



In the above examples one can notice how in spite of the change in syntactic functions that took place once the sentence is turned into the Passive voice, the thematic roles assigned to each constituent remain the same. Thus, *the children* which is the Active Subject turns into a Prepositional Object in the passive sentence, but it is still the Agent who perform the action. As *the window* changes from an Active Direct Object into a passive Subject, it still keeps the thematic role of Patient, suffering the action initiated by the Agent.

Although we cannot make generalizations, the properties of thematic roles do interact in regular ways with certain grammatical constructions. Chomsky (1965) [3] argues that although the Verb directly assigns theta-roles to its *Internal Arguments* (i.e. its Complements), it is not the Verb but the whole Verb Phrase that assigns a theta-role to its *External Argument* (i.e. the Subject).

Here is an inventory of the most cited thematic roles taken over from Fillmore's theory [4] on Case (The Case for Case, 1968):

- **Agent:** the initiator of the action acting with volition, thus performing a deliberate act for which he may be held responsible

(3) *The robber shot the clerk./ The little boy stumbled.*

In certain instances, the Agent does not really intend to perform the act. We can notice the difference between the two examples above and we can test the presence of volition or willingness by adding adverbials of manner such as: *deliberately, willingly, intentionally*:

(4) *The robber **deliberately** shot the clerk./ \*The little boy **willingly** stumbled.*

- **Experiencer:** the entity subjected to an action, being aware of the process or state taking place, but not in control of it.

(5) *David is afraid of dogs./ A few passers-by saw the accident./ I can't abide liars.*

- **Patient:** the entity that suffers a change of state when the action is performed:

(6) *She sliced the bread carefully./ A car ran over their dog yesterday./ The bee stung the farmer on his arm.*

Blake [1, 68] argues that the role Patient covers all of the following situations (for which we provide further examples below), thus including what other linguists call Theme (b):

- an entity viewed as existing in a state or undergoing change

(7) *This theory is clearly obsolete./ The bomb blew the tower up.*

- an entity viewed as located or moving

(8) *The baby is sleeping in the pram./ The competitors have dived into the water.*

- an entity viewed as affected or effected by another entity

(9) *The cat has scratched the front door./ The figure had been moulded in clay.*

- **Benefactive:** the entity for whose benefit the action is performed:

(10) *They have been praising the winner for days on end./ The children laid the table for their parents./ The Zookeeper has set the animals free.*

- **Theme:** the entity that moves or whose location is specified. This label derives from Gruber's 1965 dissertation [7]. However not all linguists consider it satisfactory.

(11) *You need this stamp on the envelope./ They have looked the word up in the dictionary.*

- **Location:** the place where something is situated or where an action occurs

(12) *Your friend is at the door./ Many people were lying on the beach when the storm began.*

- **Source:** the starting point for a movement

(13) *The message was first heard on radio./ The Moores have sent for the doctor.*

- **Goal:** the end point for a movement

(14) *The books will be shipped to your country in 5 to 10 days./ He bribed his way out of prison.*

- **Instrument:** the means used to perform an act

(15) *They have corrected their spelling with a dictionary./ Policemen have been traveling by train for more than 8 hours.*

- **Stimulus**

(16) *Their criticism stung him./ He amazed everybody with his intelligence.*

- **Recipient**

(17) *The student has got a last warning.*

Grimshaw (1990) [6] suggests that the theta-grid represents the prominence relations among arguments. She adopts the following thematic hierarchy noticing that syntactic relations are not established only according to this hierarchy of thematic roles but also according to the aspectual properties (Vendler's: *activities, accomplishments, achievements, states*) of the predicate.

#### Thematic Hierarchy

(Agent(Experiencer(Goal/Source/Location(Theme))))

She claims that arguments are  $\theta$ -marked from the least prominent to the most prominent, as the least prominent roles are the most dependent on the verb for their interpretation.

## Ergative Verbs and NP-MOVEMENT in Ergative Structures

Ergative verbs are verbs that can function either as transitive or as intransitive without any change in form and without passivization (*to sink, to float, to dry, to ring, to break*):

**Table 1. Ergative verbs**

Vtransitive	Vintransitive
The sun <i>faded</i> the T-shirt.	The T-shirt <i>faded</i> in the sun.
She <i>dropped</i> her voice dramatically.	Her voice <i>dropped</i> (in a whisper).
The heat <i>steamed</i> his glasses up.	His glasses <i>steamed</i> up.

We have first decided to bring evidence in favour of NP-movement in ergative constructions as our initial claim is that an ergative clause is only a derived structure within an intermediate stage which makes the transition towards the final passive construction.

Remember that ergative verbs are those intransitive verbs that have transitive counterparts. Here are further examples:

(18) The postman rang *the bell*./ *The bell* rang.

(19) The conductor began *the concert*./ *The concert* began.

(20) The sun melted *the ice*./ *The ice* melted.

Notice how ergative verbs allow us to move NPs functioning as DOs (*the bell, the concert, the ice*) into Subject positions without passivization. However these structures resemble Agentless passives inasmuch as the NPs functioning as Subjects (*the postman, the conductor, the sun*) that have been assigned the thematic role of Agent in the D-structure are deleted in the S-structure, i.e. in the ergative construction.

In the first stage we need an empty NP Subject so we apply NP-movement to *the postman* as shown below:

- (21) [t] rang [the bell] [the postman].

In order for the derived structure to be grammatical we must insert the preposition *by* before the NP *the postman* to preserve both the thematic and the propositional information of the D-structure:

- (22) [t] rang [the bell] [by the postman].

Agent

As no grammatical sentence in English can allow an empty NP Subject. We must farther on apply NP-movement to the DO *the bell* which is promoted to the Subject position:

- (23) [The bell] rang [t] [by the postman].

Theme

Agent

At this stage we notice that the verb allows us either to delete the Agent, thus deriving the ergative clause (24) or to insert the passive Auxiliary BE which is inflected with the Tense-Agreement features and attach –EN to the main verb, hence deriving the passive construction (25).

- (24) [The bell] rang [t].

- (25) [The bell] was rung [by the postman].

## Ergative Structures and Thematic Roles

It has often been pointed out that such verbs express an action from a performer's point of view or from the patient's perspective so that the attribution of blame and responsibility in various media discourses, for instance, differs considerably according to the speaker's intentions.

Consider the following examples taken from the British National Corpus [2]:

- (26) '338 people died when the Queen Mary liner collided with the British cruiser Curacao, which *sank* off the coast of Donegal, 1942.'
- (27) 'On January 21st allied forces destroyed some Iraqi anti-aircraft batteries operating from oil rigs in the northern Gulf; the next day American aircraft *sank* two Iraqi ships, one a minelayer.'

The possibility of using the same verb as transitive or intransitive allows the speaker to emphasize the Agent who is responsible for the act or to avoid naming such an entity. In example (26), the Patient 'the British cruiser Curacao' is firstly involved in a reciprocal intransitive predication, while in the relative clause that follows the same NP turns into Theme due to the presence of Location 'off the coast of Donegal'. The journalist avoids blaming anyone for the incident by the metonymic use of the two ships' names. In example (27), the transitive predication introduces the Direct Object-NP 'two Iraqi ships' as the Patient, while the Subject-NP represents the Agent which caused the event.

- (28) 'The SDP, devised as a tool `to *break* the mould'; of British party politics, itself *broke* in the clumsy hands of Dr Owen.'

- (29) ‘He was not the only one who could *break* signed treaties.’
- (30) ‘The cause had to be lack of food, the mints I’d had earlier had obviously worn off, but, soft-hearted fool that I am, I was trying to wait so that me and the invalid could sit and *break* bread together.’
- (31) ‘They had forgotten to tell the rest of my body about this and as a result I slumped out of Armstrong, hitting the road with my right shoulder, having just remembered in time not to *break* my fall with my hand.’
- (32) ‘Transport minister Roger Freeman failed to *break* the deadlock between the Caldaire bus company and developers anxious to clinch a supermarket deal.’

Examples (28) to (32) identify the verb *break* as an intransitive verb only in the second instance of the first example, where we can state that we deal with an ergative verb. However, the following examples introduce idiomatic uses of the same verb that allow neither intransitivisation nor passivisation.

As regards possible thematic roles emphasized by the verb *to break*, here are further examples:

- (33) ‘Pittsburgh suffered a severe blow, however, when quarterback Neil O’Donnell *broke* his right leg.’
- (34) ‘Neither of us complained when the weather *broke* and we had several fine days of sunlight.’
- (35) ‘The securities scandal, which *broke* in June, centred upon the discovery that the Nomura, Nikko, Daiwa and Yamaichi securities houses had made compensation payments to important clients who had suffered financial losses as a result of taking their investment advice.’

In example (33), we cannot but identify the Subject-NP ‘quarterback Neil O’Donnell’ as an Experiencer, as we think he did not do it on purpose, and the Direct Object-NP ‘his right leg’ as the Patient which suffers a change in state.

An interesting case is found in the following example, i.e. (34), due to the metaphorical use of the verb aimed to emphasize the radical change that the Subject-NP suffers, thus ‘the weather’ becoming the Patient.

The relative clause in (35) is based on the intransitive predication which assigns the role of Patient to the relative pronoun ‘which’.

It seems that Patients are pervasive in ergative structures either as Direct Object-NPs or as Subject-NPs. However, one can think of other possible instances that make use of other thematic roles as well:

- (36) *The key broke while I was trying to lock the door.*  
Instrument
- (37) *I dropped my wallet in the river but luckily it floated.*  
Agent      Theme                              Theme
- (38) *The noise increased their anger.*  
Stimulus                              Patient
- (39) *The room has filled up with guests in a minute.*  
Location

## Conclusions

Taking into account the examples above, we can state that every time an ergative verb is used intransitively the interlocutor or the reader is able to infer the presence of an Agent who caused the event although this may not be explicitly mentioned.

From a pragmatic point of view, this is an instance of flouting Grice's Maxim of Quantity [5], when the speaker's intention is to provide less information to prompt his interlocutor to look for an additional meaning, or the speaker may also opt out the same maxim, if he is unwilling to provide the necessary details.

This approach to ergative structures proves once more the intertwining of Syntax with Semantics and Pragmatics.

## References

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## Ergativitatea – structură esențială în desemnarea rolurilor tematice

### Rezumat

*Lucrarea este elaborată în baza teoriei conform căreia structurile sintactice sunt direct asociate cu semantica și pragmatica unei limbi. Acestea nu mai pot fi separate, iar abordările asupra structurilor argumentative dovedesc această relație. Ergativitatea constituie o parte importantă a sintaxei limbii engleze care face legătura între tranzitivitate și intransitivitate. Totuși, s-a subliniat adesea faptul că astfel de verbe exprimă o acțiune din perspectiva actantului sau din perspectiva pacientului astfel încât atribuirea vinei sau responsabilității în diferite discursuri media, spre exemplu, diferă considerabil în funcție de intențiile vorbitorului.*