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Northwest Caucasian Languages: Grammar and Typology

II. Nominal morphology

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Overview

	Abkhaz-Abaza	Ubykh	West Circassian	Kabardian
possession	+	+	+	+
alienability distinctions	–	–	+	–
number	+	+	+	+
definiteness	+	+	(+)	(+)
grammatical cases	–	+	+	+
peripheral cases	+	+	+	+
gender	+	–	–	–

Possession

- NWC languages feature **head-marking** of adnominal possession by means of pronominal prefixes **indexing** the possessor on the possessee.

- Abaza:

(1) a. *sá-la*

1SG.PR-eye

'my eye'

b. *abχaz-k^wa*

Abkhazian-PL

'the Abkhaz language'

rə-bəzša

3PL.PR-language

Possession

- West Circassian shows a contrast between **alienable** and **inalienable** possession:
 - nouns belonging to a closed class of lexemes denoting body parts and kinship relations attach possessive prefixes directly;
 - all other nouns employ a special **possessive applicative** to combine with possessive prefixes.

- (2) a. *p-ŕhe*
2SG.PR-head
'your head'
- b. *s-šəpχ^{wə}*
1SG.PR-sister
'my sister'
- c. *w-jə-č'ezəw*
2SG.PR-POSS-time
'your time'

- In line with the cross-linguistic tendency for inalienable possession to have less elaborate marking than alienable one (Haspelmath 2017).

Possession

- Kabardian has generalised the alienable possessive strategy to all nouns:
Besleney Kabardian

- (3) a. *w-jə-wəne*
2SG.PR-POSS-house
'your house'
- b. *s-jə-šəpχ^w*
1SG.PR-POSS-sister
'my sister'
- c. *jə-g^w*
[3SG.PR]POSS-heart
'his/her heart'

Possession

- Dyadic reciprocal possessive forms

West Circassian (Bagirokova et al. 2022: 273)

(4) *ze-pəj-xe-m* *fed-ew* *ze-fə-š'ə-tə-x...*
REC.PR-enemy-PL-OBL similar-ADV REC.IO-BEN-LOC-stand-PL
'they behave like (each other's) enemies to each other'

Definiteness

- Dedicated marking in Abkhaz-Abaza and Ubykh; in Circassian (in)definiteness is manifested by presence vs. absence of grammatical case marking (see below).
- Abaza: definiteness *a-*
 indefiniteness *-k* (also used as numeral 'one')
 bare form mostly used in non-specific contexts
 definite and indefinite markers can combine yielding a
 'subset' reading

Definiteness

- Abaza (texts)

- (5) a. *зә.ҕ^w-к* *h-qá.s-ra* *a-taq-χá-ṭ*
brook-**INDF** 1PL.ABS-cross-MSD 3SG.N.IO-need-INC-DCL
'We had to cross a brook.' (specific indefinite)
- b. *а-зәҕ^w* *s-an-ta-pšá* *ásqan...*
DEF-brook 1SG.ABS-TEMP-LOC-look when
'When I looked at the brook...' (definite)
- c. *rax^wχč'á* *d-g'-áʔa-m*
shepherd 3SG.H.ABS-NEG-be-NEG
'There was no shepherd.' (non-specific)
- d. *а-č'к^wәn* *а-č-к* *аʔа-хә-m-к^wа* *j-ba-ṭ*
DEF-boy **DEF**-ox-**INDF** be-RE-NEG-CVB 3SG.M.ERG-see-DCL
'The boy saw that one of the (two) oxen was no longer there.'

Definiteness

- Abkhaz:
 - the bare form has almost fallen out of use;
 - the prefix *a-* no longer signals definiteness but has rather become a generic nominal marker:

(6) *a-škol* *s-ta-le-jt* *w-h^wa-ma?*
ART-school 1SG.ABS-LOC-enter-AOR.DCL 2SG.ERG-say-Q
'Did you say you started school?' (Šakryl 1970: 8)

Number

- Number: an apparently simple system with just singular vs. plural
- Elaborations:
 - singular vs. number-neutral forms
 - general vs. specific plural suffixes in Abaza and Abkhaz
 - agreeing plural forms of demonstratives in Abaza and Abkhaz
 - suppletive singular-plural pairs
 - associative plural

See Bagirokova et al. (2022) for a really detailed description of West Circassian.

Number

- Abaza (texts): general plural, NB phrasal marking

(7) a. *ph^wəs-k* *l-sabáj* *d-ʕa-l-q-áštələ-n*
woman-INDF 3SG.F.PR-child 3SG.H.ABS-CSL-3SG.F.IO-LOC-forget-PST
'A woman forgot about her child.'

b. *a-wandár-k^wa* *h-rá-k^w-çə-ta* *a-ph^wəs-k^wa,*
DEF-cart-PL 1PL.ABS-3PL.IO-loc-sit-ADV DEF-woman-PL
a-qáçə-k^wa *ájsra* *j-áʔa-ta*
DEF-man-PL DEF+war 3PL.ABS-be-ADV
'(It were we) the women (who) traveled on carts, while the men were at war.'

c. *a-[çəjs* *ʕ^wabž'a* *č'k^wən]-k^wa* *a-χ'ta* *j-a-š'-wa-n*
DEF-bird grey small-PL DEF-frost 3PL.ABS-3SG.N.ERG-kill-IPF-PST
'Small grey birds were freezing.'

Number

- Abaza

(8) a. *a-nχaɸ^w-ĉá*
DEF-worker-PLH
'workers'

b. *sá-nbž'aɸ^w-ĉa-k^wa*
1SG.PR-friend-PLH-PL
'my friends'

human plural

c. *h^wəs* 'calf' ~ *h^wara* / *h^wara-k^wa* 'calves' (Tabulova 1976: 49)

animal kid plural

d. *ph^wás.pa* 'girl' (< woman-son) ~ *h^wsása* 'girls'

suppletion

- demonstrative agreement

(9) *awa-t* *a-bəzša-k^wa*
DIST-PL DEF-language-PL
'these languages'

Number

Number neutrality of the unmarked form

West Circassian (Bagirokova et al. 2022: 268, 266)

- (10) *qəpçə wəne-m jə-λ-a?*
plum house-OBL LOC-lie-Q
'Is there a plum/are there plums in the house?' number-neutral
- (11) a. *g^wəš'əʔewəxəv je-pλ!*
sentence DAT-look
'Look at any sentence(s)!' number-neutral
- b. *g^wəš'əʔewəxəve-m je-pλ!*
sentence-OBL DAT-look
'Look at a/the sentence!' singular only
- c. *g^wəš'əʔewəxəve-xe-m ja-pλ!*
sentence-PL-OBL DAT+3PL.IO-look
'Look at the/some sentences!' plural only

Number

- Associative plural (Daniel & Moravcsik 2013):
'X and those close to her/him', 'X and objects like it'

Abaza (texts)

- (12) *ž-zažə-ḵ ... nana-rḡa r-pnə j-ḡa-hə-r-tə-n*
cow-one-INDF granny-ASPL 3PL.PR-at 3SG.N.ABS-CSL-1PL.IO-3PL.ERG-give-PST
'They gave us a cow at the granny's place.'

West Circassian (Bagirokova et al. 2022: 274)

- (13) *məhamwede-txe-r jež'ape-m š'ə-ʔe-x*
Mohammed-ASPL-ABS school-OBL LOC-be-PL
'Mohammed and his friends in school.'

Case

- No grammatical cases in Abkhaz and Abaza, head-marking instead
- Abkhaz (Hewitt 1979, transcription and glosses adapted)

(14) a. *a-χάça a-ph^wás a-š^wq^wá lá-j-te-jt* clause
ART-man ART-woman ART-book 3SG.F.IO-3SG.M.ERG-give-DCL
'The man gave the book to the woman.' (p. 36)

b. *á-č'k^wən ja-ɣná* noun phrase
ART-boy 3SG.M.PR-house
'the boy's house' (p. 116)

c. *a-3ájas a-ɣná* postpositional phrase
ART-river 3SG.N.IO-at
'at the river' (p. 103)

Case

- Peripheral cases in Abaza (texts):

- (15) a. *qamč'ə-la* *hə-j-zak-ɬ*
whip-INS 1PL.ABS-3SG.M.ERG-beat-DCL
'He beat us with a whip.' instrumental
- b. *buxgáalter* *qadá-ta* *d-sá-cə-nɣ-əj-ɬ*
accountant chief-ADV 3SG.H.ABS-1SG.IO-COM-work-PRS-DCL
'She works with me as a chief accountant.' adverbial
- c. *jənž'ág'-č'k^wən* *áɸ'ma-la* *a-ʒ-čpá-ʒa*
Zelenčuk-small right-INS DEF-water-bank-LIM
'[lands] till the right bank of Malyj Zelenčuk' limitive
- d. *k'ang'áš-dʔa* *j-ɣa-s-ná-h^w-əj-d*
doubt-CAR 3SG.N.ABS-CSL-1SG.IO-3SG.N.ERG-say-PRS-DCL
'it tells me without any doubt [that we shall meet tonight]' caritive

Case

- Absolutive vs. Oblique (ergative + indirect object + possessor + object of postposition)
- NB in Ubykh the Absolutive is unmarked and number-neutral:

(16) a. *a-ĉ^w a-j-k'e-n* b. *a-ĉ^w a-j-k'-a-n*
DEF-ox 3.ABS-CSL-go-PRS DEF-ox 3.ABS-CSL-go-PL-PRS
'The ox is coming.' 'The oxen are coming.' (Dumézil & Esenç 1975: 162)

(17) a. *sə-pχ'éš^wə-n* *jə-d^wá-n*
1SG.PR-woman.SG-OBL.SG 3SG.ABS+3SG.ERG-sew-PRS
'My wife is sewing it.' (Fenwick 2011: 33)

b. *a-š'anž'eš^we-ne* *wəbáx* *a-bjé-be*
DEF-Abdzakh-OBL.PL Ubykh 3PL.ERG-see-COND.IRR
'If the Abdzakhs see an Ubykh...' (ibid.)

Case

- Circassian (somewhat simplifying):
 - no case marking of 1st and 2nd pronouns as well as on most proper names
 - no case marking on nouns with possessive prefixes
 - obligatory case marking on demonstratives / 3rd person pronouns (with special allomorphs of the Oblique)
 - (almost) obligatory case marking on nouns with the plural suffix, including those with possessive prefixes
 - with singular unpossessed common nouns, presence vs. absence of overt case marking depends on specificity (Arkadiev & Testelet's 2019)

Case

- West Circassian noun paradigm ‘girl’

	“definite”		“indefinite”
	Sg	Pl	
Abs	<i>pšaše-r</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-r</i>	<i>pšaše</i>
Obl	<i>pšaše-m</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-m</i>	<i>pšaše</i>
Ins	<i>pšaše-m-č’e</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-m-č’e</i>	<i>pšaše-č’e</i>
Adv	n/a	<i>(pšaše-x-ew)</i>	<i>pšaš-ew</i>

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Abs	<i>pšaše-r</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-r</i>	<i>pšaše</i>
Obl	<i>pšaše-m</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-m</i> <i>pšaše-me</i> <i>pšaše-xe-me</i>	<i>pšaše</i>
Ins	<i>pšaše-m-č’e</i>	<i>pšaše-xe-m-č’e</i>	<i>pšaše-č’e</i>
Adv	n/a	<i>(pšaše-x-ew)</i>	<i>pšaš-ew</i>

- cumulation, multiple exponence, overabundance

Case

- “Differential nominal marking” in Circassian (Arkadiev & Testelelets 2019):
 - specificity-driven alternation between overt vs. zero case-marking
 - looks very similar to the familiar differential object marking (DOM)
 - but occurs in **all** syntactic positions, not just for direct objects
 - “caseless” nominals show number-neutrality and narrow scope with respect to negation, quantifiers and other operators (much like the bare nominal forms in Abaza)

Case

- Besleney Kabardian (texts): Absolutive object

- (18) a. *kelxoz–themade-m bəb^w çax^w-xe-m q̇-a-r-jə-t-xe-t-jə*
kolkhoz–head-OBL bull man-PL-OBL CSL-3PL.IO-DAT-3SG.ERG-give-PL-IPF-ADD
‘[when there was a draught] the kolkhoz head would give the people a bull’
- b. *a bəb^wə-r f-a-bz-t-jə*
DEM bull-ABS LOC-3PL.ERG-cut-IPF-ADD
‘they would slaughter that bull’

- Bzhedugh West Circassian (elicited, Adrkadiev & Testeletts 2019): Absolutive subject

- (19) a. *jə-š’əč’ab č’ele–k^wače-r qe-k^we-n-ew*
POSS-need guy–strong-ABS DIR-go-POT-ADV
‘It is necessary that the strong guy comes.’ (there is a strong guy and we know him)
- b. *jə-š’əč’ab č’ele–k^wače qe-k^we-n-ew*
POSS-need guy–strong DIR-go-POT-ADV
‘It is necessary that a strong guy comes.’ (we don’t know if there is one)

Case

- Besleney Kabardian (elicited, Arkadiev & Testeletts 2019): Oblique indirect object

- (20) a. *s-jə-ž'em* *çəx^wə-ʔje* *je-s-š'e-ne-ɔəm*
1SG.PR-POSS-cow man-bad 3SG.IO+DAT-1SG.ERG-sell-FUT-NEG
'I won't sell my cow to a bad person.' (non-specific)
- b. *s-jə-ž'em* *çəx^wə-ʔje-m* *je-s-š'e-ne-ɔəm*
1SG.PR-POSS-cow man-bad-OBL 3SG.IO+DAT-1SG.ERG-sell-FUT-NEG
'I won't sell my cow to a/the bad person.' (specific / definite)

- Bzhedugh West Circassian (elicited, Arkadiev & Testeletts 2019): Oblique adverbial

- (21) a. *nep^heməç'-wəne* *tə-βa-ḵ^w*
other-house 1PL.ABS-CAUS-go
'Let's go to another house.' (non-specific)
- b. *nep^heməç'-wəne-m* *tə-βa-ḵ^w*
other-house-OBL 1PL.ABS-CAUS-go
'Let's go to the another house.' (there are only two houses)

Case

- West Circassian (elicited, Arkadiev & Testeleets 2019): Oblique agent

(22) a. *ʔaze-dev^{wə}-m w-jə-ʁe-χ^{wə}əž'ə-š't*
doctor-good-OBL 2SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-CAUS-recover-FUT
'The good doctor will cure you.'

b. *ʔaze-dev^{wə} w-jə-ʁe-χ^{wə}əž'ə-š't*
doctor-good 2SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-CAUS-recover-FUT
'A good doctor will (be able to) cure you.'

- West Circassian (Serdobolskaya 2011: 531): Oblique within the Instrumental

(23) a. *t-jate pχe-xe-r wetəč'ə-č'e j-e-q^{wə}ate-x*
1PL.PR-father wood-PL-ABS axe-INS 3SG.ERG-DYN-chop-PL
'Father is chopping the wood with an axe.'

b. *t-jate pχe-xe-r wetəč'ə-m-č'e j-e-q^{wə}ate-x*
1PL.PR-father wood-PL-ABS axe-OBL-INS 3SG.ERG-DYN-chop-PL
'Father is chopping the wood with the axe.'

Case

- Our analysis (Arkadiev & Testelets 2019):
 - nominals marked for Absolutive and Oblique are full determiner phrases (DPs)
 - bare nominals are NPs or “small nominals”, which show case-deficiency in other languages as well (Pereltsvaig 2006)
 - still typologically unique in being syntactically unrestricted
 - could Circassian grammatical cases be fused definite articles historically (Kumakhov 1971)?

Coordination

- Coordination of nominals is expressed by affixes rather than free-standing conjunctions.
- NB not a comitative strategy, cf. Stassen 2000

Besleney Kabardian (texts)

(24) *jə-nane-re* *jə-dade-re=dje* *jə-h-a*
POSS-grandmother-COORD POSS-grandfather-COORD=at 3SG.ERG-carry-PST
'She brought it to her grandmother and grandfather.'

Circassian: case-marked conjuncts are in the Oblique in all positions including S/P

(25) *λə-xe-m-re* *fəz-xe-m-re ...* *ʔəst-xe-qəm*
man-PL-OBL-COORD woman-PL-OBL-COORD sit.down-PL-NEG
'Men and women do not sit down [at weddings].'

Dissimilation *-r-re > -m-re?

The nominal complex

- Non-referential modifiers (bare nouns, adjectives, numerals) form compound-like structures with the head-noun (Lander 2017 on West Circassian):
 - productively formed in syntax
 - but show morphosyntactic and sometimes even phonological properties of single coherent words

Besleney Kabardian (elicited)

- (26) *d-jə-[ɸ^wəneɸ^w-bzəλx^wəɸe-daxe-dede]-m*
1PL.PR-POSS-neighbour-woman-beautiful-very-OBL
'our very beautiful lady-neighbour'

Abaza (texts)

- (27) *a-č-çəq^w-arqán-k^wa*
DEF-horse-tail-rope-PL
'ropes made of horsetail'

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