

The Role of Voice in Establishing Control: Evidence from a Syntactically Ergative Language

There is an overwhelming cross-linguistic tendency for obligatory control constructions to be constrained regarding the choice of controlled argument in the embedded clause: even in a language that otherwise displays syntactic ergativity effects, control follows a syntactically accusative schema (Dixon 1994; Deal 2015). Given that most analyses of control capitalize on the structural prominence of the controlled argument within the embedded clause (Landau 2013:108-123 and references therein), this generalization poses a problem for syntactically ergative languages, where the surface subject position is occupied by the absolutive theme of a transitive verb, but control targets the structurally lower ergative agent. Based on data from West Circassian (or Adyghe; WC), I argue that this discrepancy is due to the role of Voice⁰ in establishing co-indexation between the controller in the matrix clause and the controlled argument in the embedded clause.

WC is a high absolutive language, with the absolutive DP raising to Spec,TP – the surface subject position. This is evinced by the behavior of reciprocals: a reciprocal in the applied object or ergative position may be bound by an absolutive DP regardless of its base-generated position (Ershova 2019:ch.3). Due to pro-drop, anaphor binding in WC is primarily expressed via specialized agreement on the predicate: in (1) this marker tracks agreement with the ergative agent and in (2) it tracks agreement with the applied object – in both cases, the absolutive argument raises to Spec,TP to bind the reciprocal pronoun.

- (1) [TP **pro**_i(ABS) [vP *rec*_i(ERG) [VP ~~*pro*~~_i(ABS) te- **zere-** λeɸ^wə -ɸ]]]
 1PL.ABS- REC.ERG- see -PST
 ‘We saw each other’ ABS>ERG
- (2) [TP **pro**_i(ABS) [vP ~~*pro*~~_i(ABS) [AppIP *rec*_i(IO) tə- **z-** e- pλəʒ’ə]]]
 1PL.ABS- REC.IO- DAT- look
 ‘We are looking at each other.’ ABS>IO

However, obligatory control constructions – a standard test for subjecthood (Keenan 1976) – fail to single out the absolutive DP as the subject despite reciprocals providing evidence for a high absolutive position in the embedded clause. Instead, they require the controller to be co-indexed with the highest DP within vP: the ergative agent of a transitive verb (3) and the absolutive external argument of an unergative verb (4).

- (3) ha-m_i [TP haʒ^wəʃ’ər-xe-r(ABS) [vP **PRO**_i(ERG) [VP haʒ^wəʃ’ər-xe-r(ABS) əɸeʃxenew]]]
 dog-OBL puppy-PL-ABS 3ABS+3SG.ERG.feed.MOD.ADV
 rjəɸeʒ’əɸ
 3ABS+3SG.ERG.begin.PST
 ‘The dog began to feed the puppies.’ ERG=PRO
- (4) č’elejeɸaʒe-m_i(ERG) [TP **PRO**_i(ABS) [vP ~~PRO~~_i(ABS) [AppIP sabjəj-xe-m(IO) jaʃeʃenew]]]
 teacher-OBL child-PL-OBL 3ABS+3PL.IO.scold.MOD.ADV
 rjəɸeʒ’əɸ
 3ABS+3SG.ERG.begin.PST
 ‘The teacher began to scold the children.’ ABS=PRO

Building on Landau’s (2000) Agree-based analysis, I argue that control in WC is mediated via Voice⁰, which (i) agrees in the index feature with the highest DP in its c-command domain, and (ii) carries the feature [CTL] which is targeted by a relativized probe on C⁰ (see Nevins 2007; Bobaljik 2008 on relativized probing). The controller in the matrix clause then agrees with C⁰, resulting in index matching between the controller and the embedded controlled argument (5). The absolutive DP in Spec,TP does not act as an intervener for Agree-mediated control, because it does not bear the targeted [CTL] feature.

- (5) [DP-Controller_[i,CTL] ... [CP C_[i,CTL] [TP DP(ABS)_[j] [VoiceP Voice_[i,CTL] [vP DP(ERG)_[i] ...]]]]

The role of Voice⁰ in obligatory control configurations is confirmed by parallels between the choice of controlled argument and the choice of antecedent for local subject oriented reflexives, which are commonly analyzed as constrained by Voice⁰ (Labelle 2008; Ahn 2015; Bhatia and Poole 2016; Ershova 2019, a.o.). This analysis explains why control constructions are insensitive to the high position of the absolutive DP: since control is established via Voice⁰, it always singles out the highest DP in VoiceP, rather than the highest argument in the full embedded clause.

References. • Ahn 2015. UCLA diss. • Bhatia & Poole 2016. In *FASAL 6*. • Bobaljik 2008. In *Phi theory*. • Deal 2015. In *Syntax—theory and analysis*. • Dixon 1994. *Ergativity*. • Ershova 2019. UChicago diss. • Keenan 1976. In *Subject and topic*. • Labelle 2008. *NLLT*. • Landau 2000. *Elements of control*. • Landau 2013. *Control in generative grammar*. • Nevins 2007. *NLLT*.