

PROBLEMS OF LEARNING SYNTACTIC BEHAVIOR OF ERGATIVE VERBS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

*Sh. Karshieva*¹

Abstract:

This thesis examines the syntactic behavior of ergative verbs in English, highlighting the challenges which learners face due to their dual transitive and intransitive functions. It explores linguists' perspectives on the complexities of these verbs and offers pedagogical approaches, such as explicit instruction and task-based learning, to address these issues in language acquisition.

Key words: Ergative verbs, syntactic alternation, transitivity, second language acquisition, intransitive construction.

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Introduction

The study of ergative verbs in the English language has long posed challenges for both linguists and learners alike. Ergative verbs are a unique class of verbs that exhibit a syntactic alternation between transitive and intransitive structures. What makes them distinctive is their ability to switch the syntactic role of their subject and object depending on the construction. For instance, in sentences like “The door opened” and “Safia opened the door”, the verb “open” operates ergatively by taking an intransitive form in the first example and a transitive form in the second. This syntactic versatility, while fascinating, complicates their learning and teaching.

Understanding the syntactic behavior of ergative verbs is critical for language learners, particularly those seeking to attain higher proficiency in English. Due to the complex nature of these verbs, which often deviate from standard syntactic patterns, they become a stumbling block in second language acquisition (SLA). As learners strive to comprehend why certain verbs can appear in both transitive and intransitive forms, they often struggle with proper usage, which can lead to confusion and errors in both written and spoken English. This thesis explores the syntactic behavior of ergative verbs in English, drawing from prominent linguists' theories and studies.

The syntactic behavior of ergative verbs has been widely discussed by numerous linguists. Ergative verbs, by their nature, exhibit a duality in their argument structure, often causing confusion among language learners and researchers alike. This section reviews key linguistic theories and perspectives to provide insight into the problems associated with the learning of these verbs.

Ergative verbs are typically defined as verbs that can appear in both transitive and intransitive constructions without changing their lexical meaning [Levin, 1993]. The term “ergative” comes from ergativity, a concept in linguistic typology where the syntactic subject of an intransitive verb behaves similarly to the object of a transitive verb [Comrie, 1978]. English, however, is not an ergative language but contains a class of ergative verbs, making it a “split-ergative” system, according to Dixon [1994]. Understanding this concept is crucial for

¹ *Karshieva Shokhista Kholikul kizi, Independent researcher of Samarkand state institute of foreign languages*

learners because it shows that while English is predominantly nominative-accusative, ergative verbs still behave according to ergative-absolutive structures.

Linguists' Perspectives on syntactic challenges

Levin and Rappaport Hovav [1995] suggest that the syntactic alternation seen in ergative verbs, especially in transitive and intransitive forms, reflects underlying semantic roles. For instance, the verb “break” can express an event where an agent causes an object to undergo a change (transitive: “Safia broke the vase”), or it can occur without an explicit agent (intransitive: “The vase broke”). Levin and Rappaport Hovav argue that this alternation creates confusion for learners who may expect a consistent syntactic pattern across all verb categories.

Fillmore [1968] introduces the concept of “Case grammar”, where he asserts that verbs select specific “deep structure” arguments, which can be altered in surface structure. This theory can be used to explain the dual syntactic behavior of ergative verbs. In “The door opened” and “Safia opened the door”, the verb “open” selects different arguments (agent and patient) depending on its construction, confusing learners who are unfamiliar with such fluid argument structures.

Another influential linguist, Pinker [1989], discusses how children and second language learners acquire syntactic structures based on input frequency and patterns. He argues that irregularities, such as the alternation in ergative verbs, disrupt pattern recognition, making acquisition more difficult. This view is supported by Bley-Vroman [1983].

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) has shown that learners often overgeneralize verb patterns, leading to errors with ergative verbs [White, 1987]. For example, learners might incorrectly use an intransitive verb in a transitive context (e.g., “The vase broke it”), reflecting confusion between the syntactic roles of subject and object. Additionally, Talmy [1985] discusses the concept of “lexicalization patterns”, where languages encode motion and causation differently. English ergative verbs often express causation implicitly in intransitive constructions, as in “The door opened”, where the cause is implied but not overtly stated.

Ergative verbs in English include words like break, open, melt, sink, change, burn, freeze, and grow. These verbs can function transitively or intransitively depending on the syntactic structure. For example:

1. Break
 - Intransitive: “The glass broke”
 - Transitive: “Safia broke the glass”
2. Open
 - Intransitive: “The door opened”
 - Transitive: “Shokhista opened the door”

In these examples, the same verb alternates between having an agent and not having one. The intransitive sentences imply that the action happens to the subject without external intervention, while the transitive sentences explicitly mark the agent responsible for the action.

Many ergative verbs imply causation in their intransitive form, which is implicit rather than overt. For example, in the sentence “The vase broke”, the sentence implies that some force caused the vase to break, but this is left unstated. Learners, especially those whose native languages overtly mark causation, may find it difficult to grasp this implicit structure.

The syntactic behavior of ergative verbs poses significant challenges for learners of English, primarily due to their ability to alternate between transitive and intransitive constructions. This thesis has explored the problems learners face when acquiring these verbs, from overgeneralization of verb patterns to difficulties with implicit causation.

In conclusion, while ergative verbs may represent a syntactic anomaly in the English language, targeted pedagogical strategies can significantly enhance learners' ability to grasp

and use them correctly. Future research should continue to explore how best to teach these verbs, with a focus on integrating linguistic theory into practical teaching methods.

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