Adyghe is a morphologically ergative, predominantly head-final (SOV), pro-drop language with extremely rich system of verb agreement. Basically, the verb agrees with all its arguments. There are distinct sets of agreement markers for A (root adjacent position), and for O and S treated uniformly (either leftmost or post-root position within the word form). Since the system of verb agreement normally matches case assignment, these agreement markers are conventionally glossed below as e.g. 1sg.erg, 1sg.abs, 1sg.obl etc. as in the following examples (for the sake of simplicity examples are given in traditional Cyrillic-based Adyghe orthography):

(1) сэ ахэ-р с-щ-агъ-эк
I(abs) they-abs lsg.erg-lead-past-3pl.abs
‘I led them’

(2) ахэ рк
I у
agъ-эх
they-abs go-past-3pl.abs
‘they went’

Importantly, non-finite verb forms (converbs, the so-called supines, etc.) in various complement clauses take exactly the same agreement markers as they would in an independent clause.

The paper focuses on the case-assignment patterns in the Adyghe constructions with ‘begin’ type verbs that take clausal complements. There are 5 or less synonymous verbs ‘begin’ that are discussed below. They fall into three types based on their argument structures, namely, there are two transitive verbs that take ergative nominals as their subjects (егъэжъэн and ублэн, cf. 3), one two-argument intransitive verb (фежьэн) that takes an absolutive subject and oblique ergative complement (cf. 4) and two one-argument verbs that take event as their sole argument.

(3) ащ урок-хэ-р ри-гъэжъ-агъ-эк
he.erg lesson-pl-abs 3sg.erg-begin-past-3pl.abs
‘he starts doing his homework’

(4) сэ урок-хэ-м с-а-фежъ-ы
l(abs) lesson-pl-erg(=obl) 1sg.abs-3pl.obl-begin-past
‘I start doing my homework’

All the five verbs at issue can take either transitive or intransitive verbs as their complements and (somewhat unexpectedly cross-linguistically) convey the meaning of either purposeful or spontaneous initiating of the embedded event.

Before proceeding to the problems of case assignment on subjects of analytical inchoative constructions, it would be germane to mention an option that is available in those cases when the embedded verb is a verb of perception, emotion, etc., namely the possibility of impersonal constructions, such as:

(5) [сэорэд-хэ-р зэээ-с-ээ-н-э-эу] ре-гъажъ
I(erg) song-pl-abs prev-1sg.erg-hear-fut-3pl.abs-conv 3sg.erg-begin
‘I begin to hear the songs’

Here the phase verb does not agree with any argument corresponding to the participant of the event, although an alternative construction with 1sg.erg agreement on the matrix verb is also possible (there is a slight difference in meaning, with (5) not implying conscious intention on the hearer’s part; this semantic

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discrepancy recalls the contrast that is often posited for raising vs. control structures). There is further evidence that proves correctness of the syntactic structure shown by bracketing in (5). In other words, the subject of (5) is overtly represented as an argument of the embedded verb in non-finite form. This option of Adyghe grammar must be kept in mind when discussing personal phase constructions; in these, there is a so-called like-subject constraint (that is, nothing like English “Mother started the maid cleaning the bathroom at ten o’clock” is possible). In other words, the subject of the phase verb (an argument with which the phase verb agrees) must be coreferential with the S-argument of the embedded verb in case the latter is intransitive and with the A-argument of the embedded verb if the latter is transitive. We now will examine case assignment in constructions with intransitive (I) and transitive (II) matrix verbs.

I. Intransitive phase verbs. If both the matrix verb and the embedded verbs are intransitive there appears to be no problem in case assignment on the subject, and it is marked for the absolutive case. However, if the embedded verb is transitive the subject of the construction receives ergative marking:

(6) ахэ-мэ сэ с-а-шэ-н-эу фежьа-гъэ-х
they-erg I(abs) 1sg.abs-3pl.erg-lead-fut2-conv begin-past-3pl.abs
‘They began to lead me’ = 7, 8

Thus, the argument that is marked for the ergative case triggers agreement of the intransitive phase verb, and the agreement marker belongs to the set of absolutive agreement markers – an otherwise unattested option in Adyghe. In such constructions the subject can receive absolutive marking only under an unusual word order pattern (which may be due to pragmatic factors), e.g.:

(7) ахэ-р фежьа-гъэ-х сэ с-а-шэ-н-эу
they-abs begin-past-3pl.abs I(abs) 1sg.abs-3pl.erg-lead-fut2-conv

The contrast between (6) and (7) together with some further evidence, and in view of the aforementioned ability of subjects to remain overtly expressed within the embedded clause, allows one to conclude that the ergative pronoun in (6) is the subject of the embedded clause. Similar patterns have been reported for some dozen of languages (though never, to my knowledge, for Adyghe); such a configuration is usually referred to as ‘backward control’ (see Polinsky and Potsdam 2002 and references therein), since a fuller structure reconstructed for (6) would be something like (8), which is strongly reminiscent of the usual (forward) control pattern except for the fact that it is the structurally superior ‘copy’ that remains mute, unpronounced, deleted or whatever is the terminological convention of a particular formalism:

(8) 0_i [ахэ-мэ, сэ с-а-шэ-н-эу] фежьа-гъэ-х
they-abs they-erg I(abs) 1sg.abs-3pl.erg-lead-fut2-conv begin-past-3pl.abs

There are, however, further facts that pose problems for the ‘backward control’ type of analysis. First, even one-argument ‘begin’ verbs can appear in structures totally parallel to those in (6). However, the control analysis for those verbs seems to be unmotivated, since control structure presupposes an external argument of the matrix verb, which is not the case of the Adyghe one-argument verbs ежьэн ‘start’ and хъун ‘begin, become’. Second, there seem to be no constraints on the use of the pattern represented in (6) that are usual for the control verbs, such as animacy (volitionality, agentivity etc.) of the subject.

II. Transitive phase verbs. If both the matrix and the embedded verbs are transitive the subject is as expected marked for ergative. However, if the embedded verb is intransitive, then a mirror image of the structure in (6) is possible for the (transitive) verbs егъэжьэн and ублэн ‘begin’ (9) along with more expected (10):

(9) [ахэ-р къэшьо-н-хэу] р-а-гъэйка-гъ
they-abs dance-fut-3pl.abs 3sg.abs-3pl.erg-begin-past
‘they began to dance’ = 10

(10) ахэ-м [къэшьо-н-хэу] р-а-гъэйка-гъ
they-abs dance-fut-3pl.abs 3sg.abs-3pl.erg-begin-past

The basic ‘strangeness’ of (9) is that the absolutive argument that receives its case from the embedded verb triggers agreement on the matrix verb. Once again, word order phenomena together with some further indications allow us to assume that the overt subject belongs to the embedded clause in (9) and to the matrix clause in (10), as
suggested by bracketing. The preference for ergative vs. absolutive marking of subjects in ‘begin (tr.) + V (intr.)’ constructions seems to be dependent on a number of factors: i) the matrix verb: out of the two transitive ‘begin’ verbs there is one (ублэн) that strongly favors ergative marking; ii) the semantic type of embedded event and agentivity of subject; iii) the morphological type of complement. Once again, the data seem to resist the usual formalist approach, in which the contrast between structures in (9) and (10) would be treated as merely a contrast between ‘forward’ and ‘backward’ control. Out of the three properties in (i)-(iii), this contrast cannot capture only the first one.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS.

1) In the spirit of Kibrik (2003: 472) who discusses a Lak pattern very similar to that in (6), I would prefer to leave the problem of formal characterization of the discussed phenomena unanswered, noticing in passing that they may posit some inconvenience for the usual formal syntactic models. In order to avoid unnecessary theoretical implications it seems to be more theoretically neutral to label the structures in e.g. (6) or (9) ‘backward concord’ rather than ‘backward control’ (cf. Kozinsky et al. 1988: 701, fn. 11).

2) Case assignment in Adyghe verb complexes appears to be dependent on a whole range of various factors, syntactic as well as lexical and semantic. On closer examination, the latter group of factors seems to show some relevant hierarchies compatible with the Transitivity hypothesis (Hopper & Thompson 1980) with ergative subject marking gravitating towards the Transitive pole of the corresponding continua.

3) The paper adds to the growing database of already documented ‘backward subject control’ configurations. There seems to be some interest in the areal-typological assessment of this typologically unusual phenomenon, since it has been reported for several Caucasian (Daghestanian) languages, such as e.g. Tsez, Bezhta, Tsaxur, Lak. Besides, the lists of verbs allowing backward concord in various languages appear to be strikingly and not quite yet understandably homogenous, with ‘begin’ verbs as probably the likeliest entry in such a list.

REFERENCES