A tentative corpus-based approach to English ergative verbs

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Abstract

This dissertation is a tentative attempt to address English ergative verbs and kindred verbs such as unaccusative verbs, manner-of-motion verbs and middle constructions. The interplay of syntax, semantics and pragmatics shall require a practical approach by means of corpus linguistics, which shall prove useful to shed further light on the issue of English ergative verbs, especially in the disparities, exceptionalities and rarities which appear in the description and analysis of these constructions and which cannot be merely explained from a purely syntactic approach.

Key words: ergativity, transitivity, English ergative verbs, corpus linguistics

Resumen

Este TFG es un intento preliminar de abordar los verbos ergativos ingleses y construcciones similares como los verbos inacusativos, los verbos de manera de movimiento y las construcciones medias. La interacción de factores sintácticos, semánticos y pragmáticos requerirán un enfoque práctico a través de lingüística de corpus, que será de utilidad para arrojar más luz en el tema de los verbos ergativos ingleses, particularmente en los casos difíciles de explicar encontrados en la descripción y análisis de estas construcciones que no pueden explicarse únicamente desde un enfoque puramente sintáctico.

Palabras clave: ergatividad, transitividad, verbos ergativos ingleses, lingüística de corpus
1. Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to explore English ergative verbs from various traditional grammars, articles and monographs which have attempted to describe and account for their peculiar syntactic, lexical and semantic behavior before proceeding to provide a corpus-based study of these verbs. Hence, this dissertation revolves around a theoretical and a practical application of English ergative verbs with a view to drawing insightful conclusions about their nature and their place in contrast to other kindred verbs and constructions.

The study of English ergative verbs relates to the realm of English descriptive linguistics which has been a part of my academic education at graduate level at the University de Jaén (UJA) and Northumbria University (NU) in the degree in English Studies. The elementary subjects which I undertook such as Introducción a la Lingüística Descriptiva Inglesa, Modelos de Análisis Gramatical del Inglés, and Gramática Inglesa at UJA and History of English at NU furnished me with extensive knowledge in English formal and descriptive linguistics and provided me with helpful linguistic analytical tools which shall be employed here to account for the point at issue.

The intrinsic mechanisms which underlie languages and particularly the English language aroused my early interest since the beginning of the degree, with a special focus on English syntax and semantics, and hence my concern for English ergative verbs as an intriguing case to disentangle owing to the interplay of syntactic, semantic and lexical factors which sometimes may manifest themselves in other similar verbs and constructions, all of which prove to be a colossal challenge. My goals shall thereby be to lay bare in an orderly manner what the main grammars, articles and monographs hold about ergative verbs and their characteristics in contrast to other types of verbs and constructions and justify, reformulate or refute the authors’ assumptions and contentions in the corpus-based study of a thoroughly selected list of controversial verbs.

It shall be emphasized that, unless otherwise stated, the totality of the following contentions, arguments and examples must be indebted to their original authors whereas the syntactic trees below represented are, on the contrary, to be considered my own contributions. If examples are modified from any given author or corpus, this shall be accordingly stated; likewise, if we are contending some novel assumptions or raising objections to any given argument or contention, we shall make mention of it. The corpora which we shall be employing are the BNC corpus and the NOW corpus (Davies, 2004, 2013), both created by Oxford University Press. BNC corpus presents a wide range of fictional and non-fictional
texts from the 1980s to the early 1990s, whereas NOW corpus mainly deals with magazines and newspapers from the web which date from 2010 up to the present time.

Thus, before going any further, it shall be fundamental to establish the course of action adopted here. First, some succinct introductory information shall be offered to account for the phenomenon of ergativity and the differences between accusative and ergative languages together with a theoretical background regarding ergative verbs and other verbs and constructions; second, a thorough description and analysis of a carefully-selected list of sentences with ergative verbs and other verbs and constructions from the British National Corpus, and the NOW corpus, particularly those verbs which are problematic due to their fuzzy syntactic, semantic and lexical behavior; and at the end a conclusion shall be offered to summarize what has been discussed and provide some valuable and fruitful insights for further studies of English ergative verbs.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition

Ergativity is a property traditionally associated to ergative languages (e.g. Basque language or Eskimo languages) for their assignation of ergative (ERG) or absolute (ABS) case to their verbal arguments in sharp contrast to accusative languages (e.g. Indo-European languages and hence English), which assign nominative (NOM) or accusative (ACC) case (Aldridge, 200: 966; Bobaljik, 1993: 45-51; Lyons, 1968: 341-342, 355-356). On which grounds could we assert that English is not an ergative language? The answer lies in the assignation of case to the verbal arguments in the sentence: in Indo-European languages, subjects (S), either in intransitive or transitive constructions, acquire NOM case and objects (O) get ACC case (Levin, 1983: 10-11; Lyons, 1968: 355-356):

(1a) **Bill** (NOM) *hits* *them* (ACC)

(1b) **Bill** (NOM) *runs away* *(instances taken from Lyons, 1968: 343)*

As can be observed, in English, an analytic language, the distinction between NOM and ACC case is hardly morphologically marked\(^1\) as in synthetic languages such as Latin, but by means of the positioning of the arguments in the sentence (i.e. word order). Ergative languages, on the other hand, have a different case-system whereby the assignation of ERG or ABS case hinges upon factors other than syntactic positioning, that is, on semantic

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\(^1\) Some English animate personal and relative pronouns (*I/me, he/him, she/her, we/us, they/them, who/whom*) are the only morphological mark of NOM and ACC case which can be found in English (Lyons, 1968: 355).
considerations such as agency or passiveness, as attested by the so-called Marantz’s Ergative Hypothesis (Levin, 1983: 10): ERG case is attached to the S of a transitive construction and ABS case to the S of an intransitive and to the O of a transitive (Aldridge, 2008: 966-968; Levin, 1983: 11). An example by Aldridge (2008: 967) illustrates a case of ergative behavior from the Dyirbal language, the suffix -nggu being the morphological mark of ERG case and ABS case being realized as morphologically null. The noun phrase mother thus receives the suffix -nggu when it functions as S in a transitive construction with a verb such as see whereas in intransitive constructions with verbs such as return it carries zero morphological mark:

(2a) yabu banaga-nyu:
   mother (ABS) return-past tense → mother returned
(2b) nguma yabu-nggu bura-n:
   father (ABS) mother (ERG) see-past tense → mother saw father

From a generative standpoint, Bobaljik (1993: 6) posited an Obligatory Case Parameter to account for the type of structural case that is assigned to a given language, depending on whether it is an ACC or an ERG language: “In N/A (NOM/ACC) languages, Case X is NOM (=ERG) and “in E/A (ERG/ABS languages, Case X is ABS (=ACC)”. Interestingly enough, in recent minimalist approaches it has been proposed that accusative and ergative languages actually share the same underlying structure (Aldridge, 2008: 973).

Nevertheless, we should emphasize that the ergativity phenomenon is not a characteristic exclusive of ergative languages; indeed, though in a covert vein, it also manifests itself in accusative languages through the existence of some verbs which exhibit ergative-like features (Biber et al., 1999: 147-148; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 306; Jespersen, 1927: ch. 16.4, 16.5, 16.7; Lyons, 1968: 351-356; Quirk et al., 1985: 1169). From a syntactic point of view, ergativity in English is typically related to a type of intransitive verbs which undergo a “causative transformation” (Lyons, 1968: 352) whereby the patient S becomes the O in the transitive variant and a S with agentive characteristics is added:

(3a) The window broke → (3b) Pat broke the window
   (instance taken from Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 79)
2.2. A first tentative approach to English ergative verbs, unaccusative verbs, verbs of motion, and middle construction

2.2.1. Transitivity and intransitivity

Once that ergativity has been defined in general terms, our attention shall thereby turn to the description of ergative verbs and kindred verbs and constructions in the main modern English grammars cited above.

Before attempting to account for ergative verbs in English, it shall be mandatory to introduce the concepts of transitivity and intransitivty in brief and concise terms. Lyons (1968: 350-351) provided the widely-held definition of transitivity in notional terms as an action going on between an agent and a patient or goal

(4) I hit you: agent+patient

though, as he suggested, this notion could be readily refuted by counterexamples such as

(5) I see you: experiencer+patient

in which, from a semantic point of view, there exists no action but a sensorial experience perceived by an animate entity. Lyons also described transitivity from a formal standpoint, that is, syntax-wise transitive verbs are two-place predicates, meaning that the verb selects two arguments in its syntactic configuration (see also Levin, 1983: 32, who terms transitive verbs as “agent-patient verbs”).

Intransitivity in English, on the other hand, relates to one-place predicates (Biber et al, 1999: 141; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 216-219) whose subject argument may be agentive or non-agentive — i.e. a patient — (Levin, 1983: 10-11), a distinction on semantic grounds which gives rise to two different types of intransitive verbs, the labels being “unergatives” — example (1b) — and “ergatives” — example (3a) — respectively (Levin, 1983: 24-26), the latter one being our main focus of interest.

2.2.2. English ergative verbs: definition, characteristics and examples

Having briefly addressed the issue of ergativity in generic terms, let us proceed with a tentative approach to English ergative verbs by making reference to the general linguistic literature.

From a purely formal point of view, ergative verbs are one-place predicates which can become transitive by means of a syntactic transformation, referred to as an “ergative or

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2 Unergatives, or also labelled “agent verbs” (Levin, 1983: 33), denote any kind of activity performed by an agent and they in turn encompass many different types of verbs such as “verbs of communication” (e.g. talk, reply, mutter, whisper…), “verbs of performance” (e.g. sing, dance, play…) or “verbs of bodily processes” (e.g. cough, snore, sniff, cry…), among others.
causative transformation” (Lyons, 1968: 352) or a “causativization process” (Hale & Keyser, 1986: 620) and both constructions, the intransitive and the transitive one, are claimed to be equivalent in that they hold a close syntactic-semantic correspondence (Biber et al, 1999: 147; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 306; Lyons, 1968: 352; Quirk et al, 1985: 1169)\(^3\): in example (3) a causative transformation has applied whereby a causative S (+/-animate\(^4\)) has been introduced to convey agency and the S of the intransitive —affected or patient role of the action— has become the O in the transitive counterpart.

Very often we could obtain copular or passive constructions or, at other times, pseudopassive constructions, particularly with “verbs of movement and change” as those listed by Jespersen (1927: ch. 16.4.), all of which convey a state as a result of the dynamic process which characterizes ergative verbs (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 306):

(6a) The door opened → I opened the door → The door was open: copular construction
(6b) The gap widened → I widened the gap → The gap was wider: copular construction
(6c) My shirt tore → I tore my shirt → The shirt was torn: passive construction or “pseudopassive construction” (Quirk et al, 1985: 169-171)

(instances taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 306)

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 307) and Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995: 85) remarked that lexical collocations\(^5\) place further selectional constraints on the syntactic distribution of ergative verbs:

(7a) break the law does not admit an intransitive construction *The law broke.
(7b) break a leg selects an affected/patient S and not a causer (obviously, in the most understood sense).
(7c) grow impedes a transitive construction when referring to children or animals, only allowing this transitive construction when referring to plants.

(instances taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 307)

With regard to morphology, English ergative verbs require zero morphological mark to convey a causative meaning—at least on the surface level—, in contrast to other languages such as Turkish (Lyons, 1968: 353). However, we should not overlook the fact that several

\(^3\) Note, however, that different labels have been attached to ergative verbs in the main grammars. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 306) referred to them as “non-agentive dynamic intransitives” and Quirk et al (1985: 1169) merely talked about a general group of “verbs which can also be transitive”, including both ergative verbs and verbs of “mutual participation” (e.g. meet).

\(^4\) Lyons left unclear if the S introduced in the ergative construction might be inanimate, which Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995: 84, 103) assumed to be plausible as shown in their cited example The earthquake broke the window in which the S is performed by an inanimate—or external—agent, also termed “force” by Quirk et al (1985: 744-745), who corroborated this assumption.

\(^5\) A collocation is, according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics (3rd ed.) “a relation within a syntactic unit between individual lexical elements […]. Used especially where words specifically or habitually go together: e.g. blond collocates with hair in blond hair or Their hair is blond; drunk with lord in as drunk as a lord; run with riot in run riot […].” (Matthews, 2014).
ergative verbs are obtained through morphological processes involving derivation such as affixation (e.g. soft (A) $\rightarrow$ soften (V)) or conversion (e.g. warm (A) $\rightarrow$ warm (V)) (Lyons, 1968: 360). Other causative processes entail the lexical alternation between two semantically-related lexemes (e.g. die $\rightarrow$ kill, Lyons, 1968: 359-360), or the introduction of a causative verb such as make or cause (e.g. John made the water boil). Jespersen (1927: ch. 16.4 & 16.5) already described these causative processes in his list of “verbs derived from adjectives” and “causatives and inchoatives” respectively, and provided examples of a rich morphological process in Old English whereby the suffix -jan attached to verbs could serve to convey causativity (Jespersen, 1927: 340).

As far as semantics is concerned, ergative verbs describe events or actions with a certain degree of self-inflicting or self-originating meaning in the intransitive use, reflected in the use of an adjunct such as by itself (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 88; Heisoon, 1994: 75-76),

(8) The door opened by itself

(instance taken from Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 88)

and with a strong causative nuance in the transitive counterpart, as one could have observed in example (3).

At this point it may be relevant to present lists of ergative verbs on the basis of the contributions provided by the main grammars. Jespersen (1927: 332-347) differentiated several classes of verbs with a high degree of overlapping and ambiguity, and what we understand nowadays as ergative verbs refer to

a) “verbs of movement and change” (ch. 16.4): alter, bend, circulate, dash, diminish, embark, fade, form, freeze, gather, increase, issue, melt, separate, shake, start, thaw, twist, upset, shut, lock, spoil, move, roll, change, drop, improve, grow, etc.\(^6\)

b) “verbs derived from adjectives” (ch. 16.5): bleach, brighten, clear, close, cool, empty, fill, heal, open, warm, (and many others verbs derived from adjectives with the suffix -en: weaken, darken, etc.), solidify, intensify (not all but a few verbs derived with the

\(^6\) We have purposefully excluded from the list verbs of motion such as fly, gallop, march, pass, run, sail, walk, etc. (Jespersen, 1927: 337) despite the fact that we are cognizant that they are usually treated as ergatives by virtue of the causative nuance which is introduced in a transitive construction (Jespersen, 1927: 337; Lyons, 1968: 365).

The horse walked $\rightarrow$ John walked the horse (‘John made the horse walk’)

(instance taken from Lyons, 1968: 365)

However, they may be considered to have both an ergative and an unergative nature on different syntactic-semantic grounds as documented by Narasimhan et al (1996: 132-136) and Lee (2012: 63-68) and other authors cited in their articles such as Perlmutter (1978) or Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995). For clarity of exposition, we shall not go into much detail for now and devote an entire subsection to them (section 2.2.4.)
suffix -ify: “verbs in -fy are nearly always transitive, but intensify is occasionally used intransitively”, 338-339)

c) “causatives and inchoatives” (ch. 16.7): some pairs of lexical alternants: sit-set (though set uses have been vanishing as the causative counterpart of sit), lie-lay, rise-raise; sink, grow, ring, starve, etc. (341-347), all of which share a strong causative sense in their transitive use or counterpart in the case of lexical alternants.

To the list of ergative verbs which we have already compiled from Jespersen’s book, we shall add those found in the grammars mentioned above and order all of them alphabetically, thereby resulting in this exhaustive list of ergative verbs:
alter, bend, blacken, bleach, boil, break, brighten, change, circulate, clear, close, collapse, cook, cool, crack, crease, darken, dash, diminish, divide, drop, drown, empty, explode, fade, fill, float, form, freeze, gather, grow, heal, improve, increase, intensify, issue, lock, melt, open, pass, roll, ring, sail, separate, shake, shut, sink, slow, smash, solidify, spoil, start, starve, stop, tear, thaw, turn, twist, unite, upset, vary, wake, warm, widen.

2.2.3. English unaccusative verbs: definition, characteristics and examples

Some authors in the specialized linguistic literature also contemplated the addition of the so-called “unaccusative verbs” (e.g. arise, arrive, emerge, occur, lean, sit) to the group of ergative verbs on various syntactic and semantic grounds as documented below (Belletti, 1988: 1-6; Cortés, 1997: 147-154):7

(9a) A problem emerged with the design
(9b) The most discordant discussion ensued then
(9c) A discussion began about the issue
(9d) The ladder leaned against the wall

(the first three instances taken from Cortés, 1997: 148, the fourth taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 307)

These verbs have received little or no attention in the main grammars: Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 307) only made reference to a subgroup of unaccusative verbs called “non agentive static intransitives” (e.g. “verbs of position”: hang, lean, rest, sit, stand) and Quirk et al (1985: 1169) merely talked about “pure intransitives”, encompassing both unaccusative and

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7 We must necessarily underline that some other authors may employ the label “unaccusativity” as an umbrella term to cover the whole phenomenon of ergativity (Perlmutter, 1978: 157-188 or Levin, 1983: 24). However, for the sake of clarity of exposition, we shall stick to our original terminology and consider unaccusative verbs as a defined subgroup of ergative verbs. If in a given line of argumentation we happen to alter our original terminology, we shall make mention of it.
unergative verbs. We have compiled a list of the commonest unaccusative verbs on the basis of the authors and their contributions referenced in this subsection: appear, arise, arrive, begin, come, digress, emerge, ensue, exist, fall, follow, go, hang, happen, lean, occur, remain, rest, rise, seem, settle, sit, stand, vanish.

As observed in the list of unaccusative verbs, many verbs of different nature enter into the unaccusative category; indeed, unaccusative verbs encompass various groups of verbs such as “verbs of existence and occurrence (e.g. happen, exist, occur…)”, “verbs of position” (e.g. hang, lean, rest, sit, stand), “verbs of change of position (e.g. come, go, ascend, fall…)” or “verbs of appearance and disappearance (e.g. appear, vanish, emerge, arise…)” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 307; Levin, 1983: 33).

As far as syntax and semantics are concerned, unaccusative verbs are intransitive verbs, that is, one-place predicates whose only argument is a patient or affected entity, a decisive trait which determines their inclusion within ergative verbs according to certain linguistic scholars, mostly of Generativist background (Belletti, 1988: 1-31; Cortés, 1997: 147-154; Hale & Keyser, 1986: 629-631; Newson, 2004: 156-159; Perlmutter, 1978: 157-188). The semantic nature of unaccusative verbs is closely knit in that they generally refer to entities that come into existence/unexistence or that come to be situated at or directed to a given temporal or locational space (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 120-121).

In fact, the label “unaccusative” was originally coined in Generative Grammar to refer to verbs unable to attach ACC case to its argument, which would encompass ergative verbs and unaccusative verbs alike (see footnote 7). According to the generative literature mentioned above, ergative and unaccusative verbs share the same underlying deep structure, that is, they both have an affected or patient argument which originates in the object position and cannot receive ACC case, which compels it to move to the subject position, hence the term “unaccusative”. To illustrate this brief account, consider these two generative syntactic trees: one for the typical ergative verb break —example (3a)— and the unaccusative verb emerge —example (9a)—:

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8 This assumption stems from Perlmutter’s unaccusative hypothesis (1978: 157-188) which posited that the distinction between unaccusative (here used as umbrella term) and unergative verbs is observed to be dependent upon semantic grounds with syntactic consequences i.e. unaccusatives have an affected entity which is an underlying object whereas unergatives have an agent entity which corresponds to an underlying subject. This hypothesis was later formulated under the Uniform Theta-role Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH) by Baker (1988), cited in Lee (2012: 65) and Newson (2004: 107).

9 The main theoretical line assumed here is that of Government and Binding theory and X-bar theory (Chomsky, 1981, 1982)
Deep structure from both verbs, showing their unaccusative nature

However, in line with footnote 7, we shall maintain the term “unaccusative” to refer to a specific subtype of ergative verbs.

With regard to unaccusative verbs’ syntactic and semantic properties, we shall mention the following characteristics:

A. They cannot transitivize nor causativize as their ergative counterparts or else they result in ungrammatical sentences (Cortés, 1997: 148; Hale & Keyser, 1986: 629):

(10a) *I arrived three passengers at the station
(10b) *Don’t arise any problems at the meeting.

(instances taken from Hale & Keyser, 1986: 629)

However, some verbs of position (e.g. lean, sit) may still transitivize and hence causativize:

(10c) The ladder leant against the wall → I leant the ladder against the wall (‘I made the ladder lean against the wall’)

(instance taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 307)

Having said that, we must caution that we could find further counterexamples of other types of unaccusative verbs which might gainsay this characteristic, as further scrutinized in our corpus analysis. For the time being, consider some verbs from the list of unaccusative verbs which could transitivize yet not causativize such as begin:

(10d) Aaron Freeman's ordeal began after his mum dropped him outside […] → intransitive
(10e) **He began** writing jokes and scripts for TV shows […] (≠ ‘*He made to begin writing jokes and scripts for TV shows‘) → transitive

(Instances taken from the BNC corpus: CH2 and CH1, respectively)

or **settle**, in which case its meaning differs from that of change of position and thus it is not an unaccusative verb in collocational instances such as settle an agreement/a deal/a dispute/an affair/a matter/a conflict.

B. They can admit a there-insertion construction (Cortés, 1997: 148; Hale & Keyser, 1986: 630; Newson, 2004: 156-162) in contrast to ergatives, which cannot, and they agree in number with its argument:

(11a) **There began** a discussion about the issue → unaccusative verb

(11b) *There **broke** a window → ergative verb

(Instances taken from Cortés, 1997: 148 and Newson, 2004: 162 respectively)

Again it would be possible to find counterexamples which contradict the assumption that ergative verbs cannot occur in there-constructions. Take, for instance, this example from the web:

(11c) **There increases** also the impoverishment of the wage-workers → ergative verb


C. Several verbs of position (e.g. sit, stand, hang) might be unergative whenever an agentive interpretation is present:

(12a) **The table sat** in the corner → unaccusative verb

(12b) **Sam (deliberately) sat** on the chair → unergative verb

(Instances taken from Newson, 2004: 156)

As shown in the example, one test to prove their unaccusative or unergative nature involves the addition of a volitional adverb (e.g. deliberately, on purpose, etc.) or also their use in a there-construction (Newson, 2004: 156-157), only hypothetically admissible with unaccusative verbs:

(12c) **There sat** a table in the corner → unaccusative verb

(12d) ?**There sat** a man on the chair → unaccusative verb

(12e) *There deliberately sat** a man on the chair

(Instances taken from Newson, 2004: 157)

Newson (2004: 157) emphasized that if sentences such as (12d) are to be considered grammatical, they must be interpreted as “having the man situated on the chair and not performing the action of sitting”.
Indeed, our corpus search has displayed instances with the verb *sit* in *there*-constructions which seem to conform to Newson’s claim. We typed the sequence ‘there sat’ on the BNC corpus’ search tool and it generated thirteen instances, out of which eight were followed by animate entities, and all of them appear to suggest that the individuals are not performing a deliberate action:

(13) *...there sat an old woman resting on a stone. [...]*

(instance taken from the BNC corpus: F72)

### 2.2.4. English manner-of-motion verbs: definition, characteristics and examples

Once we have approached ergative verbs, we shall address an interesting case of verbs which may exhibit both ergative and unergative features (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 7), that is, the so-called “verbs of manner of locomotion” (Hale & Keyser, 1986: 608) or also “manner-of-motion verbs” (Lee, 2012: 63; Narasimhan *et al.*, 1996: 132): *buck, canter, dive, fly, jump, march, race, roll, run, slid, swim, trot, walk* (compiled from the authors given above).

Lyons (1968: 365) called them verbs with “agentive objects” and Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 307) termed them “agentive intransitives”. These verbs are claimed to be one-place predicates typically having an agent as their S in the intransitive, which may become the O in a transitive construction and a causative agent is then introduced as the S:

(14a) *The horse walked*

(14b) *John walked the horse* (‘John made the horse walk’)

(instances taken from Lyons, 1968: 365)

They are, according to Lyons (1968: 364-365), inherently ergative, yet Levin (1983: 53), Lee (2012: 64-67) and Narasimhan *et al.* (1996: 132-135), the latter two founded on Levin and Rappaport-Hovav’s (1995) findings, claimed that they are unergative “on their basic meaning” and ergative “on their derived meaning of directed motion” (Lee, 2012: 64), that is, when accompanied by a directional or path adjunct:

(15a) *The horse jumped (over the fence)*: unergative, or ergative verb if accompanied by the path adjunct

(15b) *The rider jumped the horse over the fence*: ergative verb

(15c) *?The rider jumped the horse*: ergative verb?

(instances taken from Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 111)

These assumptions are based upon the way that Italian ergative verbs behave (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 185-189): unergative verbs select *avere* (‘have’) as their auxiliary in perfective constructions whereas ergative verbs select the auxiliary *essere* (‘be’). Consider the following examples from Italian taken from Levin *et al.* (2009: 13) to illustrate how the
manner-of-motion verb *volare* (‘fly’) changes its nature depending upon the presence of a directional adjunct:

(16a) *il primo uomo che ha volato nello spazio*: ‘the first man that flew in space’
(16b) *è volato in Sicilia per organizzare i primi vertici*: ‘he flew to Sicily to organize the first summits’

Following Levin & Rappaport-Hovav’s line of reasoning, one of the tests to ascertain the assumption that a directional or path-adjunct ascribes an ergative reading to a sentence involves causativization (Narasimhan et al, 1996: 133-134), which is a process characteristic only of ergative verbs, thus:

(17a) *The mouse ran → *We ran the mouse*: unergative verb
(17b) *The mouse ran through the maze → We ran the mouse through the maze*: ergative verb

(17b) is ergative since it conforms to the causativization test, predicted by the presence of a path adjunct, which is not the case for the causative counterpart in (17a), an ungrammatical sentence, for it is not ergative.

However, we do not find consistency in this line of argumentation since we have considered (14b) and (15c) to be acceptable and naturally occurring sentences, despite not having a path adjunct, which perhaps proves, according to the causativization criterion, that some manner-of-motion verbs are, in most cases, ergative. In fact, we have attempted to corroborate this early assumption by effecting a quick search on the BNC corpus with the collocational sequence ‘walked’ + ‘dog’, which generated eight sequences and six out of them appeared without any path adjunct. Consider this instance taken from the corpus:

(18) *I walked a dog belonging to a widower who was out at work all day […]*

(18) instance taken from the BNC corpus: FAT

Indeed, we give the benefit of the doubt to their account. Moreover, it might be plausible to find instances in which, regardless of the addition or lack of a path or directional adjunct, an agentive interpretation is unmistakably obvious and no causative process can apply, all of which points to an unergative reading:

(19a) *The bird flew → ??John flew the bird*: unergative verb
(19b) *The bird flew through the air → ??John flew the bird through the air*: unergative verb

(instances slightly modified, taken from Lyons, 1968: 365)

To prove this last claim of ours, we have entered the words ‘flew’ and ‘bird’ as collocates on the BNC corpus’ search tool. Sixteen collocates were found in which ‘bird’ appeared as the S

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10 We might claim that a given manner-of-motion verb would not be ergative if an agentive interpretation is attached to the sentence, which could possibly be determined by the possible addition of a volitional adverb or by-phrase: *The horse walked by itself.*
and followed either by path or directional adjuncts or not followed by them at all. However, when we tried to find instances in which ‘bird’ follows the verb as an O, no results were found.

Also, Narasimhan et al (1996: 134) stressed that, given that causativization was originally conceived as a syntactically productive test to determine ergativity, it would theoretically predict the following sentence’s grammaticality, for it is followed by a directional adjunct. Nonetheless, it is not the case, which proves, perhaps, that further factors other than the presence of a directional or path adjunct are involved:

(20) *John ran the children apart

(instance taken from Narasimhan et al, 1996: 134)

Besides, notice the possibility to transitivize the path adjunct, thus becoming an object argument (Hale & Keyser, 1986: 610):

(21) The horse jumped over the fence → The horse jumped the fence

(instance taken from Hale & Keyser, 1986: 607-610)

We suspect, however, that the nature of the verb of motion is different when the path adjunct in (21) becomes an O, i.e. the verb turns from ergative to unergative. Why is this so? If we simply take the causativization test and apply it, we would obtain:

(22) The horse jumped the fence → *John jumped the horse the fence

As we can observe, (22) cannot causativize, for there are more arguments to assign than those required by the verb, which leads to an ungrammatical sentence; hence its unergative reading.

Hale & Keyser (1986: 610) also noted that several manner-of-motion verbs can never transitivize their path adjunct since they are, as they put it, “canonical ergative verbs”:

(23) John slid across the floor → *John slid the floor

(instance taken from Hale & Keyser, 1986: 610)

All in all, Hale & Keyser (1986: 609-610), Levin (1983: 53), Lyons (1968: 365) and Quirk et al (1985: 744) already hinted at the potentially ambiguous nature which underlies this type of verbs and we shall accordingly attempt to shed further light in the corpus-based study.

2.2.5. English middle constructions: definition, characteristics and examples

English middle constructions differ from the previous types of verbs in that they are not ergative, yet they are highly similar on the surface, which is why we shall discuss them here in detail.
The term ‘middle’ is broadly employed to refer to a type of voice system with active and passive features alike (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 307), which is not present in English as such. The general linguistic literature coincides in that middles do not refer to a specific type of verb either but to transitive constructions which may become intransitive in a peculiar “activo-passive use” (Jespersen, 1927: ch. 16.8), in which “their grammatical subject is logically their direct object… the subject not being expressed because of its indefiniteness”, yet it does not apply to every single verb (Jespersen, 1927: 349-350):

(24) The books *sell* well | My plays won’t *act* | The words would not *form* on her lips

(instances taken from Jespersen, 1927: 347-348):

Thus, middles are claimed to be “notionally passive though formally active” and are not considered a class of verbs in itself but a special use of them given certain conditions and contingent upon the lexical nature of the verb and other factors explored below. Consider the following list of the commonest verbs which can be found in middle constructions, compiled from the grammars cited above:

*alarm, amuse, assemble, bribe, clean, convince, cook, corrupt, crush cut, demoralize, embarrass, flatter, frighten, hammer, intimidate, iron, kill, offend, pacify, please, read, sell, slice, shock, translate, unnerve, wash, wax*


A. Despite some degree of agency being implied, they do not admit the retrieval of a by-
phrase adjunct:

(25) *Government officials bribe easily by managers*

(instance taken from Heisoon, 2002: 77)

However, the implicit agent might be retrieved by means other than a by-
phrase:  

(26) That book reads quickly for Mary

(instance taken from Heisoon, 2002: 94)

B. They are usually descriptive in that they do not denote any kind of activity or event
going on; thus they do not usually occur with progressive forms, past tenses and
adjuncts of location in time:

(27a) *The walls are painting easily*

(27b) *Yesterday, the floor waxed quickly*

(instances taken from Heisoon, 2002: 79)

C. They usually occur with some negated modal auxiliaries (wouldn’t, won’t) and
negated dummy auxiliary ‘do’ (don’t), and/or they may be accompanied by adjuncts
of manner (e.g. well, easily, quickly, nicely, etc.), which ascribe a quality to the S, as observed in (24), (26) and (27b). Sometimes, intonational cues might as well produce slightly acceptable sentences such as:

(28a) ?Politicians *bribe*

(instance taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 385)

Also, some verbs may allow a middle reading in their raw form:

(28b) *The house sold*

(instance taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 308)

D. When accompanied by an adjunct of manner, middles are unique in that this adjunct of manner refers to the patient S and not to an underlying agent, in contrast to active or passive constructions in which this adjunct of manner naturally refers to the agent S in the active or to the implicit agent — sometimes manifested by means of a by-phrase adjunct — in the passive:

(29a) ?The books *sold* quickly: ‘The books were quick to sell’

(29b) *They sold* the books quickly | The books *were sold* quickly (by the sellers): ‘They were quick to sell the books’

(instances taken from Lyons, 1968: 366)

Indeed, in (29a) as noticed by Halliday (1967, cited in Lyons, 1968: 366), the middle construction is “process-oriented” since something is predicated about the qualities of the books, that is, ‘the books are quick to sell’, and the remaining constructions — active and passive respectively — are “agent-oriented” whose adjuncts of manner refer to the fact that ‘the sellers were quick to sell the books’.


(30) *John cut the bread* → *This bread cut easily*

(instance taken from Hale & Keyser, 1986: 611)

It is no wonder, then, that the main grammars have related these constructions to passive constructions on semantic grounds.

Interestingly enough, note how middle constructions can be derived from the transitive variant of ergative verbs by introducing an adjunct of manner or a negated modal auxiliary or dummy auxiliary *don’t* (Halliday, 1968: 187; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 308, Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 383):
The door won’t open | These rods bend quite easily: typical ergative verbs in middle constructions  
(instances taken from Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 308)

These prisoners don’t march: manner-of-motion ergative verb in middle construction  
(instance taken from Halliday, 1968: 187)

2.2.5.1. Criteria for a distinction between English ergative verbs and middle constructions

Let us now concentrate upon specific syntactic-semantic criteria which characterize and define English ergative verbs from the most superficially similar construction i.e. the middle construction. For that purpose, special attention shall be given to Keyser and Roeper (1984) and Heisoon (1994) among other works cited, and examples of theirs shall serve to support their contentions.

Given the wide similarity which middles and ergatives share on the surface—some shared features being, for instance, the possession of a patient subject (Halliday, 1968: 187-188), or the ungrammaticality derived from the addition of a by-phrase adjunct (see Heisoon, 1994: 77-78)—, we could theoretically assume that they might share an underlying syntactic structure, which nevertheless has been proven to be untrue in generative accounts (for instance, Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 384-389). Nevertheless, there also exist several syntactic-semantic criteria which may serve to distinguish them in further lines: we noted, for instance, that middles generally need be supported by an adjunct of manner (typically easily, well, quickly, nicely, etc.) which characterizes the patient subject, and/or a negated modal auxiliary (won’t, wouldn’t) or a negated dummy auxiliary ‘do’ (don’t); also intonational cues might as well produce a somewhat acceptable middle sentence as (28). Here we have compiled the main semantic-syntactic defining differences between ergatives and middles (Heisoon, 1994: 384-386, Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 381-405), being as follows:

A. Ergatives admit progressive forms whereas middles do not (generally):

(32) The door is closing | *The walls are painting  
(instances taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 385)

However, we beg to differ with this assumption. We picked the collocational sequence ‘selling well’ on the BNC corpus’ search tool and found an enormous wealth of examples in which middle constructions with ‘sell’ appear with progressive forms:

(33) The sequel’s selling well, but not all the critics are impressed  
(instance taken the BNC corpus: K23)
Thus, in the meantime it shall be more cautious to state that the tendency for middles is to appear with non-progressive tenses.

B. Ergative verbs can be employed in imperative constructions with their patient participant being used as vocative, while middles cannot:

(34) Close, door! | *Wax, floor!

(instances taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 384)

C. Ergatives denote events in that they describe some kind of particular action at a specific point in time and middles generally convey generic states, which explains why ergatives can appear in past tenses and /or with adjuncts of time whereas middles rarely do:

(35) At yesterday’s house party, the kitchen door opened | ?Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily, according to the newspaper

(instances taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 384-385)

D. Ergatives can nominalize in an -ing form used as a premodifier with a noun whereas middles cannot -due to their genuine transitive nature-:

(36) The rolling-ball | *The easily-bribing men

(instances taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 387)

E. Ergatives may possess an inherent self-originating meaning —reflected by the use of a phrase such as ‘all by itself/themselves’— which middles do not have:

(37) The boat sank all by itself | *Bureaucrats bribe easily all by themselves

(instances taken from Keyser & Roeper, 1984: 405)

Middles, on the other hand, have been claimed to possess an underlying sense of agency, manifested in this paraphrasing:

(38) This novel reads easily → In general, this book is easy to read: ‘Anyone can read this book without difficulties’

(instances taken from Heisoon, 1994: 79)

F. Ergatives in the transitive use have a causative reading which is not found in middles:

(39a) The door opened → John opened the door = ‘John caused the door to open’

(39b) The foreign cars sell quickly → Tom is selling the foreign cars quickly ≠ ‘Tom caused the cars to sell quickly’

(instances slightly modified from Heisoon, 1994: 80 to illustrate the causative nuance characteristic of ergative verbs)

In their paper Keyser & Roeper (1984: 384) cited an intriguing example of ambiguity:

(40) The door opens easily
Nevertheless, we remain convinced that the most usual interpretation would be ‘The door is easy to open’, which doubtlessly corresponds to a middle interpretation, for there exists no eventive process going on and the omission of the adverb would lead to a sentence of dubious acceptability —unless some intonational cues were given—. Having said that, an ergative reading might still be plausible if the sentence, for instance, takes a self-originating meaning with the addition of the phrase ‘all by itself’. Halliday (1968: 187) provided another similar example which might also be ambiguous,

\[(41) \text{The door doesn't open in wet weather}\]

which might mean either that “it stays closed” because of the inner qualities of the door —i.e. a middle reading— or that “it cannot be opened (e.g. because of the damp)” —i.e. an ergative reading—.

### 3. A corpus-based tentative approach to ergative verbs

At this time it might be convenient to start addressing some controversial and problematic points which we have raised in our dissertation so as to draw conclusions in our study of ergative verbs. In order to do so, we shall effect a painstaking corpus survey, drawing upon the BNC and the NOW corpora.

The moot points to be approached span the following issues: lexical collocations and their selectional constraints in ergative verbs, unaccusative verbs and manner-of-motion verbs and the surface ambiguity of middle and ergative constructions.

#### 3.1. A preliminary lexico-semantic and pragmatic study of ergative, unaccusative, and manner-of-motion verbs: a corpus approach

 Throughout our paper we have found several instances of lexical collocations which might affect the syntactic configuration and distribution of the arguments of ergative, unaccusative and manner-of-motion verbs as well as their meaning. There also seems to exist pragmatic factors at play which might influence the selection of the intransitive or the transitive-causative variant or even their supposed ergative nature. For those reasons, we are compelled to address these issues by looking at several specific verbs whose syntactic, semantic and pragmatic behavior might be controversial.
3.1.1. Ergative verbs: a corpus survey

3.1.1.1. The ergative verb *break*: a case in point

We first return to one of the commonest ergative verbs, *break*, and several of its collocational usages: *break the law/the rules/a promise/a contract/a record* and others such as *break the news/someone’s heart*. In this sense, *break the law/the rules/a promise/a contract/a record* do not admit the intransitive construction *The law/*The promise/*The rules/*The contract/*The record broke* (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 85).

To arrive at this conclusion, we effected a search on the BNC and NOW corpus for the sequences ‘law broke’, ‘rules broke’, ‘promise broke’, ‘contract broke’ and ‘record broke’ and we obtained no results for that intransitive use. If any, we found phrasal verbs with *break* such as the intransitive phrasal verb *break down*:

(42a) ... after talks about an improved contract broke down...

(42b) ...since negotiations for a new three-year contract broke down early Sunday morning...

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 16-12-05 GB ESPN.co.uk (blog) and 11-08-09 US The Star-Ledger - NJ.com respectively)

The reason for these collocations’ reluctance to detransitivize lies in the fact that they require the compulsory, overt presence of an interventional and volitional agent as the direct cause of the action (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 102-105):

(43a) The president’s discretion overrides any categorical classification, and there has been no assertion that Trump broke a law by allegedly sharing the information.

(43b) Thompson broke the rules and was penalised two shots.

(43b) The Liberal Democrats faced heavy criticism in 2010 when former leader Nick Clegg broke a promise to oppose any increase in tuition fees for English universities.

(43c) That was the first bit of corruption involved with boxing. The IBF says Fury broke his contract.

(43d) José Mourinho took over at Manchester United and broke the record for the biggest transfer in the history of football...

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-05-16 GB The Guardian, 17-04-06 NZ New Zealand Herald, 17-05-16 GB International Business Time UK, 16-10-05 NG Gistmaster (blog), 17-05-18 PK The Express Tribune (blog), respectively)

The intransitive variant of ergative verbs thus seems to be reserved for those cases in which not only agents but also forces or external causes could be responsible for the bringing about of the action.

We continue exploring other collocational instances of the ergative verb *break*. The lexical collocation *break the news* happens to conform to the causative alternation, though the meaning is slightly different from that default meaning of *break*: when someone breaks the
news, he/she does not break it in a physical way, rather he/she causes the news to become known:

(44a) ... although Bell said the projections were planned for Monday night long before the news broke.

(44b) What was your first thought when the news broke today about President Trump's executive order on election integrity?

(44c) The Washington Post broke the news Monday that Trump provided Russia's foreign minister and ambassador with highly classified

(44d) Selena Gomez herself broke the news, followed by the official Twitter account for 13 Reasons Why...


The fact that it can appear in the intransitive may relate to the fact that they can actually appear with external forces such as a news agency or any other type of institution as in (44c). Furthermore, the intransitive use of breaking the news may be claimed to bear a coming-to-existence meaning (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 233), similar that of verbs of appearance, which may allow it to appear in there-constructions:

(44e) When, at the end of July, there broke the news of the great World War I, all foreign yachting stopped instantly “for duration”.

(instance taken from the web: https://books.google.es/books?id=hFrMdGCpddC , retrieved on 19th May, 2017)

In the same fashion, several other ergative verbs may fall into the unaccusative category through a semantic bleaching of their original meaning and a meaning shift toward a coming-into-existence sense (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 234), which serves to account for cases such as (11c) or (44e) in which a typical ergative verb acquires an unaccusative status.

Other collocations such as break someone’s heart—in the figurative sense of making someone become saddened—do not show irregularity either, that is, it may appear in both intransitive and transitive-causative constructions. Indeed, if it can bear an intransitive use it means that not only agents but also external causes may break one’s heart:

(45a) I never made the same things. All unique. They died and my heart broke. Nearly five years, I couldn’t touch again.

(45b) My heart broke when Prince Buthelezi said ‘I am told it's going to get rough’.

(45c) Chisom’s story not only broke my heart, it made my blood boil.

(45d) ...but the Gunners broke the heart of their faithfuls.

(instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-02-23 NZ Stuff.co.nz, 17-02-15 ZA politicsweb, 17-05-16 NG BellaNaija, 17-04-10 NG Naij.com, respectively)
Curiously enough, in (45a) and (45b) the external causes appear in a covert manner, remaining close to the verb in adjoining parts of the clause: (45a) can be paraphrased as ‘Their death broke my heart’, and (45b) as ‘Prince Buhelezi’s saying ‘I am told it’s going to get rough’ broke my heart’.

With regard to the collocation break one’s leg, we have found several instances of the intransitive sequence ‘leg broke’:

(46a) *The first leg broke while the second leg was seriously fractured.*

(46b) *Riley’s leg broke in December while he was sliding on his mother’s lap.*

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 12-12-22 NG Vanguard, 15-05-15 CA Globalnews.ca, respectively)

(46a) is indeed a curious example, for the first leg’s breaking might be due to an external cause, perhaps an accident, whereas the second leg’s breaking appears to be provoked by a covert volitional agent on account of its use in the passive form. This we suppose since it is not rare to find instances of fracture used intransitively with body parts when an external cause is responsible for the fracture:

(47) *I was jumping up for the ball, landed badly, and my leg fractured, just below the knee.*

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 11-03-03 GB telegraph.co.uk)

The external cause remains close in both (46b) and (47) where it is understood that some accident while performing some kind of action provoked the breaking or fracture, which is the causative reading proper of ergative verbs.

Intriguingly enough, the transitive use of break one’s leg seems not to conform to the ergative characteristics cited in 2.2.2., for the subject lacks a causative agent, replaced instead by an affected entity:

(48a) *Max broke his leg when it was crushed by a falling wall.*

(48b) *He broke his leg when knocking timber in the wood.*

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-05-28 GB Press and Journal 17-05-06 IE Kilkenny People, respectively)

The subject argument corresponds to the affected possessor of the broken leg, not to the causer of the broken leg. Moreover, both sentences contain the indirect external cause in their subordinate constituents, which, if absent, must be retrieved from the context for a non-agentive interpretation. For instance, the paraphrasing of (48a) may be the following: ‘A falling wall broke Max’s leg’. Thus, we may argue that, although (48a) and (48b) are not formally ergative, it is their contextual interpretation that ascribes them a causative reading and casts them into the ergative group.

In short, we may hold the view that there exists a strong correlation between the lexical entries appearing as patient in the transitive-causative alternation of an ergative verb
and the possibility to find it detransitivized, the possible choice of agents as well as external forces being the ultimate factor in determining an ergative verb’s detransitivization in specific collocational instances. Furthermore, other collocational instances such as break one’s body part might not be ergative at first sight, but pragmatic contextual considerations may assign them the causative interpretation typical of ergative verbs.

3.1.1.2. The ergative verb grow: a case in point

We return now to other irregularities briefly mentioned in subsection 2.2.2. by having a closer look at the ergative verb grow.

The verb grow, we have mentioned, does not permit a transitive-causative construction when said of animals or persons, only appearing as such with other entities i.e. plants, crops, vegetables and the like or, in a more figurative sense, sales, revenues, hair, etc. as attested in the BNC and NOW corpora:

(49a) His garden was a credit to him, too, and he grew flowers and potatoes.

(49b) On Tuesday, Bank of America said it grew revenues 7 percent, to $22 billion, from the same period last year.

(Instances taken from the BNC and NOW corpora: BN6 & 17-04-18 US Charlotte Observer (blog) respectively)

To confirm the assumption that grow lacks a transitive-causative variant with animals or persons, we effected a search on the BNC and NOW corpora and no results have been detected except one which we found rather peculiar:

(49c) He also grew animals like goat, chicken, turkey, ducks and other fowls

(Instance taken from the NOW corpus: 14-10-26 PH Manila Bulletin)

Indeed, the meaning is that of ‘raising animals’, the ergative verb raise being preferentially used over grow, as attested in the NOW corpus on the 5th of June, for animals (107 hits), cattle (157 hits), children (1363 hits) or kids (383). Consider this instance which shows the alternating choice of the verbs raise and grow depending upon the patient entity:

(50) The family raised animals and grew vegetables.

(Instance taken from the NOW corpus: 16-12-03 SG The Strait Times)

Another intriguing feature of grow is that when it is used intransitively and said of flowers, plants, fruits and the like, it does not assume the underlying existence of any agent or force causing the entity to grow; rather, it is the entity fully in itself and its inner nature and characteristics that are solely responsible for their growth. Certainly, we had first assumed that ergative verbs bear a certain degree of self-originating meaning as a distinct semantic feature, yet the existence of an ultimate agent or force remains hidden behind the intransitive variant of an ergative verb in most cases. When a door opens by itself as in (8), we
presuppose that it did not do it entirely by itself, though its intrinsic features or mechanisms may have been a major contributing factor if, for instance, the bolt or the latch was loose as well as the handle. Yet not only are the door’s intrinsic features and mechanisms responsible for the door’s opening, but it is actually the role of an ultimate action of a volitional agent or the role of an external cause—the wind, humidity, an earthquake, etc.—that acts as the main trigger of the door’s opening. When plants, grass, fruits, vegetables or trees are said to grow, it usually means that they “increase in size or maturity” (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 236), an “internally-caused” reading by which the patient entity is thought to be “responsible for bringing about the eventuality” (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 91, 97, 159-161) in that no external force or agent is responsible for the bringing about of the change of state denoted by the intransitive but the intrinsic characteristics of their patient argument:

(51a) ...the seed had failed to germinate but eventually all six plants grew and they have stayed productive the longest.

(51b) Apples trees grew remarkably well and held onto a sizeable proportion of the set fruit.

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-03-30 NZ stuff.co.nz & 16-11-05 IE Irish Independent, respectively)

Why is it that the entities in (51) are internally caused? We could presumably assert that there might be an underlying hidden actor as there was in a door’s opening, yet there exists a radical difference for considering grow an outlier in these cases: the growth of a tree or of a plant escapes the direct involvement and control of an agent, which is nevertheless a necessary condition or trigger for opening a door. Besides, it may be true that external causes such as proper weather and climate conditions might contribute to their growth to a certain extent, yet their growth mainly depends upon their own biological running and system; a door, on the contrary, must necessarily rely on a triggering cause, either an agent or an external cause, to open.

What happens, however, when plants, trees, fruits or vegetables appear in the transitive-causative pattern as in (49a) or (50)? The meaning radically changes, too, to that of taking care of and looking after them for a specific purpose: selling, eating, etc., i.e. the verb grow is hence what Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995: 97) termed an “externally caused” ergative verb. For those reasons, when we speak of grow said of plants, trees, fruits, vegetables and the like, we must differentiate between two totally different ergative verbs which do not form a causative pair as it is normally the case: the intransitive use of grow bears an idiosyncratic semantic and syntactic nature, different to that of grow as transitive-causative i.e. one is internally caused and the other is externally caused.
Another different meaning of grow is that of coming-to-existence (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 236), as already observed in instances (11c) and (44e), which allows it to appear in there-constructions and thus acquires an unaccusative-like status:

(52a) ...there grew protest movements to demand better conditions and equal rights in wages, employment opportunities...

(52b) On the shimmering distances there grew trees quite unperturbed by the heat, then dark, dense foliage, looking heavy as if it were soaked with rain.

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus and the web: 17-04-14 IN Deccan Chronicle and https://books.google.es/books?id=jnwq2yP1NowC&lpg=PT119&ots=dAEKWs_hb&dq=%22there%20grew%20trees%22&hl=es&pg=PT119#v=onepage&q=%22there%20grew%20trees%22&f=false retrieved on 5th June, 2017, respectively)

In (52a) the meaning is closely related to that of appearing, and in (52b) the meaning is rather tied to that of “living rootedly” (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 236).

Therefore, it may be reasonable to argue that grow acquires an internally-caused reading when referring to entities whose growth is not caused by some agent or external force, but by the entities themselves, by virtue of their own characteristics and qualities, and an externally-caused reading when a volitional agent is in charge of the care of the entity’s growth. Both readings are ergative, though they refer to two different types of verb which happen to share the same morphological form, and consequently they do not form a causative pair. Also, another meaning has been explored, which attaches a different status and classification to the verb grow, that of unaccusative verb.

3.1.2. Unaccusative verbs: a corpus survey

The group of unaccusative verbs comprises verbs of heterogeneous nature which, despite their differences in meaning, share a series of general syntactic features which set them apart from ergative verbs, and these were their reluctance to transitivize as in (10a) and (10b), and their participation in the there-construction as in (11a). Furthermore, we emphasized that certain verbs in the unaccusative group were rather exceptional in that they may undergo transitivization, or acquire an unergative reading whenever several conditions of pragmatic and semantic nature are met, as was the case with verbs of position in (10c) and (12). Also, we made mention of verbs such as begin (10d) and (10e) or settle which could transitivize and rather acquire a different status. Our course of action, thus, shall be to explore these distinct features and exceptionalities from a corpus approach to draw further conclusions about unaccusative verbs’ nature.
First, we shall address the phenomenon of transitivity in unaccusative verbs. We had previously asserted that unaccusative verbs resist transitivization, and to prove this assumption we shall effect a search on the BNC and NOW corpora for two representative verbs from the unaccusative class: *arise* and *arrive*. The search shall be carried out by using the most effective sequence to search for transitive constructions of these verbs, which is ‘NOUN unaccusative verb-ed the NOUN’ in order to display hits which might show similarity to a transitive pattern or be the transitive pattern itself. As predicted, no hits were found of *arise* and *arrive* in the transitive, though we include here several rare counterexamples which need further attention and clarification:

(53a) *His actions arose the suspicion of his employer*

(53b) *But when his colleagues arrived the scene, they left angrily when they could not see any violent traces.*

(instances taken from the NOW corpus: 15-12-04 JM Jamaica Star Online, 17-05-08 NG Guardian (blog), respectively)

At first glance, both corpus examples seem to challenge unaccusative verbs’ characteristics, yet it is not thus. (53a) is a rather exceptional instance, indeed, and may have rooted in Jamaican English only, hence its rarity. The meaning conveyed is that of ‘raising suspicions’, and this transitive use of the verb *arise* bears a strong causative nuance, which leads us to consider this instance as a rare case of *arise* functioning as an ergative verb. (53b) may seem odd, though it is a hit whose frequency was fairly high, all belonging to Nigerian English, perhaps suggesting a peculiar dialectal feature in which a locative adjunct appears in the form of a noun phrase instead of the typical prepositional phrase ‘on/at the scene’, and therefore it is not a case of transitivization.

What about *begin* in (10d) and (10e) or verbs such as *settle* which appear in transitive constructions? The answer lies in the meaning of the verb and the resultant syntactic properties. Originally, *begin*, with the meaning of ‘starting something’, is a transitive verb\(^\text{11}\), and lacks the coming-into-existence meaning characteristic of unaccusative verbs, which can only be obtained through a process of semantic bleaching to acquire that unaccusative meaning. The verb *settle*, in the sense of ‘coming to live somewhere’, is unaccusative, whereas when used in the sense of ‘arranging something’ as shown by the collocational instances *settle an agreement/a deal/a dispute/an affair/a matter/a conflict*, it might be claimed to acquire an ergative status, for there exists a prominent causative meaning: ‘to

\(^{11}\) The verb *begin* is assumed to bear an ergative meaning and is included in the class of ergative verbs in this web source: [https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/es/english-grammar/verbs/reflexive-and-ergative-verbs](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/es/english-grammar/verbs/reflexive-and-ergative-verbs). However, none of the linguistic sources cited in our paper considers *begin* as an instance of ergative verb.
make/cause an agreement/a deal/… to settle’. We have attempted to find instances of these collocations in the intransitive and no hits were found, suggesting that their behavior is closely related to that of break’s collocational instances in that a volitional agent is needed to be in charge of the action, and as the intransitive may suggest multiple types of animate and inanimate agents including forces, settle’s collocational instances resist de-transitivization.

The intriguing behavior of verbs of position does need further attention and we shall concentrate on this specific type of unaccusative verbs. This group of verbs is the only which was asserted to be able to transitivize and causativize, keeping a seemingly closely-knit semantic and syntactic relation in both the intransitive and the transitive-causative uses. Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995: 127-133) argued that verbs of position may acquire at least three slightly different verbal meanings — one of maintaining a specific position in a space, another of describing a position and one of assuming a specific position. We shall, thus, investigate into this property by looking at these two verbs of position: lean and hang. This time, we shall be using the sequences ‘leant’ and ‘hung’ to provide different corpus examples:

(54a) Still on his feet, Cullam leant on the desk, his head hanging.
(54b) She leant her elbows on the table, clasped her hands lightly and rested her chin on them.
(54c) Curtains hung at the window like grey veils.
(54d) …she walked into the room and hung the towels over the rail.

(Instances taken from the BNC corpus: A73, A0R, HGF, HHB)

In (54a), the meaning provided by the context for the verb lean is that of an intentional action of an agent, corresponding to the assuming position meaning, and would not hence participate in the there-construction and for that reason would be labelled unergative. On the contrary, the verb hang might be said to convey a description of a position or the maintenance of the position, a meaning compatible with an unaccusative classification and it makes it possible to appear in there-constructions. In (54b) and (54d), the meaning attributed to the verbs is that of making her elbows or the towels adopt or assume a specific position, a causative nuance which would in principle attach an ergative interpretation. However, we claim that it appears not to be so on the grounds that the intransitive counterparts Her elbows leant on the table and The towels hung over the rail do not bear the same meaning, for the elbows cannot lean out of their own accord and neither can the towels hang by themselves, thus any assuming position meaning is nonsensical and, indeed, a descriptive or maintaining meaning is presupposed instead. This involves that there does not exist a close semantic relationship between the intransitive and the transitive as was the case with ergative verbs, thereby not
forming an ergative pair but two distinct verbs, the intransitive being unaccusative and the transitive being unergative, which happen to share the same morphological form. This assumption seems to conform to Levin & Rappaport-Hovav’s suspicions (1995: 129-133) who provided a syntactic approach to account for this characteristic differentiation which we have attempted to address in a more meaningful, semantic and pragmatic manner. (54c) is a case similar to that of the verb *hang* in (54a), though the only meaning compatible would correspond to that of describing the position of the curtains, which are not maintaining that position because they are already fixed, and this interpretation also casts the verb into the unaccusative category.

In short, we have shown by means of corpus examples that the behavior of unaccusative verbs is not as blurry and messy as we had conceived of in the theoretical approach to unaccusative verbs. We have attested that semantic and pragmatic considerations are ultimately determinant in assigning a correct classification, that a certain group of unaccusative verbs, namely verbs of position, may adopt an unergative reading when there are agentive connotations, and these connotations can only be understood when there is a volitional agent, usually animate, who performs an action deliberately and under his or her control.

### 3.1.3. Manner-of-motion verbs: a corpus survey

Manner-of-motion verbs were claimed to be ambivalent in their nature: they could be either ergative or unergative, depending upon the fulfilment of certain syntactic and semantic criteria, the most important of them being their participation in the causative alternation, only possible when a directed-motion interpretation by means of a directional or path adjunct was present. We have also seen, however, that causativization might not always predict ergativity, as was the case in (20). The nature of the verb appeared to be volatile by virtue of other factors involved, such as specific lexical entries as in (19), the intrinsic characteristics of the manner-of-motion verb itself as in (23) or the interaction of semantic and pragmatic factors as in (15c) and (18). For those reasons, we shall attempt to address manner-of-motion verbs by having a look at real-life examples taken from the corpora in order to classify them accordingly.

#### 3.1.3.1. Ambiguous cases of manner-of-motion verbs: a corpus survey

Several manner-of-motion verbs which had an ambivalent and ambiguous nature are to be approached in this subsection: *jump*, *walk*, and *roll*. 
The verb *jump*, as one of the core members of the manner-of-motion verbs, fits the bill for our purposes, for it shows a dual nature given certain criteria which we had previously addressed in subsection 2.2.4. For the sake of clarity of exposition, let us reproduce instances (15):

(15a) *The horse jumped (over the fence):* unergative, or ergative verb if accompanied by the path adjunct
(15b) *The rider jumped the horse over the fence:* ergative verb
(15c) ?*The rider jumped the horse:* ergative verb?

We have claimed that one criterion to determine ergativity has to do with the presence of a directional or path adjunct. Yet not only its presence but an underlying directed-motion meaning may ultimately ascribe an ergative reading. In the case of (15a), bereft of any path adjunct, two interpretations may arise: an unergative reading if the meaning conveyed is that the horse made a jump, or an ergative reading if ascribed an underlying directed motion meaning (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 185-188). In (15c), the only accepted interpretation is that of ergative because the directed-motion meaning is implicitly present, and any other reading would theoretically give rise to an unacceptable sentence. The cue, however, seems to rely on contextual considerations which need to be taken into account for a more precise classification:

(55a) *The mobile application will allow riders to view the calendar of their rides, and have information on the intensity of each session and how many jumps each horse jumped.*
(55b) *Seven racegoers were severely injured when a horse jumped over a high fence into a crowd of about 50 spectators during the Grand Annual Steeplechase at Warrnambool racetrack on Thursday.*
(55c) *The very same day he bought it, the horse jumped the fence and escaped into the hills.*
(55d) *Several people were seriously injured when a riderless horse jumped into a crowd in 2011.*

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 16-02-04 NZ HorseTalk, 11-05-06 IN NDTV.com, 11-05-28 GB mi2g 15-05-04 AU ABC Local, respectively)

(55a) would be a case of unergative interpretation since, if we stick to the diagnostics and criteria to determine ergativity, no directed-motion meaning is attached but that of a horse making many jumps, further reflected by the presence of the cognate object ‘how many jumps’. (55b) would, in principle, be a case of ergativity, for there is a path adjunct accompanying the verb which undoubtedly ascribes a directed-motion meaning, and the same goes for (55d), whose directed-motion meaning is reflected by the directional adjunct ‘into the crowd’ and recoverable from the context itself as the people injured must have been situated at a given spatial point toward which the horse headed. However, we beg to differ with Levin
& Rappaport-Hovav’s criteria in the sense that in both instances the horse seems to have acted out of its own volition without the intervention of another causative agent, further corroborated by the presence of the adjective ‘riderless’ in (55d), and at the same time it is very unlikely that an external force must have triggered the horses’ jumps. Thus, by the context itself, the only interpretation possible is that of unergative. (55c) is a case of a transitivized path adjunct which could only mean that jump here is unergative according to our early suspicions in (22) and further confirmed by the context, for the horse intentionally jumped to escape without the intervention of any agent or external force.\textsuperscript{12}

As to the verb walk, the same conclusions derived from the verb jump can apply here. Instances (14) or (18) show the intransitive and transitive-causative variants, and its ergativity ultimately depends not only upon the already cited syntactic and semantic criteria, but also upon pragmatic considerations. Let us then present several corpora examples to draw further conclusions:

(56a) We knew life had changed when my dad and grandfather were concreting round the side of the house, the dog \textbf{walked} through the wet concrete, dad and grandpa yell at her and Nan races out and starts yelling at them to leave the "poor little dog alone, she doesn't understand" while stroking the dog’s head.

(56b) On Dec. 14, some hours after the Lanza’s 20-year-old son killed 20 students and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School 42.5 miles away, police officers and a police dog \textbf{walked} around the exterior of the Bartina Lane home and neighboring properties, and later left.

(56c) Daisy, 57, of Hindon, near Salisbury, Wilts, was hit as she \textbf{walked} the dog to a nearby village.

(56d) After arriving to scenes of chaos, Mrs MacLeod \textbf{walked} the streets and searched hotels and train stations across the city...

(Instances taken from the NOW and BNC corpora: 13-09-05 AU Daily Life, 13-08-06 US The Advocate, HAF, 17-05-25 GB Press and Journal, respectively)

Originally, (56a) would be considered ergative by virtue of the presence of the path adjunct ‘through the wet concrete’, yet by the context we can infer that the dog walked out of its own volition as no one else seems to direct it, particularly reflected by the dad and grandpa’s angry reaction toward the dog’s action which appears to have spoiled the concreted ground. (56b) seems to be unergative on the surface, for there is no directional or path adjunct but a locative adjunct, and the intransitive use might further suggest an unergative reading; however, the most plausible interpretation is that the police officers walked the police dog, so

\textsuperscript{12} Many of these assumptions we have corroborated by asking Italian native speakers, for Italian language, as discussed above, could be used to identify the ergativity of a manner-of-motion verb by the alternating selection of the auxiliary in the perfective construction.
that the police dog did not walk on its own but controlled or under the command of the police
officers, and for those reasons the verb walk here is hence ergative. (56c) is unmistakably
ergative, predicted first by the syntactic and semantic criteria i.e. there is a directional adjunct
and also strong causative nuance in this transitive pattern, and the context does not provide
further reasons to believe the opposite. Finally, (56d) is a clear case of agentivity and thus it is
unergative, for the path adjunct is transitivized.

The manner-of-motion verb roll is also subject to the same criteria above discussed: it
may be either ergative or unergative depending upon syntactic and semantic criteria and
pragmatic considerations, as has been already attested with the other manner-of-motion verbs:
(57a) At Miramichi Lodge, a truck carting hazardous materials crashed and rolled down the slope as
the driver lost control due to the quake.
(57b) Another man rolled across the hood of a car to rob a customer making a night deposit through
his driver’s side window at a Conway bank drive-up in November.
(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-06-01 CA Pembroke Daily Observer 12-01-04 US
claimsjournal.com)
In (57a), the verb roll is used intransitively and is accompanied by a path adjunct, two cues
which would lead us to regard it as ergative, further confirmed by the presence of the causes
specified in the adjacent constituents of the sentence, namely an external force being ‘the
quake’ leading to the driver’s loss of control and eventually to the crashing and rolling down
of the truck. In (57b), the presence of the path adjunct does not ascribe an ergative reading,
for that man is a volitional agent in that he rolled of his own accord for a specific purpose,
hence it is unergative.

3.1.3.2. Inherently unergative and ergative manner-of-motion verbs: a corpus survey
On the one hand, there seems to exist several manner-of-motion verbs that, regardless of their
lexical entries, are always unergative, for they do not admit the transitive-causative variant
under any circumstance (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 156) regardless, also, of the overt
or covert presence of a directional or path adjunct:
(58a) The runner jogged all day → (58b) *The coach jogged the runners all day
These verbs are few in numbers, and we have only spotted two in our references: jog and
wander. Thus, we shall concentrate on these.

On the other hand, other manner-of-motion verbs such as slide —instance (23)— are
supposed to be inherently ergative because of their impossibility to transitivize their path or
directional adjuncts as a necessary condition to cast them into the ergative group. As no other
manner-of-motion verb has been found to be inherently ergative, we shall only address the verb *slide*.

First of all, we shall look at the inherently unergative manner-of-motion verb *jog*. The item ‘jogged’ generated 1471 hits in the NOW corpus and 131 hits in the BNC corpus, most of which corresponding to the meaning of ‘running slowly’:

**(59a)** More than 22,000 people ran, walked and *jogged* down Yonge St. Sunday in the annual 10-kilometre event…

**(59b)** On Sunday he played squash and on weekday mornings he *jogged* for twenty minutes before work.

(Instances taken from the NOW and BNC corpora: 17-05-15 CA Toronto Star & A0R, respectively)

When searching for ‘jogged + NOUN’, we have surprisingly found several instances attesting the use of jog as ergative verb in that there exists a strong causative nuance in the transitive pattern:

**(59c)** As a youngster, he *jogged* horses, cleaned stalls and helped with our horse-breeding operation.

**(59d)** But never in the last 7 years that I have *jogged* horses and trained horses have I had a bit break.

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 10-07-19 US Plain Dealer, 10-01-10 CA Standardbred Canada, respectively)

Undeniably, the meaning attached to these instances is that of ‘making the horses jog’, which definitely challenges the verb’s classification as inherently unergative. Indeed, hits showing this transitive-causative use are scarce, though English native speakers may well spread this use and sentences such as (58b) might one day become utterly grammatical and acceptable if the trend does not stop here.

The other manner-of-motion verb to approach is *wander*. Again, the same procedure shall be effected to find instances in the corpora by typing the sequence ‘wandered’: 9791 hits were found in the NOW corpus and 867 hits in the BNC corpus, many of which corresponding to the meaning of ‘walking aimlessly’ or ‘strolling’.

**(60a)** Afterward, I *wandered* through the stadium, looking for my parents.

**(60b)** The incidence of the Famine was in fact worse for those peasants who *wandered* into the nearby Volga cities or travelled much further afield.

(Instances taken from the NOW and BNC corpus: 17-06-05 NZ New Zealand Herald & A64, respectively)

Unfortunately, no results showing a transitive-causative use were found, which may suggest that *wander* is as yet an inherently unergative manner-of-motion verb, a status which may eventually be challenged as soon as native speakers start adopting the transitive-causative use.

As to the verb *slide*, we could confirm its classification as inherently ergative, for no hits were found in which a directional or path adjunct performed the function of direct object.
Indeed, the only hits which we could find were in the intransitive or in the transitive-causative variant:

(61a) The car slid across the road on to a large grassed area.
(61b) ...and an automatic grab for the handbrake slid the car away from the mountain to a stop just before the opposite cliff edge.

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-04-06 NZ Stuff.co.nz, 17-05-16 ZA Wheels24, respectively)

(61a) can only be understood if we assume the existence of an underlying agent whose voluntary or involuntary action under his/her control provoked that car’s accident or even an external force — e.g. the wet ground, inertia or ‘an automatic grab for the handbrake’ in (61b)—, for cars are not yet supposed to be in full charge of their control and direction, and, even if it were the case, brand new automatic driverless cars are not supposed to provoke an accident on purpose.

All in all, we have uncovered the significance of the role of factors other than syntactic and semantic factors in classing manner-of-motion verbs i.e. pragmatic factors. Pragmatic considerations seem to provide the correct classification for manner-of-motion verbs, based on the assumptions which derive from the specific situations and the interactive role of the actors, processes and circumstances in relation to the context.

3.1.3.3. Unaccusative status in manner-of-motion verbs: a corpus survey

Throughout our paper we have attested cases of ergative verbs which, through a semantic bleaching of their original meaning and the meaning shift toward a coming-into-existence meaning, may acquire an unaccusative reading, evidenced by their use in there-constructions in the corpora as shown in (11c), (44e), and (52).

Likewise, several manner-of-motion verbs may undergo the same process and enter into the unaccusative category (Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995: 242-244) and for that reason we shall have a look at manner-of-motion verbs such as walk or run as we have attested corpora examples of them behaving as unaccusative verbs:

(62a) More than a millennium ago, there walked a man on this planet who experienced some of the most heartbreaking trials ever known...
(62b) And through all our discussions, there ran a recurring double thread.
(62c) In the 1970s and 1980s there ran a set of very sinister public information warnings to stop children and adults alike doing stupid things

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 14-10-28 SG Aquila Style, 16-11-10 GB Scotsman, 11-06-27 GB Den of Geek)
The meaning conveyed corresponds to that of unaccusative verbs in that they denote appearance, or existence, but not a manner-of-motion interpretation, and explains their participation in the *there*-construction.

### 3.2. The surface ambiguity of ergative and middle constructions: a corpus approach

Ergatives and middles were claimed to bear distinct syntactic and semantic characteristics which differentiate the one from the other. However, we illustrated by means of (31) that certain ergative verbs may acquire a middle status, or that other constructions such as (40) and (41) may be interpreted to be ergative or middle according to semantic and pragmatic factors at play. The similarity in these cases resides in that the intransitive variants of the ergative and middle both share a subject argument which is a patient entity, and the difference lies in the ultimate pragmatic function of these constructions: ergatives in the intransitive are employed to hide the agent or force responsible for the action because the cause or agent is unknown, irrelevant, elusive or recoverable from the context (Rappaport-Hovav, 2014: 22-28), and middles are used to say something about the qualities of the patient entity.

The verbs which we are to investigate are thus the following: *break, open, and march*. By using the sequences ‘the NOUN breaks/opens’ and ‘won’t march’, likely to provide us with rich ambiguous corpus examples, we shall try to elucidate whether these examples correspond to cases of ergativity or of the middle voice by looking at the context for further cues and we shall provide an explanation for our interpretation.

(63a) *It’s happened to a lot of women: The condom breaks.*

(63b) *But what happens when the condom breaks or you get struck with a needle that could be infected with HIV?*

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 10-11-15 US RH Reality Check & 17-05-11 US KSAT San Antonio)

(63a) might be superficially ambiguous, yet the meaning is unmistakably to that of a middle reading, for the condom is being attributed the properties of being easily breakable despite the absence of the manner of adjunct ‘easily’, and there is no causal interpretation either. In (63b), however, the properties of the condom are not being questioned or described; rather, (63b) is stating a hypothetical situation in which the verb *break* is used intransitively because the cause of the condom’s breaking is irrelevant, though it remains implicitly present. Indeed, incorrect manipulation or weather conditions might be the ultimate causes but they are not stated because the focus lies in the action and the consequences of a broken condom: ‘As a result of a broken condom, it happens that…’.

(64a) *Be careful, the door opens outwards!*

33
(64b) The door opens and a boy enters.

( Instances taken from the BNC corpus: KCN & G0F)
The intrinsic properties of the door in (64a) give rise to the door’s opening —a malfunctioning latch, a loose handle, etc.— hence, we are attesting a middle construction, and this interpretation is further reinforced by the covert presence of the adjunct of manner ‘easily’. There is no interest in the cause of the door’s opening, but in the effects which this action might provoke, which explains why the addressee urges the addressee to be careful. In (64b), there is an action and not a reference to the door’s properties and the cause remains hidden; it might have been the boy himself, somebody else, the wind, an instrument such as a key, or an electronic system in charge of a door’s opening, yet this either irrelevant or recoverable from the context e.g. if the boy is at a hotel, the door may have opened because of an electronic system which detects the host’s footsteps or his facial features, or simply the boy himself by using a card or a key.

(65a) Police Chief Mark Saunders has said uniformed police won’t march in this year’s parade.
(65b) Black Lives Matter won't march in Pride Parade.

(Instances taken from the NOW corpus: 17-05-27 CA Toronto Sun & 16-07-17 CA Huffington Post Canada)
Both instances correspond to the manner-of-motion verb march, but their meaning is slightly different: in (65a), the uniformed police will not be made to march, regardless of the actual intentions of the uniformed police, as it is higher ranks or government officials who ultimately decide whether they march or not, that is, marching escapes the uniformed police’s control. This interpretation corresponds to that of an ergative manner-of-motion verb which has adopted a middle reading. (65b) might be ambiguous: it can mean exactly the same thing as (65a), or it might be that Black Lives Matter are highly likely not to join the Pride Parade because they decided not to, and the addressee is merely stating a prediction. The first reading corresponds to that of a middle one, and the second is simply an unergative verb.

4. Conclusion
Ergativity is a well-defined property of some human languages which assign ergative and absolute case, in contrast to accusative languages which operate in terms of accusative and nominative case. On a smaller scale, the phenomenon of ergativity has been observed in accusative languages through verbs which show ergative-like characteristics: the so-called ergative verbs and other types of ergative-like verbs such as unaccusative verbs and manner-of-motion verbs.
We provided a different syntactic-semantic classification of English verbs on the basis of ergativity instead of that more traditional classification based on transitivity, and distinguished between ergative and unergative verbs. Among the ergative verbs, different classes of verbs were spotted: ergative verbs proper, which show their ergativity by means of a patient entity that participates in the causative alternation and by means of the close syntactic-semantic relationship between the intransitive and transitive counterparts, and unaccusative verbs, which also possess a patient entity as subject and whose ergativity relates to their participation in the there-construction. Indeed, Generative Grammar has proved by means of different syntactic-semantic analytical approaches that ergative verbs and unaccusative verbs share the same deep structure. Also, different semantic types of verbs have been identified within the ergative and unaccusative class, and this large variety and number of verbs proved to be a considerable challenge to disentangle in that many seemingly exceptional cases were observed and apparently had no explanation. Manner-of-motion verbs had a dual nature: they could be either ergative or unergative, depending upon syntactic-semantic factors which had been spotted in other languages such as Italian. We also discovered apparently unexplained exceptionalities, and we resolved to shed further light on all of these disparities. Moreover, we approached, not a group of verbs in itself, but the grammatical category of voice, and within it the middle voice, which, despite not being morphologically represented in English, does manifest itself through the syntax i.e. intransitive constructions obtained out of the transitive variants of ergative and unergative verbs alike. We observed the shared surface similarities between intransitive ergatives and middles and presented a distinction on different syntactic and semantic grounds.

Once we set all this theoretical approach to English ergative verbs, we attempted to provide a more practical framework, which consisted in a corpus approach by taking into account semantic and pragmatic factors which had not been sufficiently addressed in previous sections. Selectional constraints in the lexicon of ergative verbs proper, unaccusative verbs and manner-of-motion verbs and surface similarities between ergative verbs and middle constructions were thus approached in a more meaningful, contextualized fashion, which served us to account for all the rarities, exceptionalities and disparities previously found. The interaction of lexical, semantic and pragmatic factors was not only contributing but, on several occasions, decisive to provide different interpretations and classifications in accordance with each of these readings.

For those reasons, we argue, in line with most recent approaches to English ergative verbs (Rappaport-Hovav, 2014, for instance) that verbs’ ergative or unergative nature is not
always a matter of the syntax but of the lexicon and semantics, particularly the lexical properties attributed to each of these verbs and the lexical properties of their arguments, and pragmatics, i.e. specific contextual and situational considerations. For each class of ergative verbs, we therefore claim that there exists a distinction between prototypical (e.g. break, open, emerge…) and peripheral (e.g. grow, hang...) members. However, members of each group are not static but mobile, and may become more or less peripheral due to different factors — as in the case of lexical collocations, or by the changing unstable nature of the language — or intersect — as the case of arise in (53a), among others. In our opinion, syntactic approaches have as yet failed to address and account for this mobility, variability and heterogeneity, for they have mainly focused on cases of representative, core members of the ergative classes and decontextualized, unnatural and sometimes forced sentences. If we are to enrich our knowledge about ergative verbs and their behavior in the English language, semantic and pragmatic approaches must be thus encouraged, developed and put forward, and in that sense our dissertation has been a tentative attempt to cover those lacks and deficiencies in the study of English ergative verbs and provide insightful views for future studies of these verbs.

5. References


