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Ergative Verbs

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بِسْمِ اللَّـهِ الرَّحْمَـٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate.

((وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا دَاوُودَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ عِلْمًا ۖ وَقَالَا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي فَضَّلَنَا عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّنْ عِبَادِهِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ))

And We had certainly given to David and Solomon knowledge, and they said, "Praise [is due] to Allah, who has favored us over many of His believing servants.

صدق الله الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ

God Almighty has spoken the truth

(سورة النمل: آية 15)
(Surat Al Naml: Verse 15)

II

Dedication

Special thanks are due to Allah, Glorified and Exalted be He, for His blessings without which the fulfilment of this research wouldn't have been possible. It is lovingly dedicated to my respectful family, especially my mother who supported me in my study from my first stages of study till graduation.

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Abstract

This study investigates the *English ergative verbs* and how they are used in grammar. In talking about the English grammar, we can describe an action by some verbs from the point of view of the doer, or the subject on the one hand. On the other hand, we describe the action from the point of view of something that is affected by the action itself. Therefore, there are some types of verbs that can be used as intransitive and transitive verbs which are called the ergative verbs. These types of verbs change the grammatical position of subject and\ or the object in specific sentences as well as the semantic meaning.

The study aims to explain the notion of ergative verbs in English. It clarifies the rules of grammar concerning the ergative verbs. It examines the syntactic behaviour of these verbs in the light of what has been discussed earlier in literature by linguists. It also will discuss ergative languages and how they differ from accusative languages such as English.

Key words: ergative, transitive, intransitive, grammar, semantic, qualitative. ergative languages

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

In English grammar there are many types of verbs with different notions, some of them are related to what follows the verb. So, we have transitive verbs which need an object and intransitive verbs that do not need an object to complete the grammatical and semantic meaning of the sentence. In this sense, we have some verbs that have the two syntactic behaviours. This means that the same verb which is used to describe the action can be used as transitive and intransitive. This group of verbs is called the ergative verbs. This research paper tries to answer the following questions:

1. What is meant by ergative verbs and when they are used?
2. How do the uses of ergative verbs differ from passive form?
3. What is meant by ergative languages?

1.2 Aims of Study

This study aims to:

1. Investigates the *English ergative verbs* and their usages.
2. Show the types of ergative verbs.
3. Shedding lights on ergative languages.

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

1. English exhibits ergative verbs.
2. The way of using ergative verbs in active voice differs from that in passive.

3. English language is not an ergative language.

1.4 Procedures

The present study adopts the following procedures:

1. Presenting a theoretical background on *English ergative verbs* and its definition with types.

2. It presents the ergative alignment followed in ergative languages.

1.5 Limits

This study is limited to present an analysis of ergative verbs and how they are used in English. It is also limited to the examine the ergative alignment shown in the so-called ergative languages.

1.6 Value

The study can be of value to those concerned in syntax including teachers seeking more information about *English ergative verbs.*

Chapter Two

Literature Background

2. Introduction

This chapter will discuss transitive and intransitive as well as ergative verbs in English.

2.1 Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in English

In English grammar, there are many types of verbs, such as active, passive, linking or model etc., but the types which is related to our study are transitive and intransitive verbs. Sometimes it is difficult to determine which verb requires an object and which does not. Thus, in order to recognize this difference, we can use the questions (what\ whom). Schoiz (2009) states that the transitive verbs sometimes require two arguments, the verb in each sentence needs a direct object and indirect object. While the intransitive verbs are not followed by objects, the verb requires only one argument which is the subject.

2.1.1 Transitive Verbs in English Grammar

Transitive verbs are types of verbs that take one or two objects to describe a complete thought. In this case of sentences the direct object receives the action in a specific sentence. While the indirect object categorizes to, or for what or whom the action is performed, as a result the transitive verbs cannot stand alone with the subject only (Joshi, 2020). The grammatical meaning of the word object refers to a pronoun, noun or noun phrase, which is affected by the action of the verb in a specific sentence. There are three types of transitive verbs. First, the mono- transitive, that

has only one object to complete the syntactic and semantic meaning of a sentence. The rule word order in this type is (Subject) (Verb) (Object). Sometimes the direct object is followed by adverbials or complementation. The object in this type of sentences is a noun, pronoun, an infinitive, noun clause or gerund, as in (1) below:

(1) We are studying English.

In (1), *we* is the subject, *studying* is the verb of the sentence that is in present continuous tense, *English* is the direct object. So, in this sentence we cannot say that *we are studying*…? Studying what! There is a need to add the direct object to complete the meaning because the verb is a transitive verb.

Second, ditransitive verbs which need two objects to complete the meaning of the sentences. The word order in this type of sentences is SVOO.

For instance;

(2) John gave Sara an apple.

Finally, the complex-transitive verbs that need an object and complementation. The word order here is SVOC (Gu, 2018). Like,

(3) John made Sara angry.

2.1.2 The difference between transitive and intransitive verbs in English

As mentioned before, transitive verbs allow direct objects. In this case, the direct object is the object that receives the action of the verb in specific sentences, as in (4) below:

(4) Mary fed the cat.

In (4), *fed* is the verb of this sentence, if we ask a question; *fed what?* There is a need to complete the meaning, we need to add a direct object in this sentence which is (the cat). Thus, the object in this sentence receives the action of the verb. So, the *cat* is the direct object (Fiktorius, 2013). As a result, the verb in the previous example is a transitive verb. This example makes us differentiate between transitive and intransitive verbs, because when we ask a question in the previous example Mary fed what*?* there is a need to add complementation which is the object in this case.

In the intransitive verbs on the other hand, there is no need to add an object to complete the meaning e.g.:

(5) Mary laughed.

In (5), the structure gives full meaning, and the verb does not require an object as it is the case in (4). The sentence in (5) keeps its semantic and syntactic meaning (Stoll Bavin, 2013).

Finally, it is important to understand the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs. Such a differentiation helps the learners to use grammatical structures correctly and improves grammar accuracy.

2.2 English Ergative Verbs

2.2.1 Previous studies

In the study of English verbs particularly the ergative verbs in English grammar, many scholars and linguists emphasize on the effect of this type of verbs on the use of English as well as the speaking just like the native. Therefore, English grammar takes the role in recognizing and understanding the speech correctly and in producing and effecting on the listeners and or readers effectively. Thus, there are many studies in this field of English grammar, in the following the researcher presents many

studies and compares between the important points in these studies and this current study about *English ergative verbs.*

AL-Khawalda (2011) in his study entitled Arabic versus *English ergative verbs*, illustrates that Arabic is an inflected language, which has ergative verbs. He explains the verbs and their syntactic and semantic roles in a specific sentence. As a result of his study, the researcher reveals that Arabic language contains ergative verbs and these verbs have many significant differences between the verbs and the intransitive type of verbs.

Sioupi (1998) in his study The typology of middle constructions, ergative verbs and passive voice: how similar are they after all? States that there are many different types of verbs in English grammar, the researcher differentiates between the middle constructions and the ergative verbs in English, he also makes a comparison between the passive and ergative verbs by presenting the differences and similarities between these types with examples.

This study differs from the other studies, the researcher in this study illustrates the types of verbs in English grammar, concerning the transitive and intransitive verbs because of the close relationships between these types and ergative verbs. This study also explores with examples how ergative verbs can be used as transitive with an object, or intransitive without an object. Therefore, the syntactic and semantic meaning of the sentences keep their important role in this type of verbs.

2.2.2 Ergative Verbs

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, English exhibits transitive and intransitive verbs. These two types of verbs are differentiated according to the need of an object or not. The discussion in this section moves to ergative verbs. An ergative verb is a verb which can

be both intransitive and transitive. It means it can be used with the subject of the sentence only in the intransitive, and as an object in the transitive (Coon *et al*, 2017).

Ergativity is associated with the ergative language such as Eskimo languages. In this sense, the *English ergative verbs* require zero morphological mark to convey a causative meaning in the semantic ergative verbs that describe events, or actions with a certain degree of self-inflicting, or self-originating meaning in the intransitive. AL- Khawalda (2011) states that some verbs behave differently from the transitive and intransitive verbs, they can be found in two types of structures, with one argument, or two arguments without any morphological alteration. Therefore, ergative verbs are unaccusative (in linguistics an unaccusative verb is an intransitive verb, whose grammatical subject is not a semantic agent. They are called *unaccusative*; because although the subject has the semantic role of a patient, it is not assigned an accusative case). Thus, ergative verbs behave just like passive, but they differ from passive by the absence of the morphological, or syntactic modification of the verbs.

The ergative verbs can be either transitive, or intransitive which depends on the context. Therefore, sometimes ergative verbs change the object into a subject without needing to change the sentence into passive, this case is called the middle voice. Bahrani (2008) states that the middle voice in English indicates the subject as the actor which acts either upon herself\ himself reflexively, or for her\ his own benefit, it is called the middle position between the active and the passive.

The subject of such middle voice is like the subject of active voice as well as the subject of passive voice, in that it performs an action, and is also affected by that action. the middle voice is any grammatical option where

the subject of a material process cannot be categorized as either an actor (someone doing something) or a goal (that at which the actor aims their work). while the passive voice expresses a medium (goal) being affected by an external agent (actor)

The middle voice expresses a medium undergoing change without any external agent as in sentence;

(6) The casserole cooked in the oven (middle voice)

2.2.3 Examples of English Ergative Verbs

Ergative verbs are generated in three steps within the lexicon. The first step is to remove case from the object, the second to remove the object and sub categorization to subject position, the third is to delete the agent role normally, assigned to subject position by the lexical entry, as in (5) below:

(7) I broke the glass.

The sentence in (5) starts with the subject *I* + the verb of the sentence *broke* which is in the past. This verb is a transitive verb; because there is a need to add an object to complete the semantic meaning of the sentence.

The *glass* is the object of the verb in this sentence, but the verb can work as transitive and intransitive which is called ergative verb. The following example explains how to use the same verb in different positions, without an object as an intransitive verb:

(8) I dropped the glass and it broke.

The verb (broke) in this sentence doesn't need an object, it works as an intransitive verb, because the object *the glass* in the previous example is a subject in this sentence with full semantic meaning. Therefore, when a verb works as both transitive and intransitive it is called ergative verbs.

When we think about the subject of a verb in English, we think about a person who does the action of the verb. For example, in the sentence *'Noor ate the cake'*, *Noor* does the eating and she decides to eat and then she eats by herself. However, sometimes the subject is not the person who does the verb as in (9) below:

(9)   The door opened.

In (9), something else (not the subject) caused the action. Maybe a person pushed the door and that made it open. It wasn't the door that decided to open and then opened by itself. This kind of verb is called an ergative or unaccusative verb. They can be confusing because it's easy to mix them up with the passive, but *'the door opened'* is an active sentence.

In some cases, it's more natural to use an ergative than a passive. For example, if you say:

(10)   Wages were increased (passive)

then we get the idea that somebody decided to increase wages.

However, this might not be true. It might be the case that lots of different things (for example, the economy, a lack of skilled workers, demonstrations by trade unions. etc) caused wages to increase.

So, in this case, it's better to say, *'wages increased'*.

2.2.4 Situations for Choosing Ergative Form

The ergative form is preferable in some situations They are:

1. When the cause of the action is irrelevant. (The film began.)

2. When we want to create a feeling of mystery. (The curtains opened and …)

3. When the subject can change without a person doing anything. (The bubble burst.)

4. When the is change usually happens. (In the spring, the snow melted.)

5. When there are many possible causes for the change. (Wages increased.)

(Celce-Murcia *et al* 1983).

2.2.5 Alternating Unaccusative

Verbs like 'Melt' and 'open' are sometimes called alternating unaccusative because they also have a transitive active form (which can make a passive form) as well as the intransitive form mentioned above:

(11)   *John opened the door* (active, transitive).

(12)   *The door was opened* (by David) (passive, transitive).

(13)   *The door opened* (active, intransitive, ergative).

It's important to remember that 'the door opened' is grammatically active, not passive. So we can't say **the door opened by John.*

Here are some more examples:
- The dog broke the vase (active)
- The vase was broken by the dog (passive).
- .The vase broke (ergative)

- The pilot landed the plane (active).
- The plane was landed by the pilot (passive).
- .The plane landed (ergative)

- The sun is melting the chocolate (active).
- The chocolate is being melted by the sun (passive).

- The chocolate is melting (ergative).

However, we need to be careful! Not all verbs that talk about a change can be used ergatively. For example, we can't use 'demolish', 'destroy' and 'build' like this:

- The builders demolished the house (active).
- The house was demolished by the builders (passive).
- .NOT: *The house demolished

- The child built the tower (active).
- The tower was built by the child (passive).
- ..NOT: *The tower built

2.2.6. .Non Alternating Unaccusatives

In addition to alternating unaccusatives, we also have some verbs that are only intransitive. The subject of such verbs doesn't really cause the action as a subject, i.e.:

(14)   *The accident happened.*

This is an active sentence. However, the subject of the sentence doesn't do the action of the verb. The accident didn't decide to happen. Instead, something else caused the accident. These verbs can also be confusing. It's easy to use them in the passive by mistake. But these verbs are intransitive. They can't make a passive. It's not possible to say '*the accident was happened*'.

We can use the following group of verbs in ergative active form rather then passive ;

- Appear: The sun appeared (NOT: *the sun was appeared).
- Arrive: The plane arrived (NOT: *the plane was arrived).
- Die: The plant died (NOT: *the plant was died).
- Disappear: The fog disappeared (NOT: *the fog was disappeared).
- Emerge: A pattern emerged (NOT:*a pattern was emerged).
- Fall: The apple fell (NOT: *the apple was fallen).
- Happen: The events happened (NOT: *the events were happened).
- Occur: The problem occurred (NOT: *the problem was occurred).
- Rise: The bread rose (NOT: *the bread was risen).
- Vanish: The path vanished (NOT: *the path was vanished).

Chapter Three

3.1 Ergative languages

The ERGATIVE/ABSOLUTIVE system (or just ERGATIVE LANGUAGE) has a system in which SO/A pattern: S and O are marked the same, and A is marked differently. Means that it is a type of morphosyntactic alignment in which the single argument ("subject") of an intransitive verb behaves like the (object) of a transitive verb, and differently from the (agent) of a transitive verb. Examples of ergative languages are Basque, Georgian, Mayan, Tibetan, certain Indo-European languages (such as the Kurdish languages and many Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi–Urdu). It has controversially also been attributed to the Semitic modern Aramaic languages.

This is in contrast to nominative–accusative alignment, which is observed in English and most other Indo-European languages, where the single argument of an intransitive verb ("She" in the sentence "She walks.") behaves grammatically like the agent of a transitive verb ("She" in the sentence "She finds it.") but different from the object of a transitive verb ("her" in the sentence "He likes her."). When ergative–absolutive alignment is coded by grammatical Case, the case used for the single argument of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb is the absolutive, and the case used for the agent of a transitive verb is the ergative. In nominative-accusative languages such as English, the case for the subject of an intransitive verb and the agent of a transitive verb has nominative Case, while the case for the direct object of a transitive verb is in the accusative Case.

Many languages have ergative–absolutive alignment only in some parts of their grammar (e.g., in the case marking of nouns), but nominative-

accusative alignment in other parts (e.g., in the case marking of pronouns, or in person agreement). This is known as split ergativity which will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Split Ergative

An important feature of all ergative languages is that they are never ergative in all aspects of their syntax and morphology, but instead have a combination of ergative and accusative properties. Often, a language doesn't use just one case marking system consistently for all instances of A, S and O, but instead has ergative case marking for some constructions and accusative case marking for other constructions.

The term in widespread use for such a system is SPLIT ERGATIVE. What this means is that the S argument may align with either A or O, depending on the grammatical context. In some circumstances, then, the alignment pattern is S = A ≠ O (an accusative alignment) while in other circumstances it is S = O ≠ A (an ergative alignment).

As an illustration of a split system, consider an Australian language, Dyirbal, which treats full noun phrases differently from pronouns in terms of case marking. Noun phrases are marked according to the ergative/absolutive system, as in the following example, In Dyirbal, and very typically in other ergative languages, there is no actual inflection for the absolutive form. Here, the simple noun root is used for absolutive case, whilst the ergative is marked with a suffix, -nggu:

  a. banaganyu   nguma   (Dyirbal)
   Father. ABC   returned

"Father (S)   returned"

  b. yabu   banaganyu

    mother.ABS   returned

    "Mother (S)   returned"

 c. nggu yabu   nguma   buran

     Father. ABC   mother ERG   saw

   'Mother(A) saw father(O).'

(Understanding Syntax)

The word for 'father' has the same case, absolute, when it's an S (a) and when it's an O (c). The word for 'mother' is an S in (b), and so again has absolutive case, but it's an A (transitive subject) in (c), where it has the ergative case. However, pronouns in Dyirbal employ a different system.

3.3 Ergative Alignment VS Accusative Alignment

An ergative language maintains a syntactic or morphological equivalence (such as the same word order or grammatical case) for the object of a transitive verb and the single core argument of an intransitive verb, while treating the agent of a transitive verb differently. This contrasts with nominative–accusative languages such as English, where the single argument of an intransitive verb and the agent of a transitive verb (both called the subject) are treated alike and kept distinct from the object of a transitive verb as in Figure (1) below:
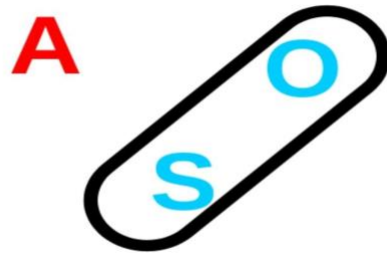
Ergative alignment
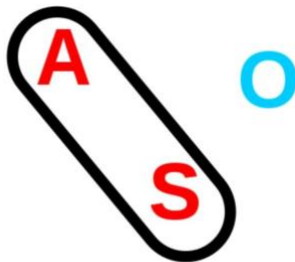
Accusative alignment

Figure (1)

(Comrie 1989, p. 110ff)

These different arguments are usually symbolized as follows:

- A = agent of transitive verb
- O = object of transitive verb (also symbolized as P for "patient")
- S = core argument of intransitive verb

Chapter four

Conclusion

This study has investigated ergative verbs in English. It has shown that these verbs have important role in the syntactic and semantic meaning of the English sentences. The study has shown there is a need to differentiate between the use of transitive and intransitive verbs in English grammar as well as the use of passive and ergative verbs. Therefore, to speak English without making grammatical mistakes we need to understand and recognize the way and rules of applying the ergative verbs in English grammar.

It has been argued that the transitive verbs need an object in the sentence to complete the meaning. While the use of intransitive verbs produces sentences without using objects keeping the semantic meaning and presenting the idea or thoughts of the speaker clearly.

Also It has been explained how it means ergative languages, so we discuss studies that explore the competition between accusative and ergative alignment, languages focus their articulation on the agency of the utterance, while nominative languages focus on the subject of the sentence.

Future research

For future research, I propose the following title for further discussion:

The Ergative verbs in Arabic and English: A comparative study.

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