The Principle of Minimal Compliance & Derivational Filtration in South Caucasian Agreement

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1 Overview

The Principle of Minimal Compliance (PMC, Richards 1997, 1998) helps us understand a range of syntactic phenomena. But just how widely does it apply?

I argue that South Caucasian (SC) agreement exhibits PMC effects: further evidence that the PMC plays a role in φ-agreement (cf. Richards 1998, Preminger 2019).

- Among the three loci of φ-agreement in SC verbs, one is tightly constrained by locality conditions, while the others are not.
- The PMC predicts this pattern if all three expone φ-probes of the same head (T0).

I supplement the PMC with derivational filters sensitive to morphological Expressiveness and Economy (Kiparsky 2005).

- Necessary to sort out derivational indeterminacy introduced by the PMC.
- Moreover, the filters capture a generalization about SC agreement that can only be stated in morphological (and not syntactic) terms.

2 South Caucasian Agreement Generalizations

Tam-suffix agreement is rigid, always tracking the highest non-dative argument.

(1) Agreement given a nominative subject (Svan, after Topuria 1967:23, 73)

(2) Agreement given a dative subject (Svan, Topuria 1967:21)

(3) Plural agreement (Georgian, Aronson 1990:172)

Prefix blocking: in local ≫ local cells, two prefixes could appear, but only one does.

- The winning prefix always indexes the argument not indexed by the suffix.

(4) a. mi (*xw-)* j- amār- ās si

   1SG, NOM (1) prepare-TAM.1/2 2SG, ACC

   ‘I was preparing you.’

b. si j- (*xw-)* alāṭ- xwi mi

   1SG, DAT 2- (*1) love-TAM.1 2SG, NOM

   ‘You love me.’
3 A PMC Effect in South Caucasian Agreement

The PMC lifts a constraint at a particular stage in the derivation after it has been obeyed there once (Richards 1998:601).

- In Bulgarian multiple *wh*-questions, for example, the highest *wh*-phrase must be first, but lower ones may be freely ordered.
- A PMC effect: C₀ must obey Attract Closest when it first probes, but then subsequent probing by C₀ may ignore the constraint.

(5) a. Koj₁ kogo₂ kakvo₃ e pital t₁ t₂ t₃?
   who whom what aux asked
   'Who asked whom what?'

   (Bulgarian, Richards 1997:332)

The key parallel:

- In Bulgarian, one *wh-*“slot” (left-peripheral position) is rigid with respect to which *wh*-phrase may occupy it, while the rest are flexible.
- In SC, one agreement slot (the TAM suffix) is rigid with respect to which argument controls its form, while the rest are flexible.
- But — in Bulgarian the flexibility emerges as free variation. In SC the flexibility only emerges when looking across a paradigm.

In SC, T₀’s first probe (φ₁:__), which is exponed by TAM suffixes, is subject to standard Locality constraints: e.g., Attract Closest (6) and the PIC (7) (cf. Rezac 2008).

But these are lifted for T₀’s subsequent probes — the ones exponed by agreement prefixes and the plural suffix.

- Thus, they can access the φ-features of objects (8b) and dative subjects (9a).

(8) Nominative/ergative-subject constructions: Either option available to [φ₂:__]

a. [ T₀ [φ₂:__] [ DP₁sg [ DP₂sg … ] ] ]

b. [ T₀ [φ₂:__] [ DP₁sg [ DP₂sg … ] ] ]

(9) Dative-subject constructions: Either option available to [φ₂:__]

a. [ T₀ [φ₂:__] [ [pp P₀ DAT₁sg ] [ DP₂sg … ] ] ]

b. [ T₀ [φ₂:__] [ [pp P₀ DAT₁sg ] [ DP₂sg … ] ] ]

The PMC explains an asymmetry observed in SC agreement: exactly one probe is rigid, while the other two are promiscuous.

4 Derivational Filtration

This can’t be the whole story — there’s no free variation in SC agreement.

- In Bulgarian multiple *wh*-questions, we observe free variation in the word order of the non-first *wh*-phrases.
- This is a byproduct of the PMC: C₀ can attract either of two possible goals when it probes a second time.

Some mechanism is necessary to ensure that the later probes ([φ₂:__] and [pl:__]) express the right features on the surface.

I use Derivational Filters to sort out the derivational indeterminacy (cf. Kiparsky 2005).

- Expressiveness: Prefer forms that index more arguments with overt morphology.
- Economy: Prefer forms with fewer morphemes.
Expressiveness filters out forms that only agree with a single argument (10a, 11b), given the alternatives that express both arguments.

- This captures the **morphological generalization** about prefix blocking.

- Object prefixal agreement wins inNom/erg-subject constructions, and subject prefixal agreement wins in dat-subject constructions.

(10) **Forms competing after derivation** \((6) \rightarrow (8)\)

a. \(\star mì \ xw-\text{amār-}\, ās \ sì\)

\(\text{1SG.NOM} \text{ 1-perform- TAM.1/2} \text{ 2SG.ACC}\)

\(\text{\textquoteleft I am preparing you.}\)

b. \(mì \ j\,\text{amār-}\, ās \ sì\)

\(\text{1SG.NOM} \text{ 2-perform- TAM.1/2} \text{ 2SG.ACC}\)

\(\text{\textquoteleft I was preparing you.}\)

(11) **Forms competing after derivation** \((7) \rightarrow (9)\)

a. \(sì \ j\text{-alāṭ-}\, xwi \ mì\)

\(\text{2SG.DAT} \text{ 2-love- TAM.1} \text{ 1SG.NOM}\)

\(\text{\textquoteleft You love me.}\)

b. \(\star sì \ xw-\text{alāṭ-}\, xwi \ mì\)

\(\text{2SG.DAT} \text{ 1-love- TAM.1} \text{ 1SG.NOM}\)

\(\text{\textquoteleft You love me.}\)

Note that this preference can’t be boiled down to the **Activity Condition**.

- Suppose that \([ϕ₁:__]\) makes the features of the argument it Agrees with inaccessible to subsequent probes.

- \([ϕ₂:__]\), then, would have no choice but to Agree with the opposite argument.

- However, multiple probes — indeed, all three — can interact with the same argument in SC (cf. Baker 2008:155–156 on Activity as a parameter).

(12) \(č\text{ven} \ v\text{-nax-}\, e-t \ lì\)

\(\text{1PL.ERG} \text{ 1-saw- TAM.1/2} \text{ PL} \text{ 3SG.NOM}\)

\(\text{\textquoteleft We saw him/her.}\) (Georgian, Aronson 1990:172)

5 **Against a Syntactic Account of Prefix Blocking**

A **Cyclic Agree** analysis of SC prefixal agreement is elegant and highly successful (Béjar 2003, Béjar and Rezac 2009). It assumes:

- \(v^0\) is a \(ϕ\)-probe relativized to \([\text{part}]\). It’s exponed by the agreement prefixes.

- If the first argument it finds in its c-command domain is local person, \(v^0\) will be satisfied.

- In Nom/erg-subject constructions, this derives the object prefix preference.

(13)

\[ v^0 \] \hspace{1cm} \[ j\text{-amārās}, \ *xw\text{-amārās}\]

\(\text{\textquoteleft I was preparing you.}\)

This general analysis can be extended to dat-subject constructions, if we adopt a **special syntax** (Béjar 2003, Lomashvili and Harley 2011).

- If dat subjects are uniformly **below** \(v^0\) (e.g., in Spec-AppP), then we derive the preference for subject prefixes in dat-subject constructions.

(14)

\[ v^0 \] \hspace{1cm} \[ j\text{-alātxwi}, \ *xw\text{-alātxwi}\]

\(\text{\textquoteleft You love me.}\)
But there are reasons to doubt that all dat-subject constructions have a special syntax.

- Some dat-subject constructions can be passivized, just like nom/erg-subject constructions can be.

(15) **Passivization in an ergative-subject environment**

a. *Levan-ma macivar-i šeaketa.*
   Levan-erg refrigerator-nom repair:aor.3sg
   ‘Levan repaired the refrigerator.’

b. *macivar-i šeketda Levan-is mier.*
   refrigerator-nom repair:pass:aor.3sg Levan-gen by
   ‘The refrigerator was repaired by Levan.’ (Georgian, field notes)

(16) **Passivization in a dative-subject environment**

a. *Levan-s macivar-i unda šeequettebina.*
   Levan-dat refrigerator-nom modal repair:plu.3sg
   ‘Levan should have repaired the refrigerator.’

b. *macivar-i unda šeequettebuliço Levan-is mier.*
   refrigerator-nom modal repair:pass:plu.3sg Levan-gen by
   ‘The refrigerator should have been repaired by Levan.’ (Georgian, field notes)

I assume, then, that at least some dat subjects are external arguments.

- If this is the case, a Cyclic Agree account cannot account for agreement in dat-subject constructions.

(17) VP
   PP
   p0
   DP
   v0
   VP
   DP
   v0

### 6 Conclusion

The PMC and postsyntactically-based derivational filtration provide a more explanatory account of SC Agreement than alternatives.

Filtration captures the non-syntactic generalization about prefix blocking.

The PMC predicts the precise asymmetry observed across the three SC agreement loci.

- Why not say that one probe ([φ1:__], exponed by tam suffices) has strict interaction conditions, while the others have looser ones?

- For instance, perhaps [φ2:__] (↔ prefixes) and [pl:__] (↔ pl suffix) undergo Multiple Agree (Nevins 2011) or they probe insatiably (Deal 2015).

- Such an analysis is entirely feasible, but it offers no explanation for the asymmetry.

### References


