

Thank you!

- West Circassian consultants: Svetlana K. Alishaeva, Saida Gisheva, Susana K. Khatkova, and Zarema Meretukova
- Karlos Arregi, Nikita Bezkurov, Cleo Condoravdi, Itamar Francez, Vera Gribanova, Boris Harizanov, Paul Kiparsky, Yury Lander, Beth Levin, Jason Merchant, Yakov G. Testelets, Michelle Yuan
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