

# Ergative Verbs in English and Arabic

## A comparative study

### الافعال المطاوعة في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية دراسة مقارنة

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## Abstract

Ergativity is one the distinctive features that differentiate between two types of languages: ergative languages such as Basque and Eskimo languages and non-ergative languages such as Indo-European languages. The paper stated a brief account about the ergative verbs in English and Arabic and how ergative verbs assign their subject to be under their influence. The paper highlighted the similarities and differences between Ergative verbs in English and Arabic. This comparison will help the researchers in grammar to understand the form and syntactic behavior of Ergative verbs in both languages English and Arabic. This paper would be of a good guide for both researchers of English and Arabic grammar.

**Keywords:** Ergative verbs, accusative, transitive, intransitive, meters, nominative.



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## ملخص

الحالة الارغاتية ليس لها ترجمة صريحة كمصطلح في اللغة العربية لكنها صفة مميزة تميز مجموعة من اللغات كاللغة العربية و الباسكية و الاسكيمو ة هناك اللغات غير الارغاتية كاللغات الهندو اوربية. يبين هذا البحث يبين بصورة مختصرة الافعال الارغاتية في اللغة العربية و الانكليزية و كيف ان هذه الافعال تؤثر على الفاعل ليكون تحت تأثيرها كانه المفعول به. لقد بين هذا البحث اوجه التشابه و الاختلاف بين اللغتين العربية و الانكليزية من حيث سلوك الافعال الارغاتية. هذا البحث يعتبر ملخص للباحثين العرب وغيرهم لمعرفة النوع من الافعال و كيفية سلوكها و تأثيرها الاعرابي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأفعال المطاوعة، المفعول به، المتعدي، اللازم، الأوزان، الاسمي.

## 1. Introduction

**Ergativity** is a unique property that characterizes some languages rather than others. This has presented a brief account of the ergative verbs in English and Arabic. The first part of the paper tackled ergative verbs in Arabic and their syntactic behavior, it also stated the morphological meter of the ergative verbs, some examples were presented to show the ergative behavior of those verbs. The second part of the paper stated the ergative verb in English and how they are structured, the second part also mentioned the characteristics of the ergative verbs. The final part of the study stated the importance of this study to the researchers of Arabic and English grammar.

## 2. Research Questions

1. What are the ergative verbs in Arabic and how do they assign their subjects?
2. What are the ergative verbs in English and how do they influence their subjects and/or objects?
3. What are the similarities and differences between Arabic and English ergative verbs?
4. What are the characteristics of the English ergative verbs?

## 3. Value of the Study

This study doesn't present something that is completely genuine but it describes one of the controversial types of verb in Arabic and English "ergative verbs". This study is useful for the non-Arabic researchers who are interested to know a brief account about the ergative verbs in Arabic. On the other hand Non-English researchers also have the chance to get an idea about the ergative verbs in in English.

#### 4. Ergativity in Arabic

Ergativity in Arabic is a controversial concept that has been stated thousand years ago in most of the Arabic morphology books. Ergativity in general means the verb in a sentence is compliant that it doesn't need an external element as an object in addition to the fact that it is not intransitive but it influences its subject for example:

1. The glass broke. انكسر الزجاج
2. The ship sank. غرقت السفينة (Sibawayh Cited in Harron 1988)

According to ( Bin Mandoor 1414 A.H) Ergativity in Arabic means that the object doesn't accept the influence of the verb and that is the meaning of the Arabic word ( المطاوعة ), for example

٣. كسرتة فلم ينكسر

In other words, the word Ergativity ( المطاوعة ) in Arabic means being under the influence of the verb whether it is transitive as in

٤. علمته علم اللاهوت فتعلمه

Or intransitive verb as in

٥. كسرتة فانكسر

As it has been said before those verbs are ergative because the object of the transitive verb and the subject of the intransitive verb are compliant under of the influence of the verb i.e the subject of the ergative verb takes the role to be its object because it receives its action.

Al Fayomi (by Al dawoodi2000) defines the Ergativity (المطاوعة) as the ability of the verb to influence its subject as it is its object rather than the subject. In Arabic it is not necessary for te ergative verbs to be intransitive, but transitive verbs also as we have seen in the previous examples. The most important condition in that the subject of the verbs must be under the influence of the verb. (Adheema 1999)

The great Grammarian of Arabic Sibawayh has stated a separate section for ergative in his book which carried his name, he entitled that section as “ the subject under the influence of the ergative verbs” (Al Asfahani cited in Abdulkareem1412). Sibawayh (Cited in Harron 1988) and Al Mubrad (cited in



Hamed 1999)has stated in his book five morphological verb formulae of the ergative verbs as follows:

- فعلته فانفعل : ٦. كسرتة فانكسر
- افعلته ففعل : ٧. ادخلته فدخل
- فعلته فتفعل : ٨. كسرتة فتكسر
- فاعلته فتفاعل : ٩. ناولته فتناول
- فعللته فتفعلل : ١٠. دحرجته فتدحرج

These ergative verb formulae cannot be translated to English as they are Arabic morphological forms and they will lose their meaning if they are translated. Sibawayh stated the above verbal formulae as regular forms of the ergative verbs. (Al Baqae cited in Al Mahdi 1999)

Another great grammarian of Arabic Al Mubrad stated three similar meters of the ergative verbs as follows:

- (انفعل ) ١١. قطعته فانقطع
- (تفعل ) ١٢. قطعته فتقطع، كسرتة فتكسر
- ( تفاعل) ١٣. ناولته فتناول

Al Mubrad has differentiated the above forms of the ergative verbs into two subtypes : those verbs the subject of which is obediently compliant to its verb as ( ناولته فتناول ) and those verbs

the subject of which is obliged to be compliant to its verb as  
(كسرتة فتكسر) (Al Mubrad cited in Hamed 1999)

Ergative verbs are mentioned also in some of the Holy Qur'an  
verses as in the following:

١٤. قال تعالى "اولئك الذين اشتروا الضلالة بالهدى فما ربحت تجارتهم

ة ما كانوا مهتدين" البقرة: ١٦

In this verse, it can be seen that the derived subject ((المهتدين) is  
derived from the verb (اهتدى) and this verb is ergative according  
to the meter (هديته فاهتدى) (Abu Hayan Al Andalusī cited in  
Jameed 1420 A.H.)

١٥. قال تعالى "فاصابها اعصار فيه نار فاحترقت" البقرة: ٢٦٦

The verb "burnت" is ergative and the subject of which  
received the influence of the verb "burn" (Ibid)

16. قال تعالى "اولم يروا الى ما خلق الله من شيء يفيئ ظلاله" النحل:

٤٨

The verb "take a shelter يتقيأ" is in ergative verb.

17. قال تعالى "فقد اهتدوا" البقرة: ١٣٧

The verb "take the right path اهتدى" is an ergative verb and its  
influence is reversed back to its subject 'the believers' ((Al  
Baqae cited in Al Mahdi 1999).

١٨. قال تعالى "يوم تشقق الارض عنهم سراعاً ذلك حشر علينا يسير" ق:

٤٤

The verb “rend تشق” in this verse influence the subject ‘earth’ so it is an ergative verb (40)

١٩. قال تعالى "لها ما كسبت وعليها ما اكتسبت" البقرة: ٢٨٦

In the above verse, the verb “ gain كسب ” means the subject “people” gain their right so the verb actually affects back its subject rather than the object (Bin Ashoor 1984).

### 5. Ergative verbs in English

Ergative verbs in English assign ergative case semantically rather than syntactically or depending on the word order. Nominative and accusative case in English are assigned by the help of the word order (Levin, 1983:10) According to Lyons (1968:352) ergative verbs in English are those verbs which are one-place predicates that is the influence of the verb influences back to the subject.

1- The door opened.

2- The gap widened.

The ergative verbs in English have certain characteristics as follows:

Ergative verbs have the ability to make copular and passive constructions.

3- The door opened...i opened the door...the door was opened.



4- The gap widened.....I widened the gap .....the gap was widened. (Quirk et al, 1985:169-171)

English ergative verbs have no morphological markers on their assigned elements in contrast with Turkish and Arabic which has morphological marking (Lyons,1968:353). Some English ergative verbs are constructed by morphological processes such as soft-soften (affixation), warm –warm (conversion) (Lyons, 1968:359-366)

Semantically speaking, ergative verbs describe actions or events with self-inflicting or self-originating meaning as intransitive verbs, those events can be reflected by sing the adjunct (itself) as in :

5- The door opened by itself. (Levin & Rappaport –Hovav, 1995:88, Heisoon,1994:75-76)

Jespersen (1997:332-347) has listed three classes of ergative verbs:

a- Verbs of change and movement as : alter, bend, circulate, dash, diminish, embark, fade, form , freeze, gather, increase, issue, melt, separate, shake, start, thaw, twist, upset, shut, lock, spoil, mover, roll, change, drop, improve, grow.

b- Verbs derived from adjectives as : bleach, clear, close, cool, empty, fill, heal, open, warm. Other verbs are derived from adjectives with a suffix such as weaken, darken.



c- Causative and inchoative verbs such as : sit-set, lie-lay,  
rise-raise, sink, grow, ring, strive...etc.(340-347)

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## 6. Conclusions

After the brief exploration the ergative verbs in English and Arabic, the following similarities can be concluded: firstly, Ergative verbs in both languages influence their subjects as if they are their objects regardless to the different word order of the two languages. Secondly, as it has been mentioned by the examples, the ergative constructions have the ability to make copular and passive constructions in both languages English and Arabic.

On the other hand, there are certain differences between ergative verbs in English and Arabic. Arabic ergative have restricted morphological meters unlike English ergative verbs which are only a specific list. Another difference is that Arabic verbs have morphological marking on their meters whereas English verbs have no such markings. Finally, Sibawayh (Cited in Harron 1988) and Al Mubrad (cited in Hamed 1999) listed the Arabic ergative verbs according to specific morphological meters but Jespersen (1997:332-347) listed the English ergative according to a semantic category as:

- Verbs of movement
- Verbs derived from adjectives.
- Causative and inchoative verbs

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