

Prominence, intervention, and attraction in Georgian agreement

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Summary: Rich agreement systems simultaneously test theories of syntactic representations, comprehension, and acquisition. Our case study is Georgian, where complex blocking relations obtain between possible agreement controllers depending on ϕ -features and case. We outline a theory which derives blocking from phrase-structural prominence, decomposing surface agreement dependencies into abstract steps of movement and ϕ -probing. This approach has empirical and theoretical advantages over alternatives. Moreover, it offers an explanatory bridge to theories of sentence processing. We suggest that complexities of Georgian morphosyntax made certain types of agreement attraction errors more frequent and thus more likely to grammaticize into the synchronic system. Proposed linking hypotheses make testable (and soon-to-be-tested) predictions about real-time sentence processing and learnability, in Georgian and beyond.

Starting points: Clausal arguments in Georgian exhibit case patterns that diagnose three syntactic categories (Harris 1981); we associate each with an argument-introducing head (Nash 2021). External arguments (in Spec- ν P) shift between ergative, nominative, and dative across tenses. Internal arguments (in Comp/Spec-VP) are dative when coargument to a nominative subject, but nominative elsewhere. Applied arguments (in Spec-AppIP) are always dative. Labels ERG, NOM, and DAT symbolize these argument categories. Condition A is sensitive to base c-command relations. Together with case, it diagnoses three bivalent clause types: active (ERG>NOM, (1)), deponent (so called for passive verbal inflection; NOM>DAT, (2)), and psych (DAT>NOM, (3)).

(1) **Active:** [TP [ν P ERG [ν P V NOM]]]

man na  a t  avisi t  avi
3SG.ERG see:AOR self’s self:NOM
“S/he saw her/himself” (case shifts w/ tense)

(2) **Deponent:** [TP [ν P [ν P NOM V [AppIP DAT]]]

is e  mareba t  avis t  avs
3SG.NOM help:PRES self’s self:DAT
“S/he is helping her/himself” (no case shift)

(3) **Psych:** [TP [ν P [AppIP DAT [ν P V NOM]]]

mas sdzulda t  avisi t  avi
3SG.DAT hate:IMP self’s self:NOM
“S/he hated her/himself” (no case shift)

Suffixal interactions: Georgian has complex and well-studied agreement (for an overview, Foley 2021). For space we focus only on the behavior of suffixes, which can register either or both arguments’ ϕ -features, along with tense and voice. In clauses with only 3SG arguments, or no arguments at all, a ϕ -default tense-only suffix appears (e.g. *-a* ‘PRES.PASS’ in (2)). This alternates paradigmatically with a local-person/LOC suffix (*-i* ‘PRES.PASS.LOC’) and a 3PL suffix (*-ian* ‘PRES.PASS.3PL’). Certain plural arguments condition the suffix *-t  * ‘PL’, which concatenates on a tense suffix. We take these morphemes all to be exponents of T⁰ and its ϕ -probe; *-t  * ‘PL’ expones a fission operation conditioned when PL cannot be fusionally expressed with a tense suffix or person prefix (cf. Bondarenko & Zoppi 2025). What arguments control which suffix depends on their ϕ -features and case. Examples below (4–9) illustrate the most important interactions.

SUBJ > OBJ	Active (‘saw’) ERG > NOM	Deponent (‘helps’) NOM > DAT	SUBJ > OBJ	Psych (‘hated’) DAT > NOM
[3PL] > 3SG	(4a) <i>na��-es</i>	(4b) <i>e��mareb-ian</i>	[3PL] > 3SG	(4c) <i>sdzul-da-t��</i>
[3SG] > 3PL	(5a) <i>na��-a</i>	(5b) <i>e��mareb-a</i> , or (5b’) <i>e��mareb-a-t��</i>	[3SG] > 3PL	(5c) <i>sdzul-da</i>
[3SG] > 2PL	(6a) <i>g-na��-a-t��</i>	(6b) <i>g-e��mareb-a-t��</i>	[2PL] > 3SG	(6c) <i>g-dzul-da-t��</i>
[3PL] > 2PL	(7a) <i>g-na��-es</i>	(7b) <i>g-e��mareb-ian</i>	[2PL] > 3PL	(7c) <i>g-dzul-da-t��</i>
[1SG] > 2PL	(8a) <i>g-na��-e-t��</i>	(8b) <i>g-e��mareb-i-t��</i>	[2PL] > 1SG	(8c) <i>g-dzul-di-t��</i>
[1SG] > 3PL	(9a) <i>v-na��-e</i>	(9b) <i>v-e��mareb-i</i>	[3PL] > 1SG	(9c) <i>v-dzul-di</i>

Prominence and intervention: We pursue the hypothesis that the ability to control (and block) agreement follows from structural prominence, sometimes derived by movement. Three abstract positions can be inferred along the clausal spine (specifiers of αP , βP , and γP) into which arguments move and can intervene on otherwise possible relations. The proposal is summarized below. Structure (10) condenses together clause types (1)–(3); probe properties (11a–d) are given in Interaction–Satisfaction terms (Deal, to appear).

(10) [_{TP} T⁰ [_{αP} α^0 [_{βP} β^0 [_{γP} ERG v⁰ [_{AppIP} DAT Appl⁰ [_{γP} γ^0 [_{γP} NOM V⁰ [_{AppIP} Appl⁰ DAT]...]]]]]]

- (11) a. T⁰ {Int: φ ; Sat: φ } = Agree with the closest argument, or all closest ones given equidistance.
 b. α^0 {Int: 3PL,–DAT^M; Sat: φ } = Move the closest argument if it is 3PL and either NOM or ERG.
 c. β^0 {Int: LOC^M; Sat: n/a} = Move all local-person arguments. Co-specifiers are equidistant to T.
 d. γ^0 {Int: TOP^M; Sat: TOP} = Move the closest topical argument.

The highest position (Spec- αP) is for 3PL subjects in ERG or NOM (but not DAT) case. These always control a 3PL tense suffix (4a,b). Importantly, they also block $-t^h$ agreement with 2PL objects (7a,b), which is otherwise obligatory (6a,b; 8a,b). Here blocking is a consequence of T⁰'s satisfaction set, which prevents it from agreeing beyond the first argument it can probe. **The middle position (Spec- βP)** is for LOC arguments. Movement here puts LOC.PL objects above 3SG subjects, where they control $-t^h$ 'PL' (6a,b). It also puts LOC.SG objects above 3PL.DAT subjects; the former block the latter from controlling $-t^h$ (9c), which they normally must do (4c). In LOC>LOC clauses, we assume that both arguments move to equidistant specifiers of βP , where T⁰ then probes them both. Only in this type of clause is it possible for the subject and object to each control a nondefault agreement suffix (8a–c). **The lowest position (Spec- γP)** accounts for an exceptional property of deponents. Usually, 3PL objects cannot control agreement (5a,c; 9a,b); subjects intervene. But in 3SG>3PL deponent clauses, agreement in $-t^h$ is possible (5b ~ 5b'), and preferred if the 3PL object is topical/pronominal (Tuite 1987). Hence Spec- γP is a topic position, just above the lowest kind of subject. In other clauses, object topicalization will not feed agreement; ERG and DAT subjects are too high.

Upshots: This proposal's selling point is how phrase-structural height correlates strongly with other dimensions of linguistic prominence — a correlation which we argue below has explanatory power. But besides that, the analysis has several advantages over alternatives. We do not appeal to vP phasehood to prevent agreement with certain 3PL objects ((5), (9); cf. Thivierge 2021), as this incorrectly predicts A-bar movement via the phase edge to possibly feed agreement. Also, we avoid the theoretical complexity of conjunctive satisfaction conditions (i.e. keep probing until both 3RD and PL are copied, simultaneously or cyclically; Bondarenko & Zoppi 2025). Here the puzzle (viz. the tension between (8) and (7a,b)) is solved by an equidistance clause in our assumed definition of Agree, which we consider to be better motivated.

Grammar and processing: This proposal is explanatory insofar as it sheds light on how an agreement system arose, and continues to be acquired and innovate; it is theoretically productive insofar as it informs linking hypotheses between grammatical representations and processing algorithms. Here, an argument's height correlates strongly with other prominence dimensions like person, featural markedness, agency, and topicality. We see this as an instance of representational iconicity, aiding in the acquisition of an otherwise quite complex pattern. As for how the pattern arose, we hypothesize that it has grammaticized certain types of agreement attraction errors (Bock & Miller 1991, et seq.) which are made likely by how prominence dimensions interact in real-time processing (Bornkessel-Schlesewsky & Schlewsky 2013). Exceptional object agreement (5b') is key. That it occurs in deponent clauses is no coincidence. Syntactically, the arguments of a deponent clause are as low as possible (2); thematically, they tend to be hard to distinguish in terms of proto-role properties (Dowty 1991). Before innovation of γ^0 (11d), 3PL object agreement was always ungrammatical. But, if prominence dimensions affect cue-based retrieval mechanisms in memory (Engelmann et al. 2019), then topical 3PL deponent objects were especially likely to cause attraction errors during production; intuitively, they could outcompete subjects for the mental spotlight. If sufficiently frequent, these attraction errors would be folded into a learner's grammar. Future psycholinguistic experiments will test specific synchronic predictions about attraction in Georgian — e.g. topical objects attract PL agreement more than non-topical ones, and psych objects attract more than active objects.

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