



The Tendency to Choose Between Ergative and Passive: An Implication for English Teachers

Ergatif ve Pasif Arasında Seçim Yapma Eğilimi: İngilizce Öğretmenleri İçin Bir Uygulama

Turgay Han *

Zinat Mahzoun **

Geliş / Received: 14.02.2019

Kabul / Accepted: 15.04.2019

ABSTRACT: This study was an attempt to examine the tendency and criteria of native speakers of English language to choose between ergative and passive structures. Five sample verbs with the possibility of occurring in active, passive and ergative constructions (*change, grow, develop, increase, decrease*) were selected and their ergative usages in sentences were extracted from Webster American dictionary. These verbs occur more frequently in academic context (according to COCA), except for the verb *grow* that is mostly used in magazines. The sentences were paired with their passive equivalents, making total ten sentences. Four native (American) English speakers were asked to determine which sentence in each pair sounded natural to them and what distinguishes them from the other. The findings revealed that all the participants chose the ergative one and they clarified that these actions are not caused by any external factor and the action happens automatically without an intentional intervention from outside. Although this study was carried out in small scales, it can have instructional implications for English teachers. Future studies can apply the research on greater number of verbs and different varieties of English native speakers.

Keywords: ergative, passive, English native speakers, grammaticality

ÖZ: Bu çalışma, anadili İngilizce olan konuşmacıların ergatif ve pasif yapılar arasında seçim yapma eğilimini ve ölçütlerini incelemeye çalıştı. Aktif, pasif ve ergative yapılarda (değişim, büyüme, gelişme, artış, azalma) oluşma ihtimaline sahip beş örnek fiil seçildi ve cümle içindeki ergonomik kullanımları Webster Amerikan sözlüğünden çıkarıldı. Bu fiiller, akademik dergilerde (COCA'ya göre), dergilerde çoğunlukla kullanılan fiil "grow" dışında daha sık görülür. Cümleler pasif eşdeğerleriyle eşleştirilerek toplam on cümle oluşturuldu. Dört yerli (Amerikan) İngilizce konuşmacıdan, her bir çiftte hangi cümlenin kendilerine doğal geldiğini ve onları diğerlerinden ayıran şeyin ne olduğunu belirlemesi istendi. Bulgular, tüm katılımcıların ergatif olanı seçtiğini ve bu eylemlerin herhangi bir dış faktörden kaynaklanmadığını ve eylemin dışarıdan kasıtlı bir müdahale olmadan otomatik olarak gerçekleştiğini açıkladı. Bu çalışma küçük ölçeklerde yapılmasına rağmen, İngilizce öğretmenleri için öğretici etkileri olabilir. Gelecekteki çalışmalar, daha fazla sayıda fiil ve farklı türlerdeki anadili İngilizce olan için araştırmayı uygulayabilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: ergative, pasif, İngilizce konuşanlar, dilbilgisi.

* Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dept. of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Science and Letters, Ordu University, turgayhan@yahoo.com.tr

** Ph.D. Student, Dept. of English Language and Teaching, Faculty of Education, Anadolu University, zinat.mahzoun@gmail.com

Introduction

In the second language research, it has been acknowledged that a solid knowledge of the target language's syntactic structure is of paramount importance because it serves many essential purposes (Rezai & Ariamanesh, 2012). One of the most complicated and challenging structures for L2 learners of English language has been identified to be ergative constructions (Kellerman, 1978; Zobl, 1989).

The word 'ergative' is derived originally from the Greek word 'ἔργον' (ergon) which literally means 'deed' or 'work'. The term was first introduced by Dirr in 1912 when describing the Rutul, a Caucasian language (Vollmann, 2008). Since then, the term has been used in a more conventionalized manner. Butt (2006) maintains that the ergative was initially observed in Polynesian, Basque and Greenlandic languages. At the time, it was known as Agent or Nominative of the Agent and it was approved by many scholars as similar to the passive in that agent arguments, in both passive and ergative, is connected to something different from the nominative; therefore, they have a vividly related constructions. Nonetheless, other researchers like Sapir (1912) argues against those scholars and stated that the nature of ergatives is active, not passive. Butt (2006) declares that despite the extensive acceptability of Sapir's ideas on ergatives, the idea of passive has not disappeared yet and assumingly, ergative constructions are historically born out of passive patterns.

Grammarians devised the term "ergative" in the mid-20th century to describe certain verbs that share the following three features (Garner, 2009). Firstly, they can be used in the active voice with a normal subject (agent) and object (patient) [as in *I broke the window*]. Secondly, they can be used in the passive voice, with the patient of the verb's action as the grammatical subject of the sentence [as in *the window was broken by me*], and probably it can be used in what is called 'the third way' in some textbooks, that is active in form but passive in sense [*the window broke*]. English language can represent processes in terms of actions as well as in terms of happenings (Lock, 1996). To do so, special verbs are applied to express occurrences that are spontaneous. These verbs are called change-of-state or ergative verbs, which allow a transitive clause's object to be an intransitive clause's subject, while the voice remains unchanged (Celce-Murcia, 2014). It needs to be mentioned that ergatives are not only change-of-state verbs, but others such as verbs of cooking, physical movements and vehicles are also considered ergatives (Collins COBUILD English Grammar, 2005). Take a look at the following sentences (taken from Yip, 1994):

1. a. "The kids eat dinner early". (transitive)
- b. "The kids eat early". (intransitive)
2. a. "The burglar broke the window". (transitive)
- b. "The window broke". (intransitive; ergative)

In the first two sentences (1a and 1b), the agent of the action for both intransitive and transitive structures is "the kids". In the last two sentences, the agent of the sentence 2a is "the burglar" and the patient of the sentence is "the window" but in the ergative construction (2b), the patient of the sentence (the window) is the subject of the sentence.

Dixon (1987) discusses different types of ergative uses, such as morphological, syntactical and lexicon ergatives. He maintains that any language in the world has some

degree of lexical ergativity, but morphological ergativity can be seen in less than fifty percent of the world languages and only a few languages have syntactical ergativity.

The Distinction between Transitive and Ergative Processes

Apart from the syntactic realizations, one might ask what distinguishes an ergative form from a transitive form. Davidse (1992) argues that transitive processes are actor-oriented. It means that the actor of the sentence plays the most central role whereas ergative processes are medium-oriented. That is to say, the medium in ergatives co-participates in the process.

Origins of the Difficulty for Learners

A further investigation reveals that some ergative verbs can have two alternatives of being a transitive or intransitive (e.g. melt, break), whereas certain verbs that can only have ergative realizations (e.g. happen, arrive). It means that the first type allows passive forms, while the second does not (Yip, 1994). Although there are many similarities between ergatives and passives, they are different in one essential aspect: Ergatives lack a special morphological marking, nonetheless they appear just like other intransitive verbs. This is a phenomenon that seems to be rather unique cross-linguistically (Yip, 1994). Another distinction was made by Estival and Myhill (1988) denoting that ergative and passive constructions are similar morphologically but different syntactically. The tendency of English learners to use agentless passive instead of ergative structures can be rooted in their similar characteristics (Yip, 1994): both of them are intransitive and lack an agent, as well as having patient in the position of subject.

Literature Review

Previous research has demonstrated that English ergative verbs cause problems in second language acquisition (SLA). Kellerman (1978) investigated learnability of ergative verbs by Dutch learners and found that Dutch learners avoided using ergative structures (e.g., “The cup broke”) and instead, preferred to use agentless passive structures (e.g., “The cup was broken”). In another study carried out by Zobl (1989), it was found that Japanese high intermediate and Arabic advanced English learners tended to use passivized form of ergative verbs rather than the ergative structures; for example, “was happened” instead of “happened”. A study in Turkish context was carried out by Abdullayeva (1993) that confirmed the study results reported by Zobl (1989). Abdullayeva (1993) argues that, typologically, Turkish language is classified as a non-configurational language, which means that case marking is used to articulate grammatical relations. To make it clear, take the following sentences:

- (1) “Adam işi bitirdi”. (“The man finished the job”.)
- (2) “İş bitti”. (“The job finished”.)
- (3) “İş bitirildi”. (“The job was finished”.)

As demonstrated in the sentences, the change in grammatical relations is marked by suffixes in Turkish verbs while in English, the change is marked by structural positioning

(Abdullayeva, 1993). As a result, typological features of the two languages can determine the acquisition methods of Turkish EFL learners.

Another research on ergative verbs in Turkish context was conducted by Yılmaz and Tek (2016) in METU University to examine the difference between the usage of ergative verbs by first-year and final-year university students. Questionnaires and interviews were applied to carry out the research. The results of the study demonstrated that almost all the participants, regardless of their entrance year, believed that intransitive structures of ergative verbs were ungrammatical, while they were actually grammatically correct. It was also found that none of the students were taught ergative structures before. So they had no awareness of such possibilities in English language. The authors concluded that ergative structures must be given more importance and they should be included in ELT curricula.

Wiltschko (2006) investigated ergativity in Halkomelem language (spoken by First Nations in British Columbia, Canada). Halkomelem language demonstrates features that are characteristic of ergative languages: only transitive subjects demand agreement between subject and verb, but not intransitives. They conducted a detailed analysis of the ergative structures to see if it is sufficient to label this language an ergative one. The results of the study revealed that ergativity in Halkomelem language is in fact a property deriving from the assumption that intransitive predicates and secondary predicates can introduce external arguments lexically and syntactically, respectively. Thus, the difference between the structure of transitive and intransitive predicates determines the ergative features (Massam et al., 2006: 223). In line with Wiltschko (2006), another research performed by Ju (2000) scrutinized the role of discourse agents that can be conceptualized in second language learners' over-passivization of unaccusative structures. The findings of the research demonstrated that over-passivization of verbs that are caused externally differs to those events that are caused internally. Nonetheless, no difference was found between alternating unaccusative verbs and non-alternating ones. Ju concluded that a cognitive element like conceptualizable agent can determine the causes of over-passivization by learners. Unlike the two previous studies that confirmed each other's findings, Kondo (2005) study on over-passivization and the role of the first language and conceptualizable agent among Japanese and Spanish learners of English indicated that over-passivization is determined by directness degree of events' causation in both alternating and non-alternating unaccusative structures. Kondo also emphasized the proficiency level of the language learners in the correct usage of these verbs.

Schleppegrell and Colombi (2005) have also affirmed in their book that non-native speakers of English language have never been given the awareness about how to apply ergative voice in their speech and they use a heuristic method to decide on which voice to choose. In this sense, some questions can be raised about choosing between ergative and passive forms: First, when do we need to choose one form rather than the other form (e.g. ergative or passive)?; next, what justifications lie behind our preferences?; and finally, do some contexts necessitate using passive or ergative?. The guiding research questions of this study is what determines English native speakers' tendency to choose between ergative and passive?

Answering the question can have important educational implications for both language learners and teachers through highlighting the distinctions between passive and ergative structures. Particularly, it can give English teachers some clues to incorporate ergative structures into their curriculum and raise the learners' awareness of such structures in English language.

Methodology

Research design

In order to explore the tendency of English native speakers to use ergative or passive structures, 4 native speakers were invited and accepted to participate in the experiment. A total number of five English change-of-state ergative verbs were chosen: *increase*, *decrease*, *grow*, *change* and *develop*. All these verbs can be used in three active, passive and ergative voices (Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2005). The mentioned verbs were used in both passive and ergative forms, making totally 10 sentences. The sentences were shown to the participants, asking them to choose the one that sounds more natural to them. They were also asked to orally explain their reasons for choosing each item. The demographic information of the participants is summarized in Table 1. The names of the participants were coded as A, B, C, and D. All participants were from the United States of America and lived in Turkey. The mean age of them is 34.5 years.

Table 1: The demographic information of participants

	Gender	Age	Nationality
Participant A	Female	32	American
Participant B	Female	30	American
Participant C	Male	36	American
Participant D	Female	40	American

Results

To explore the tendency and reason underlying native speakers' preference to choose either passive or ergative structure, sample sentences including the verbs *increase*, *decrease*, *grow*, *change* and *develop* were extracted from Merriam-Webster American English dictionary. The extracted sentences contained the ergative form of the verbs, as follows:

“The town has changed little in recent years.

The house increased in value.

Yearly sales decreased by five percent.

The tree grew to an immense size.

A blossom develops from a bud.”

The above-mentioned sentences, along with their passive equivalents were displayed to four English native speakers to choose the one that sounds more natural to them and explain the reason why one is more acceptable and the other is not. The extracted sentences and their passive forms are as follows:

(4). “The town has been changed little in recent years.”

(5). “The town has changed little in recent years.”

- (6). "The house increased in value."
- (7). "The house was increased in value."
- (8). "Yearly sales were decreased by five percent."
- (9). "Yearly sales decreased by five percent."
- (10). "The tree grew to an immense size."
- (11). "The tree was grown to an immense size."
- (12). "A blossom develops from a bud."
- (13). "A blossom is developed from a bud."

The results of the test revealed that all native speakers chose the ergative counterparts, that is 5, 6, 9, 10, and 12. When asked about their justifications for preferring ergative to passive, they expressed the following reasons:

Participant A said that "I don't like passive voice and we rarely use it... as for why, it's hard to say... I think with all of those it seems weird to use passive because no one is doing the action- the subject is doing it itself... it's really hard to say!".

Participant B said that "It has to do with the logic of the meaning. The other sentences have another meaning which is not logical... Those (passive sentences) imply that someone is causing them and actually they couldn't really have controlled".

Participant C said that "If a tree can be grown, the tree is the agent, if a tree is growing, it can't be a passive thing and the same is true of things like increasing and decreasing in value... but if you know what the thing is by definition, something else is not decreasing it probably".

Participant D said "I think that when you say the town has been changed in recent years, it implies that people are changing the town but usually where we see this's been used in normal use, it's talking about how town changes passively over time so it would be the normal usage that makes sense ... for the second one, normally you can't increase your house in value, you would say it differently, like the house has been developed or things like that ... um for number 3, you wouldn't intentionally decrease sales so if you use it that way, it implies that you do it intentionally which doesn't make sense... for the fourth one also, we don't say that... you can't cause a tree to grow... and also blossoms, that's something that happens naturally and it's not something happening in lab perhaps... if it were happening in the lab, 5b could be possible... it just doesn't make sense logically to say that".

Discussion and Conclusions

The current research mainly aimed at investigating the reasons underlying native speakers' tendency to use certain verbs in ergative rather than passive form. The participants' responses showed that all of them would naturally use the ergative and their justifications demonstrated some common grounds. They all concurred that in the sample sentences, the agent does the action itself or the action happens automatically without needing an external cause to make it happen or control it. On the other hand, using a passive verb implies the existence or necessity of some external factor, which in all cases seems illogical. The result of this present study is not parallel with previous studies conducted in different contexts. For example, in a study by Kellerman (1978), it was found that Dutch learners avoided using

ergative structures, and in a study by Zobl (1989), it was found that Japanese high intermediate and Arabic advanced English learners tended to use passivized form of ergative verbs rather than the ergative structures. In Turkish context, the results of a study by Abdullayeva (1993) confirmed the study results reported by Zobl (1989). The reason for this result can be explained as Turkish language is classified typologically as a non-configurational language, which means that case marking is used to articulate grammatical relations (Abdullayeva, 1993). Further, the results of the present study can serve as a source for EFL teachers to draw upon when distinguishing between passive and ergative structures for learners. In other words, giving awareness is the key to solving the problem of learning ergatives. This is in line with Schleppegrell and Colombi (2005) who also emphasized the importance of giving awareness to non-native English speakers on ergatives. Raising the learners' awareness will help them overcome avoidance of using ergatives and compensating it through overpassivization that were pointed out in several studies (Kellerman, 1978; Zobl, 1989; Ju, 2000; Wiltchko, 2006).

These findings have useful implications for English teachers since they provide clear explanations given by native speakers that could assist teachers to clarify the difference between the passive and ergative structures to learners. It can be suggested that ergative structures should be given more importance and they should be included in ELT curricula (Yılmaz & Tek, 2016). Nonetheless, the applicability of the findings should be tested on other verbs too. It can also be checked with English native speakers of other dialects and countries (e.g. British, Australian) to examine its consistency.

References

- Abdullayeva, O. (1993). *The acquisition of ergative verbs by Turkish EFL students*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Bilkent University, Ankara
- Butt, M. (2006). The dative-ergative Connection. In B. O, & P. Cabredo HofHerr (Eds.), *Empirical issues in syntax and semantics* 6 (pp. 69-92). The Hague: Thesus.
- Cobuild, C. (2005). *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*. Collins Cobuild.
- Davidse, K. (1992). *Transitivity/Ergativity: The Janus-headed Grammar of Actions and Events*. In M.Davies & L.Ravelli (Eds.) *Advances in systemic linguistics: Recent history and practice* (pp 105 – 135). London and New York: Pinter
- Dixon, R. M. (Ed.). (1987). *Studies in ergativity (Vol. 71)*. Elsevier Science Limited.
- Estival, D. & Myhill, J. (1988). Formal and functional aspects of the development from passive to ergative systems. *Passive and Voice*, 16, 441-524. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/tsl.16.15est>
- Heyvaert, L. (2003). *A Cognitive-Functional Approach to Nominalization in English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Garner, B. A. (2009). *Garner's modern American usage* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Ju, M. K. (2000). Overpassivisation errors by second language learners: The effect of conceptualizable agents in discourse. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 85-111. Doi: 10.1017/S0272263100001042

- Kellerman, E. (1978). Giving learners a break: Native language intuitions as a source of predictions about transferability. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 15, 59-92. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED153469> on 22nd September, 2019
- Kondo, T. (2005). Overpassivization in second language acquisition. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 43(2), 129-161. Doi: 10.1515/iral.2005.43.2.129
- Lock, G. (1996). *Functional English grammar: An introduction for second language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Massam, D., Johns, A. & Ndayiragije, J. (2006). *Ergativity: Emerging issues*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Rezai, M. J. & Ariamanesh, A. A. (2012). Acquisition of English unergative and unaccusative structures by Persian EFL learners. *Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, 31(2), 53-85. Retrieved from: http://jtls.shirazu.ac.ir/article_498_4f56697aa124c5d10a4705a0452fb337.pdf, On 20nd September, 2019
- Schleppegrell, M. J. & Colombi, M. C. (2005). *Developing advanced literacy in first and second languages: Meaning with power*. London: Routledge.
- Vollmann, R. (2008). *Descriptions of Tibetan ergativity: A historiographical account*. Graz: Leykam.
- Wiltschko, M. (2006). On 'Ergativity' in Halkomelem Salish. In Alana Johns, Diane Masseem, & Juvenal Ndayiragije (Eds.), *In ergativity: Emerging issues* (pp 197-227). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Yılmaz, M. Ş. & Tek, İ. (2016). Usage of ergative verbs across different English proficiency levels. 6th Middle East Technical University English Language Teaching Conference, 6. Retrieved from http://www.meltus.fle.metu.edu.tr/index_htm_files/Abstract-Book.pdf, On 18th September, 2019
- Yip, V. (1994). Grammatical consciousness-raising and learnability. In T. Odlin (Ed.), *Perspectives on pedagogical grammar* (Cambridge Applied Linguistics, pp 123-139). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139524605.008
- Zobl, H. (1989). Canonical typological structures and ergativity in English L2 acquisition. In S. M. Gass, & Schacter (Eds.), *Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition* (pp. 203-221). New York: Cambridge University Press.