

Unlocking the Mystery of Dual-Voiced Verbs: A Comparative Study in English and Armenian

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to delve into semantic-functional aspects of dual-voiced verbs and elucidate their position within the frameworks of two comparative languages to outline their common and distinctive traits. The article reveals unexpected characteristics of dual-voiced verbs in comparative and historic dimensions. It allows qualitative and quantitative analysis of the intensity of verbs with dual functions in the two languages. The topic of the paper covers “ergativity” which becomes the milestone of the research.

Ergativity navigates through the systems of the of the two comparative languages. Though originated from the same I-E languages of family, English, and Armenian took different paths in their historical development of ergative verbs that is dictated by the changes in language aspects and these shifts yielded to the changes on the one hand, in their functional occurrence and on the other hand, in a various spectrum of semantic nuances. This divergence emphasizes how languages adapt to shifting communication needs through a variety of ways and how dynamic language evolution is. The research contributes to a wider knowledge of linguistic change across languages by analyzing these trends and providing insights into how language evolution has changed the syntax and usage of ergative verbs in English and Armenian.

Keywords: ergativity, transitive verbs, intransitive verbs, comparative study, word order, phonetic changes, historic perspective

1. Introduction

The evolution and the development of a language is an ongoing process that happens without sudden changes. In this living process, linguistic items undergo their own specific semantic architecturing, manifesting on the one hand their uniqueness and, on the other hand, displaying systemic universal regulations governing a set of languages. This dynamic and gradual evolution reflects the intricate interplay between internal linguistic factors and external influences, contributing to the richness and diversity of languages as they adapt over time.

Through this prism, we shall delve into the insights of ergative verbs within the framework of English and Armenian, making some touches on their historical development. This exploration will take the reader on a journey through the history of comparative languages, providing a deeper understanding of how these languages have evolved differently while sharing a common ancestral origin. The historical trajectory of these languages reveals how subtle shifts in linguistic structures can lead to significant divergences in grammatical patterns, particularly in the case of ergative verbs.

Hence, a twofold question is raised in the paradigm of this research: firstly, how within the historical development of languages, transitive and intransitive verbs transform into ergative ones; and secondly, how these changes are mirrored in languages, restructuring systemic relations within the corpus of each language. These questions are central to understanding the broader implications of linguistic evolution, as they highlight the processes through which languages reorganize their grammatical systems in response to internal and external pressures.

We embark on the endeavor of crafting our own comparative study of English and Armenian dual-voiced verbs. This comparative analysis offers invaluable repertoires of the verbs, depicting their common (allomorphic) and distinctive (isomorphic) features of source and target languages. In doing so, it sheds light on the underlying mechanisms that drive linguistic change and the factors that contribute to the unique trajectories of different languages. In this respect, we are on the line of L. Kulikov’s statement that present typological study of languages is mainly performed on the synchronic axis, while the diachronic approach is left in the lumber room (L. Kulikov, 2014). We are deeply concerned about the two-axis study as it portrays the full landscape of research, providing a comprehensive view that encompasses both the historical development and the current state of the languages under study.

2. Literature Review

Various linguistic theories have enriched this study of dual-voiced verbs. Research on ergativity has highlighted its significant role in transitive and intransitive verb transformations, that are influenced by historical and phonetic changes. Scholars like Aldridge (2008) and Lyons (1968) explore ergative structures in different linguistic frameworks. Jespersen (1927), on the other hand, identifies dynamic processes in English verbs. Similarly, Armenian studies that are carried out by Letuchey (2013) reveal the diachronic shifts, and they show a reduction in dual-voiced verbs that has taken place over time. Comparative studies (e.g., Bobaljik, 1993) emphasize the differences in case

marking and alignment. All in all, these insights provide a foundation for understanding how ergative verbs evolve uniquely across languages and how they maintain shared historical roots.

3. Research Method

The present study investigates the semantic-functional characteristics of dual-voiced verbs in English and Armenian comparatively, paying attention to both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Data included texts from history and contemporaneity in the languages under consideration: Old English, Modern English, Old Armenian (Grabar), Middle Armenian, and Modern Armenian (Ashkharabar). It concerned itself with the identification and comparison of the syntactic and semantic properties of ergative verbs, including case marking, word order, and morphological features. The study also looked at the historical evolution of these verbs: changes in phonetics, morphological processes, and syntactic shifts. The analysis is theoretically grounded in historical-comparative linguistics, using established frameworks on ergativity.

4. Analysis and Discussion

At this stage we are very much engaged in underling the concept “*ergativity*”.

Sometimes the terms used to describe some grammatical concepts make them look more difficult than they really are. The term *ergative* is one. It is a term, used to describe the verbs that are transitive and intransitive at the same time, but the object of the transitive verb can be the subject of the intransitive verb.

Ergativity is a characteristic that is traditionally associated with ergative languages (examples of an ergative language are Eskimo languages) in case of which verbal arguments are marked with either ergative (EKG) or absolute (ABS) case. They contrast to accusative languages, e.g. Indo-European languages and English (as English assigns nominative (NOM) or Accusative (ACC) case (Aldridge, 2008:966, Bobaljik, 1993:45-51, Lyons, 1968: 341-342).

The main focus here is on case marking alignment. This alignment plays a vital role in the grammatical structure of languages, as it governs the relationship between subjects and objects within a sentence. It draws on well-established syntactic relations (subject object, the significance of which has been demonstrated across numerous languages). In accusative alignment, one marker, A (accusative case), is used for direct objects, while a different marker, B (nominative case), marks the subjects of both transitive and intransitive verbs.

A good example of this can be found in Russian, where subjects are marked by the nominative case, and direct objects are marked by the accusative case. For example:

Он поймал птичку.

He caught (nom) a bird (acc).

(Alice C., Harris and Lyle Campbell: 242).

As have already discussed the issue of ergativity in generic terms, it is time to proceed with a tentative approach to English and Armenian ergative verbs. For this reason, we need to refer to the general linguistic literature. It is important to underline that the phenomenon of ergativity is not limited to ergative languages. In fact, though it may be more overtly displayed in ergative languages, it also manifests itself, albeit in a more covert manner, in accusative languages. This is evident in the presence of certain verbs that display ergative-like characteristics and blur the distinction between these linguistic categories. They also highlight the intricate interaction between different grammatical systems (Biber et al., 1999:147-48; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002:306; Jespersen, 1927: ch. 16.4).

Verbs that show movement and change, or those verbs that are listed by O. Jespersen (1927: ch. 16.4) express a state that is a result of the dynamic process, which is a key feature of ergative verbs. For instance, the phrase “break a leg” does not allow for an intransitive construction like “The law broke.” In this case, “break a leg” selects an affected patient (S) rather than a causer, in the commonly understood sense. (Huddleston and Pullem, 2002:306)

Thus, ergative verbs from the purely formal point of view can become transitive by means of a *synthetic transformation*. At this point, it may be useful to present the lists of ergative verbs based on the contributions provided by the main grammars. O. Jespersen identified several categories of verbs that have a high degree of ambiguity and verbs which overlap. What we now classify as ergative verbs refers to the following types:

- a) Verbs of movement and change: “alter, bend, change, circulate, diminish, drop, embark, fade, grow, increase, lock, melt, move, separate, shake, spoil, start, etc.
- b) Verbs derived from adjectives: “bleach, brighten, clear, close, cool, empty, -en: weaken, darken, etc., verbs in-fy/-ify
- c) Causative and inchoative: certain pairs of lexical alternations: sit-set, exhibit a strong causative meaning in their transitive form or in their corresponding lexical alternant (O. Jespersen 1927, ch. 16.4).

As for morphology, English ergative verbs do not require any morphological marking to express a causative meaning, in contrast to Armenian (in English “The door opened”, in Armenian <<Դռնը բացվեց>>). So, how can we assert that English is not an ergative language? We can get the answer from how case is assigned to verbal arguments within a sentence: in Indo-European languages, subjects in both transitive and intransitive constructions receive nominative (NOM) case, while objects (O) are marked with accusative (ACC) case (Levin, 1983: 10-11).

(1a) Bill (nom) hits them (acc).

(1b) Bill (nom) runs away,

(Instances taken from Lyons, 1968:343).

As English is an analytic language, it makes a minimal morphological distinction between nominative (Nom) and accusative (Acc) cases, unlike synthetic languages such as Latin and Armenian. Instead, this distinction is mainly conveyed by means of the positioning of arguments in a sentence, specifically via word order. This characteristic reflects a broader trend in the evolution of English, where the language has shifted away from the rich inflectional systems typical of its linguistic ancestors toward a more syntax-dependent structure. This shift has implications not only for how sentences are constructed but also for how meaning is conveyed through verb forms and their associated arguments.

However, it is important to note that many ergative verbs are formed through phonological processes that involve deviation, such as affixation (e.g., soft (adj.) that becomes soften (v)) or conversion (e.g., warm (adj.) turns into warm (v)) (Lyons, 1968: 360). Other causative processes include the lexical alternation between semantically related lexemes (e.g. die-kill Lyons, 1968:359) or the use of causative verbs like make or cause (e.g. John made the water boil). Interestingly enough Old English provided examples of a rich morphological process. Delving into the historic development of English we are forced with the interesting fact that in Old Romanic and Germanic languages functional occurrence of ergative verbs was not great as compared with modern relevant languages. It follows that in spite of structural diversity the languages are governed by the same principle.

Ergative verbs have antecedents and analogies in many other languages and enjoy a long history in English. In Old English, it was a distinctive feature of the language, characterized by its inflectional morphology and semantic nuance. This period of the language's history was marked by a complex system of endings and inflections that provided clear indications of grammatical relationships, making the role of ergative verbs particularly significant. In Modern English, it is not overtly marked morphologically as in Old English and Middle English. Instead, the role of ergative verbs is often expressed through syntactic structures and lexical choices, reflecting the broader trend toward simplification and syntactic dependency in English grammar.

During the Middle English period, the system of Old English nominal declension underwent a constant process of simplification and unification. This period of linguistic transition saw the gradual erosion of the complex case system that had characterized Old English. The variety of types of declension found in Old English no longer existed in Middle English. The Old English case system, which consisted of four or five cases, was reduced to a system of two cases in Late Middle English because of the weakening and further leveling of unstressed vowels.

This phonological shift had profound implications for the structure of the language, as the loss of unstressed vowels resulted in the disappearance of vowel endings in English and led to the obscurity of parts of speech—the distinguishing mark between the form of the noun and the verb became less clear, further driving the language toward a reliance on word order and context to convey meaning. As for Old Armenian (Grabar) the number of ergative verbs was great and were counted at approximately 500 verbs. However, Armenological studies show that there is a tendency in decrease of ergative verbs within the historical development of the language. The number was reduced to 300 in Middle Armenian and in Modern Armenian (Ashkharabar) you can find about 200 verbs (100 of which was inherited from Grabar).

In terms of *semantics* ergative verbs in Grabar encompass a wide spectrum of words, the great majority of which belong to verbs of common layer. Examples include verbs such as ազդել (influence), աղերսել (implore), աղմկել (make noise), ամփոփել (summarize), աշակերտել (apprentice), հոսել (flow), ներել (forgive), մաղթել (wish), զինել (arm), and խավարել (darken).

- Verbs of movements: արշավել, ննայել, դեղևել, etc.
- Verbs of emotion: ակտրթել, անխայել, գարշել, etc.
- Verbs of obligation: տիրել, իշխել, բռնակալել, etc.
- Verbs of cognition: խորհրդածել, մեքենայել, etc.

Apart from quantitative change, Armenian ergative verbs underwent changes in their semantic spectrum (A.Летучий: 273). Within the historic development of the language Armenian verbs acquired new *semantic-functional* modifications. For example, the verb խփել (beat) had two semes in Grabar, while in present Armenian its semantic paradigm entails more than 20 meanings due to the great functional use of instances with neutral voice. This remarkable evolution reflects the dynamic nature of the language, where verbs continuously adapt to new contexts and communicative demands.

Neologism turned to be the next effective word formation means for enriching the heritage of Armenian dual-voiced verbs:

- Affixation: are coined new words, with the help of suffixes- ցն, -nun, -սս, etc..
- Compounding verbal compounds: are coined from relevant nouns: թմբկահարել (the verb is derived from the noun թմբկահար), մթազնել, սիրաբանել, etc. (noun+verb) patterning.

Verbal compounds derived from verbs, such as գործել-պատժագործել (verb+verb patterning).

Some verbs are the result of redublication: ծափահարել, սուլուլել, etc..

It's worthy to note that were created 70 neologisms and the great majority of which belong to common layer of the language; these words are devoid of any stylistic coloring and attitudinal stance.

Furthermore, a diachronic shift has been observed in the pairings of these verbs, indicating a significant evolution in their usage over time. This shift highlights how the language adapts to changing communicative needs, reorganizing the way verbs are employed to convey meaning. Dual-voiced verbs are now structured by the following two models, which should be defined as a specific trait for Armenian:

a) *Active-neutral*

b) *Passive-neutral*

Having a proper look at these two models, we can outline a specific tendency for the development of dual-voiced words in Armenian—a tendency of neutralization operates in the system of the language, which in turn yields to the decrease of the verbs. This trend reflects a broader linguistic shift where the language simplifies its verbal structures, potentially as a response to the need for more streamlined communication or due to the influence of external linguistic factors over time. The neutralization process not only reduces the number of verbs but also reshapes the way these verbs function within the language, leading to a more uniform and less complex verbal system.

Apart from this, it is important to underline A. Letuchey's assumption that the divergences between European and Non-European languages are accounted for by an indisputable argument: that European languages' (among which is English) development processes are affected by other European languages, which predetermine their mode of alternations. This influence suggests that the evolution of languages is not isolated but rather part of a larger network of interactions where languages borrow, adapt, and evolve in response to one another. This interaction has resulted in unique developments in European languages. It has distinguished them from their Non-European counterparts and contributed to the specific linguistic traits that they have observed today.

5. Conclusion

From the growing body of the research, it becomes known that ergativity is modeled by nominative-accusative alignments and it deals with causativity. This finding actually shows the complexity of ergative structures and their relationship to other grammatical alignments. It also offers insights into how languages manage subject, object, and verb interplay. The emergence of dual-voiced verbs is influenced by phonetic word formation or syntactic processes in comparative languages.

Dual-voicing is an embodiment of two different voices in the corpus of the same lexeme without any formal or morphological change. The dual configuration of verbs in the paradigm of voice is a common feature in the diachronic dimension of comparative languages. However, each language takes its own path in the history of language development, i.e. voice pairings are unique for each language.

While the transformation of active into passive is generally straightforward in inflectional languages (using inflectional markers such as endings and suffixes), English's reliance on auxiliary verbs (e.g., is, are) and word order makes it slightly more complex.

The data study provides evidence for the reduction of dual-voiced verbs in Armenian, while the increase of such verbs in English is conditioned by phonetic changes in the process of language development, by syntactic processing, and by the fact that the syntax of any language mirrors the changes of verbal valency. This observation shows the dynamic nature of language, where phonetic and syntactic developments continuously shape and reshape the verb systems of languages. In English, these changes have led to an expansion of the verb inventory, while in Armenian, a contrasting trend of reduction has been observed.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. A. Hovhannisyanyan was responsible for study design and revising. Prof. Zakyan was responsible for data collection. Prof. Zakyan drafted the manuscript and Prof. Hovhannisyanyan revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Authors contributed equally to the study.

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