ERGATIVITY IN ENGLISH: REFLECTIONS ON THE USAGE

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ABSTRACT

The interest in ergativity in linguistics is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Many languages inherit it though the nature of ergativity is not similar in all languages. In the English language ergativity is manifested in different forms. As ergativity digresses considerably from conventional grammar, users of the English language are likely to be baffled by it unless they are trained about it in a systematic way. The purpose of this paper is to bring ergativity into the main focus so that the teachers and learners become aware of the pitfalls of this curious aspect of the English language. It also examines how diversely the English language lends itself to ergativity. This paper also goes a few steps further to retrieve examples from different authentic sources to demonstrate the current usage of ergative verbs. As a whole it, this paper will not only enlighten the readers about the theoretical aspect of grammar but will also offer valuable tips for classroom teachers.

Keywords: *Ergativity, English, reflection, usage*

Introduction

Ergativity is currently an 'in' term in linguistics. It is used by a wide variety of linguists, with a whole range of different meanings. As a result, much confusion exists at present about what an 'ergative' language is, and about the morphological, syntactic, and semantic consequences of such a characterization (Dixon, 1979: 59) [2].

Ergative verbs are a special category of verbs that stress the action not the actor or the agent. According to COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary "an ergative verb is a verb that can be both transitive and intransitive, where the subject of the intransitive verb is the same as the object of the transitive verb. For example, ' open' is an ergative verb because you can say 'The door opened' or 'She opened the door'". [1]

R. L. Trask draws attention to the distinction between *ergative* languages and *nominative* languages based on how they lend themselves to transitivity. Trask explains the distinction: "Roughly, ergative languages focus their articulation on the agency of the utterance, while nominative languages focus on the subject of the sentence" (Trask, p. 36) [12]

Oxford Dictionary defines ergative verb as "(a verb) able to be used in both transitive and intransitive way with the same meaning where the object of the transitive verb is the same subject of the intransitive verb: *The verb 'grow' is ergative because you can say 'She grew flowers in her garden or flowers grew in her garden*" [11]. As ergative verbs can be used transitively and intransitively, some grammarians designate them as 'Middle Voice' verbs. (Muslim, p.70) [9]. In general, ergative verbs tend to communicate a change of state, position, or movement. For example-

The car stopped.

Here the doer/agent/causer of the action is inanimate and absent. The writer or the speaker is not willing to mention it. It is deliberately kept hidden. Here the verb 'stop' is ergative.

The driver stopped the car.

Here the doer/agent causes the action. The doer is animate and the verb 'stop' is transitive.

1. The difference between Transitive Processes and Ergative Processes

What distinguishes a transitive from an **ergative** process? Characteristic of transitive processes (e.g., *chase, hit, kill*) is that the verbs are Actor-centered: their 'most central participant' is the Actor. Consider the example

> *The lion is chasing the tourist.*

Here 'lion' is the actor and the verb 'chase' is transitive. The action of the lion is the prominent part of the sentence. The object the 'tourist' receives little attention and thus relegated to the background.

Ergative processes comprising such verbs as *break, open* and *roll*, in contrast, are 'Medium-centered,' with the Medium as the 'most nuclear participant'. Consider the following example.

> *The glass broke.*

Here the action is the main focus and the actor is totally absent. The ergative Medium co-participates in the process as 'semi-' or 'quasi-autonomous'. The basic Medium-Process constellation can only be opened up to include an Instigator, as in *The cat broke the glass* (Liesbet, 2003) [7].

2. Types of Ergativity

Ergative verbs show remarkable versatility (Garner, 2009) [6]. According to Montserrat Martínez Vázquez (1996) [8], there are three types of lexical ergativity:

a.   Alternating transitivity
b.   Derived intransitivity
c.   Derived Transitivity

2. a. Alternating transitivity

As far as English is concerned some verbs (Medium-centred) are used both transitively and intransitively the intransitive sentence having as subject the object of the transitive counterpart. Thus these verbs allow us to choose two or more sentence patterns. In one pattern, there is no agent; the action just occurred in a natural way and no force is responsible for action. In the other pattern, an agent is responsible for action. Such patterns together are called ergative pairs. Ergative pairs account for many of the most commonly used verbs in English, some of which are listed below, with examples:

> Burn: I've *burned* the toast. The toast has *burned*.
> Break: The wind *broke* the branches. The branches *broke*.
> Burst: She *burst* the balloon. The balloon *burst*.
> Close: He *closed* his eyes. His eyes *closed*.
> Cook: I'm *cooking* the rice. The rice is *cooking*.
> Fade: The sun has *faded* the carpet. The carpet has *faded*.
> Freeze: The low temperature has *frozen* the milk. The milk has *frozen*.
> Melt: The heat has *melted* the ice. The ice has *melted*.
> Run: Tim is *running* the bathwater. The bathwater is *running*.

Stretch: I *stretched* the elastic. The *elastic* stretched.
Tighten: He *tightened* the rope. The rope *tightened*.
Wave: Someone *waved* a flag. A flag *waved*.

It is also possible to have an additional agent and an additional causative verb in the transitive clauses of ergative pairs (Downing 2006) [3].; for example, *The child got his sister to ring the bell, Mary made Peter boil the water*

2. b. Derived Intransitivity

Some inanimate subjects (nouns) take ergative verbs in a natural way whereas some do not. For example, the sentence *"Books write well"* does not sound natural, whereas *"Pens write well"* sound natural but the noun "books" does not collocate with the verb "write". Let us consider some more examples.

> *The material washes well*
> *The poem translates well*
> *This potato bakes well*
> *This straw sucks well*

In the above examples the adverb *well* implies that the result of the action is due to a positive property of the patient. In this sense these derived intransitives are *patient-focused* as Fellbaum (1986:21) [4] labels them or *process-oriented* as Halliday (1967:47) [5] terms them, in opposition to passives which are *agent-oriented*. If, on the contrary, we are dealing with a negative property of the subject, then negation may replace the adverbial:

> *This shirt doesn't/ wont iron.*

One may want to be more specific about the process. In that case one may write

> *His book reads like a thriller or*
> *The dress fastens down at the back*

In English we also find these derived intransitives with human subjects.

> *Bureaucrats bribe easily.*
> *Mary scares easily.*
> *Royalists die well under torture.*

2. c. Derived Transitivity

The third group of structures loosely called *ergative*, is formed by active intransitive verbs like *walk, march, swim*, etc. which admit the addition of an NP subject to form a causative structure.

> *She walked the dog in the park.*
> *He stood the candle on the table.*
> *The nurse exercised her patient*
> *George danced Carol toward the wall.*

Here is a list of ergative verbs; the list is not, of course, exhaustive.

accumulate, accrue, answer, approach, bear, begin, blow, blast, break, burn, come, change, close, crack, decompose, decrease, derail, diminish, drop, end, escalate, explode, fall, feel, finish, grow, improve, intensify, increase, kill, mirror, move, multiply, open, perish, read, reflect, resolve, ripen, ruin, resolve, run, scare, sell, shut, smell, stand, strike, turn, decompose, count, focus count, cripple, decline, deepen, prove, revive, ruin, sell, shrink, slide, write.

3. Sentences framed with Ergative verbs

The following examples have been extracted from different reputed English dailies, periodicals, etc. which are known as authentic sources to show how ergative verbs are used in real contexts.

The pace of Ethiopia's progress towards prosperity and stability would quicken. (TE. Jan. 2. 2016, P.34)
In America gas sells for around $3.40 per million British thermal units. (TE. March 2, 2013, p.11)
Every vote counts.
Fear strikes.
Poverty stares in the face.
Nowadays winter comes late
The scenario has changed a lot.
I hope, this answers your question.
Incessant rains ruin city life.
Heavy rains cripple Dhaka.
Tension with its regional rival, Iran, has deepened. (The Economist (TE) April 25, 2015. p.49)
Thousands defy orders to dispense as democracy demonstration widens. (International New York Times (INYT). September 29, 2014, p.1)
Patience and transparency count. (INYT. September 29, p.1)
Graft threatened the party's hold on power. (INYT, June 12/15. p.1)
Cars must usually prove themselves on the open road before earning the accolade of a song penned in homage. (TE. September 13, 2004, p.33)
Two big obstacles face the reform-minded Italian government. (TE. May 23, 2015, p.24)
Anderson's performance feels like a mean joke at someone's expense. (TIME. Feb 1, 2016 p.42)

[Note: Many of the verbs that end in 'en' fall within the category of ergative verbs. For example, awaken, brighten, broaden, coarsen, deaden, dampen, deepen, embolden, freshen, harden, hasten, hearten, heighten, lengthen, loosen, moisten, quicken, ripen, sicken, soften, straighten, strengthen, stiffen, thicken, tighten, toughen, threaten, weaken, whiten, widen, worsen.]

German divisions arrived to <u>stiffen</u> Habsburg resistance.
The first surprise may be that the dollar weakens, not strengthens.
The mood in Finland has not softened. (TE. April 25, 2015, p.10)
Traffic situation worsens during Ramadan.
The chances of a happy outcome to this situation <u>worsened</u> on October 1st. (TE. October 4, 2014, p.56)
Cold water has thickened the product. (TE. July, 2015, p.82)
River erosion threatens ferry terminal.
High exports may straighten declining economic growth.
Twitter woes <u>deepen</u> as use base fails to grow.
The war, in Eastern Ukraine has quickened, for now. (TE. September 13, 2014, p.33)
Hafiz's disability did not <u>dampen</u> his craving for knowledge.
PSG's image has worsened under Qatari ownership. (TE. May 23, 2015, p.24)
School reforms "would widen differences between state schools in rich and poor areas. (TE. May, 2015, p.24)

Soil <u>moistens</u> at night.

Conclusion:

Ergative verbs pose a serious problem for learners and even for the expert users of English language as it does not conform to conventional usage. But this aspect is not adequately addressed by traditional grammar books. Given the complex nature of this verb, it becomes evident that ergative verbs need special treatment in language curriculum. Language teachers should make it a point to teach ergativity as without explicit knowledge of it learners will fail to grasp this important aspect of language. Sensitizing about ergativity becomes all the more important in the light of the fact that newspapers, journals and periodicals of international standard frequently use ergative forms.

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