

## Special Issue. Accusativity and Ergativity

### 1 Accusativity and ergativity: Two systems of case alignment

Accusativity and ergativity are two different ways languages organize the grammatical relationships between subjects and objects. Herein, we will refer to the subject of intransitive verbs as subject (S), the subject of transitive verbs as agent (A), and the direct object of transitive verbs as object (O).

#### 1.1 Accusativity: Nominative-accusative system

Accusative languages utilize the nominative-accusative system, in the sense that S and A receive the same case, namely, the nominative case, while O receives a different case, namely, the accusative case.

English is a typical accusative language, which can be shown by the use of pronouns. In (1), S and A receive the same case, since *I* is the nominative form of the first person singular pronoun, while O is assigned a different case, since *him*, but not *he*, is the accusative form of third person singular pronoun.

- (1) a. I run.  
 b. I like him/\*he.  
 c. He likes me/\*I.

Similar examples can be found in Japanese (2) and German (3).

- (2) a. 鍵-が 走った。  
 Jiàn-ga hashit-ta.  
 Jiàn-NOM run-PST  
 ‘Jiàn ran.’ (data mine)
- b. 鉄凡-が 光-を 見-た。  
 Yifán-ga Guāng-o mi-ta.  
 Yifán-NOM Guāng-ACC see-PST  
 ‘Yifán saw Guāng.’ (data mine)
- (3) a. Der Hund rannte.  
 the.SING.M.NOM dog.SING.M run.3SG.PST  
 ‘The dog ran.’ (data from Google)
- b. Der Mann sah den Hund.  
 the.SING.M.NOM man.SING.M see.3SG.PST the.SING.M.ACC dog.SING.M  
 ‘The man saw the dog.’ (data from Google)

#### 1.2 Ergativity: Ergative-absolutive system

Ergative languages are known for their ergative-absolutive system, in which S and O are assigned the same case, that is, the absolutive case, whereas A receives a different case, that is, the ergative case (Comrie 2013; Dixon 1994).

The Basque language is known for its ergativity, where the ergative case is marked by the suffix *-ek* and the absolutive case is null-marked (King 1994), as in (4).

- (4) a. Martin-∅ etorrida.  
 Martin-ABS arrive.PERF  
 ‘Martin arrived.’

- b. Martin-ek Diego-∅ ikusidu.  
 Martin-ERG Diego-ABS see.PST  
 ‘Martin saw Diego.’

Another example comes from the Labrador Inuit language, where the ergative marker *-up* marks A only when the verb *taku* ‘see’ is used as a transitive verb. When its valency is reduced by grammatical processes, the sole argument is realized as an absolutive argument, which is zero-marked (Polinsky 2017).

- (5) a. Anguti-up annak taku-janga.  
 man-ERG woman.ABS see-3SG.SUBJ.3SG.OBJ.PRS  
 ‘The man sees the woman.’  
 b. Annak (anguti-mut) taku-jau-juk.  
 woman.ABS man-DAT see-PASS-3SUBJ.PRS  
 ‘The woman is seen (by the man).’  
 c. Angutik anna-mik taku-juk.  
 man.ABS woman-INS see-3SG.SUBJ.PRS  
 ‘The man sees a woman.’

吾 and 我 have been argued to instantiate an ergative distinction in Old Chinese, whereby 吾 functions as the ergative form of the first person singular pronoun, restricted to agents (see (6)), and 我 serves as the absolutive form, used for themes/patients or experiencers (see (7)) (Tong and Lu 2025; Jin 2025).

- (6) a. 吾不欲观之。 (我不想看他。)  
 b. \*不吾知。 (Intended: (他们) 不理解我。)  
 c. \*莫吾肯顾。 (Intended: (他们) 不愿意照顾我。)  
 (7) a. 我行(于)我素。 (我按照我平素的样子行事。)  
 b. 我见欺于王。 (我被王欺骗了。)  
 c. 硕鼠硕鼠，无食我黍；三岁贯汝，莫我肯顾。  
 (大老鼠啊，大老鼠啊，不要吃我的粮食；多年来一直供养你，却没有人愿意照顾我。)  
 d. 我欲仁，斯仁至矣。 (我想要仁，仁就到了。)

## 2 Coexistence of accusativity and ergativity in one language

The nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive systems are not clear-cut across languages. Many languages reflect both systems in different constructions (Bickel 2011; Palmer 1994).

### 2.1 Ergativity in English nominalization

Nominalization is the process of turning a verb into a noun or noun-like expression. One method to nominalize a verb in English is the use of *-ing*, e.g., from *chant* to *chanting*. It reflects ergativity because S and O are both introduced by the preposition *of*, while A is introduced by *by*, as in (8) and (9) (Verbeke 2013; Langacker 1991).

- (8) a. the chanting of the demonstrators  
 b. the chanting of the slogans  
 c. the chanting of the slogans by the demonstrators  
 (9) a. the singing of the singer  
 b. the singing of the song  
 c. the singing of the song by the singer

## 2.2 Accusativity and ergativity in Mandarin Chinese

Mandarin Chinese also shows both accusativity and ergativity (Ye and Pan 2012; Pan and Ye 2023; Li 2025). The evidence primarily comes from the fact that the subject (S) of intransitive verbs can be regarded as either the subject (A) or the object (O) of their transitive versions, as in (10). This therefore gives rise to the ambiguity of sentences in (11).

- (10) a. 我写了信。 → 我写了。 (我 is A; accusativity)  
 b. 我写了信。 → 信写了。 (信 is O; ergativity)
- (11) a. 鸡不吃了。  
 b. 经理通知了。  
 c. 中国足球队谁也打不过。  
 d. 中国乒乓球队谁也打不过。

## 3 Unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs

Against this background, we can identify two types of intransitive verbs (Perlmutter 1978). Unaccusative verbs are those verbs similar to intransitive verbs in ergative languages, in the sense that the sole argument should receive an accusative case, but the verbs do not possess it and can only assign it an absolutive-like case. That is, the subjects of these verbs are actually the underlying objects (a feature of absolutive).

- (12) a. There arrive three people.  
 b. Van venir tres persones.  
 3PL.PST come three persons  
 ‘Three people came.’ (Catalan)  
 c. the fallen leaves (leaves as subject of *fall*)  
 d. the beaten protesters (protesters as object of *beat*)  
 e. *arribada* ‘arrival’ (Catalan)  
 f. *sortida* ‘exit’ (Catalan)  
 g. *llegada* ‘arrival’ (Spanish)  
 h. *salida* ‘exit’ (Spanish)

On the other hand, unergative verbs are those similar to intransitives in accusative languages, in the sense that the sole argument should be assigned an ergative case, but the verbs cannot do so and only offer a nominative-like case. Therefore, the subjects of these verbs are indeed the underlying subjects (a feature of nominative).

- (13) a. Three people run.  
 b. Tres persones corren.  
 three persons run.3PL  
 ‘Three people run.’ (Catalan)  
 c. \*the sung choir (choir as subject of *sing*)  
 d. \*the eaten glutton (glutton as subject of *eat*)  
 e. \**correguda* ‘(Intended) person who has run’ (Catalan)  
 f. \**corrida* ‘(Intended) person who has run’ (Spanish)  
 g. \**cantada* ‘(Intended) person that has sung’ (Catalan and Spanish)

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