Dynamic locality, split ergativity and adposition agreement in Avar

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BACKGROUND: The ergative-absolutive language Avar (Northeast Caucasian) displays an optional aspect-based alignment split whereby both arguments in a transitive clause bear unmarked (absolutive) case when the tense form is periphrastic (Forker 2012). Since ϕ-agreement in Avar tracks absolutive case, this creates an additional target for agreement. Furthermore, just like verbs, certain low adpositions display ϕ-agreement with the absolutive argument (1).

(1) łimal **łim** ʕert'ini‹**b**›e t'o- l- e– l r– ugo
kids.ABS **water.ABS** ‹N›jug.ILL pour-PRS-PTCP–PL PL–AUX.PRS

'The kids poured (the) water into a/the jug.' [neutral order]

This paper addresses two puzzling patterns of the interaction of split ergativity with adposition agreement.

PUZZLE I: Oblique adpositional arguments can only show agreement with the theme argument; moreover, the PP-object cannot appear left-peripherally even though short movement past the theme argument is permitted (2).

(2) (*ʕert'ini‹**b**›e) łimal ʕert'ini‹**b**›e **łim** t'o- l- e– l r– ugo
‹N›jug.ILL kids.ABS ‹N›jug.ILL water.ABS pour-PRS-PTCP–PL PL–AUX.PRS

'The kids are pouring (the) water into a/the jug.' [derived position]

PUZZLE II: vP-level agreeing adpositions display agreement variability correlating with their linear position. Left-peripheral adpositions agree with the absolutive subject (3a), there being a strong preference for object agreement when the adposition occurs to the right of the subject (3b).

(3) a. hani–**w** **emen** (*hani–**w**) xer b–ec- ul- e– w w–uk'-ana
here–M **father.ABS** here–M hay.ABS N–MOW-PRS-PTCP–M M–be- PST

b. emen hani–**b** **xer** b–ec- ul- e– w w–uk'-ana
father.ABS here–N **hay.ABS** N–MOW-PRS-PTCP–M M–be- PST

'Father was mowing (the) hay here.'

Thus, the existence of two distinct agreement controllers and two distinct modes of attachment (event modification *vs.* oblique argument) creates an ideal testing ground for the directionality of valuation debate.

AIMS AND CLAIMS: I claim that the ban on fronted PP-objects (Puzzle I) and the variable agreement pattern in the case of vP-adjoined PPs (Puzzle II) arise as a consequence of **opportunistic early spell-out** underlying the aspect-based alignment split. I further show that Upwards valuation (Chomsky 2000) is sufficient to derive agreement on all ϕ-probes, whereas downwards valuation fails to derive object agreement on the verb.

ANALYSIS: I take derivations to start with numerations and subarrays (Chomsky 2000), and assume spellout can apply opportunistically once a subarray has been exhausted (Zwart 2009). Unvalued features on probes are valued when probes c-command their goals, downwards valuation being disallowed.

Building on existing literature on Avar, I view the vP as the locus of both case assignment and agreement (Rudnev 2015). In finite and non-finite clauses alike, the ERG argument asymmetrically c-commands the ABS argument, and case marking and agreement are uniform across all clause types

regardless of transitivity: T is not implicated in assigning ABS. Since both vP and PP can realise overt agreement marking, I analyse them as being specified with unvalued ϕ-features.

Adopting, but modifying, Coon & Preminger's (2017) configurational approach to ergativity and split ergativity, I view the alignment split in Avar as arising due to early spellout of the lower portion of the vP, which "hides" the internal argument from the configurational procedure of case assignment (Marantz 1991).

The ban on fronting either the direct object or the PP-object in (2) follows from the low phase (Phase 1) already being spelled out by the time the external argument enters the structure. If the domain notated as Phase 1 in (4a) is not spelled out, structure building proceeds, resulting in ergative alignment (4b), since both arguments appear within the same domain and are therefore visible to Case Competition. I treat PP-objects as forming a small clause with the absolutive argument internally to vP (den Dikken 1995), which results in P's [uϕ] feature probing its c-command domain and getting valued under sisterhood. An identical feature on V is subsequently valued.

(4) a. $[_{\text{Phase 2}}\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{subj}}\ [_{\text{Phase 1}}\ \ldots\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{obj}}\ \text{PP V}\ ]\ \text{v}\ ]$ [split alignment]

b. $[_{\text{Phase 1}}\ \text{DP}^{\text{ERG}}_{\text{subj}}\ [\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{obj}}\ \text{PP V}\ ]\ \text{v}\ ]$ [ergative alignment]

The same approach provides a solution to the variable agreement puzzle: object agreement on PP, (3b), will obtain when the PP adjoins to Phase 1 immediately before that domain is spelled out (5a). Once adjoined, it will inspect its c-command domain and find the absolutive object. Subject agreement will result when the PP is adjoined to Phase 2 and inspects its interior in search of an absolutive goal (5b). Subject agreement in (5a) is ruled out: if Phase 1 is spelled out, so is PP inside it; if spell out fails to apply, the subject will receive ergative marking thus becoming an ineligible agreement controller.

(5) a. $[_{\text{Phase 2}}\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{subj}}\ [_{\text{Phase 1}}\ \text{PP}\ [_{\text{Phase 1}}\ \ldots\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{obj}}\ \text{V}\ ]\ \text{v}\ ]\ ]$ [object agreement]

b. $[_{\text{Phase 2}}\ \text{PP}\ [_{\text{Phase 2}}\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{subj}}\ [_{\text{Phase 1}}\ \ldots\ \text{DP}^{\text{ABS}}_{\text{obj}}\ \text{V}\ ]\ \text{v}\ ]]$ [subject agreement]

In addition to Downwards valuation being unable to derive agreement between v and the absolutive object it c-commands, it also makes a wrong prediction. If only the lower portion of Phase 1 in (5a) is spelled out while PP's features are still unvalued, Upwards valuation correctly rules out subject agreement whereas downwards valuation incorrectly predicts it to be available since PP will be able to probe upwards.

OUTLOOK: The analysis of the alignment split developed here is complementary to approaches to split ergativity postulating additional structural layers in progressive/imperfective aspects as chief culprits of the failure of the external argument to get ergative case. Furthermore, the analysis provides a fairly strong argument in favour of Upwards valuation (Chomsky 2000) and against Downwards valuation (Zeijlstra 2012).

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