Divergent typologies in 'North Caucasian': bridging the morphological gap

Most specialists recognize some degree of genetic relationship between the language families known as Northwest and Northeast Caucasian (NWC, NEC). However, this state of affairs rests mainly on a few works – essentially Trubetzkoy, who treats basic vocabulary items (personal pronouns, numbers, parts of the body and the world, highly frequent verb roots) and proposes regular phonetic correspondences, and the more recent *North Caucasian etymological dictionary* of Nikolaev and Starostin, who, taking the relationship for granted, provide numerous but phonetically suspect reconstructions in which almost no inflectional or derivational morphology is identified. The morphology thus remains the poor relation within this little-studied field. The chief reason for this is that the two families differ greatly in morphosyntactic terms: NWC overwhelmingly makes use of head marking and the polypersonal indexation of various arguments on the verb by means of prefixes, with no genders and no or very few (and largely pragmatic) cases, while NEC languages are dependant-marking with plethoric case-systems and index the verb (and other targets) for the single or the most patient-like argument, according to a system of four nominal genders (human masc. *v-*; fem. *r- (>j-)*; non-human animate *b-* including 'moon' and body parts such as 'eye', 'tongue'; inanimate *d- (>r/l-)*). How is one to compare systems which share so little in structural terms? Hence the scepticism of some (e.g. Nichols), who consider that under these circumstances a comparative grammar of the two families is impossible and even that no genetic relationship between them can be demonstrated.

However, one can and should, at least initially, both engage in internal reconstruction and make proposals regarding the typological evolution of the two families, assuming that at least one of them underwent massive *divergence*, most probably due to external contact. Any progress in their comparison, whether grammatical or lexical, should ultimately be based on a scenario for this divergence which is both typologically plausible and philologically solid with regard to the parameters which *distinguish* them the most: the marking of heads *vs* dependants, and the importance of gender (of S/P) *vs* person (of S/P/A and other arguments) in the marking of grammatical relations.

The scenario we propose starts from a simple observation: numerals make use in NEC of suffixes (a recent development) or prefixes (more conservatively) in order to mark gender. Meanwhile, in the probable NWC cognates of these numerals, these prefixes are clearly found fossilized (Ubykh *t* and *p/b* in *t-q'we* '2', *p-ł'ə* '4', *b-lə* '7', *b-ǧʸə* '9'). The common ancestor of these two families must therefore have featured nominal gender, which was marked on numerals by prefixes. Rather than being an innovative feature within NEC, this was a characteristic of the protolanguage, and the search for such fossilized gender markers can be extended across the basic lexicon. Among the shared vocabulary, the words for 'moon', 'eye' and 'tongue' in NWC (**mze*, **ble*, **bze* respectively) have an initial *b/m* which corresponds to /b/, /m/ or /v/ in NEC. But in the latter, this segment is the non-human 'animate'/countable gender marker, which only appears in the 'nominative' (S/P, according to Kibrik, Nichols, Creissels) case, cf. Lak *ba-rz*, obl. *zur-* 'moon'; Chechen *b-ʕar(g) vs* Hunzib *hare* < proto-NEC *(b)-ħVl* 'eye'. We can conclude that the proto-language had a system of nominal genders marked overtly (maybe originally as proclitic definite articles) on nouns in the nominative, while grammatical relations rested on the agreement of the predicate and adverbial arguments with this non-case-marked argument; meanwhile, the highly allomorphic (and semantically distributed, cf. recently Arkadiev) oblique cases served – according to a syncretism still found in Lak –both as ergative and as genitive cases in combination with nouns, which then evolved into spatial cases (all of NEC except the Nakh group) and/or preverbs (NWC and the Lezgic group of NEC).

According to this scenario, in lexical reconstruction any initial *phoneme* resembling the four gender markers can be taken to continue an overt gender or agreement *morpheme* that has become lexically fixed. As for their replacement, as agreement markers, by *person* markers in the NWC verb, this is surely the same, probably contact-driven phenomenon as that described by A. Harris (2002) for Udi (NEC, southeasternmost). By contrast, we should be confident that the third-person markers of Abkhaz, which vary for gender (*j*, *d*, *l*), are an archaism and not an innovation within NWC.