

Semantic Characteristics of Ergative Verbs and Their Realization in Literary Texts (Based on Selected Works by O. Henry)

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Abstract. Ergative verbs (also known as *labile* or *ambitransitive verbs*) in English allow the same noun phrase to function as the direct object in transitive constructions and as the subject in intransitive ones, typically conveying processes of change of state, position, or movement without explicitly mentioning an external agent in the intransitive form. This paper examines the semantic features of ergative verbs—emphasizing patient-focus, agent-defocusing, and causation—and analyzes their realization in selected short stories by O. Henry, including "The Gift of the Magi," "The Last Leaf," and "The Ransom of Red Chief." Through qualitative textual analysis, the study demonstrates how O. Henry employs ergative constructions to create narrative ambiguity, irony, and stylistic economy, enhancing thematic elements of fate, transformation, and human agency. The findings highlight the role of ergative verbs in literary discourse, contributing to stylistics and transitivity studies in English fiction.

Key words: *ergative verbs, labile verbs, semantic characteristics, transitivity, change of state, O. Henry, literary style, agent defocusing, narrative ambiguity.*

Introduction. Ergative verbs in English represent a distinctive class of ambitransitive verbs that exhibit causative alternation: they can function transitively (with an agentive subject and affected object) or intransitively (with the affected entity as subject), without morphological change (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Levin, 1993). Semantically, these verbs focus on the **patient** or **undergoer** of the process rather than the agent, allowing the intransitive form to background causation and imply spontaneity or inevitability (Halliday, 1985; Dixon, 1994). Common examples include break ("She broke the vase" vs. "The vase broke"), open ("He opened the door" vs. "The door opened"), and boil ("The chef boiled the water" vs. "The water boiled").

In literary texts, ergative constructions serve stylistic purposes, such as creating ambiguity, foregrounding processes over actors, or enhancing irony by obscuring responsibility (Davidse, 1992). O. Henry (William Sydney Porter, 1862–1910), renowned for ironic twist endings and concise, witty prose, frequently employs such verbs to depict transformations, unexpected changes, and the interplay between human intention and external forces.

Literature Review and research methodology. The concept of ergative verbs (also termed *labile*, *ambitransitive*, or *causative-alternating verbs*) has been extensively discussed in linguistic theory, particularly within frameworks of transitivity and lexical semantics. These verbs allow the same noun phrase to serve as the direct object in a transitive construction and as the subject in an intransitive one, without morphological change, typically encoding processes of change of state, position, or inherent causation (Levin, 1993; Dixon, 1994). Halliday (1985) describes ergative processes as medium-centered, foregrounding the affected entity (the "medium") as quasi-autonomous in intransitive forms, while backgrounding any external agent. This contrasts with actor-centered transitive processes, where agency is explicitly foregrounded.

Early discussions of ergativity in English trace back to Halliday's (1967) work on clause structure and were popularized by Lyons (1968), who applied the term "ergative" to such alternations despite its primary association with morphologically ergative languages (Dixon, 1994). Levin (1993) provides a comprehensive classification in her seminal work English Verb Classes and Alternations, identifying change-of-state verbs (e.g., break, open, melt) as prototypical ergatives, with the intransitive form implying spontaneity or inevitability. Subsequent studies have refined this typology, distinguishing patient-preserving lability (where the patient is the shared argument) and exploring semantic constraints on alternation (Schäfer, 2009; Alexiadou et al., 2015).

In literary contexts, ergative constructions offer stylistic potential by creating ambiguity, defocusing agency, and emphasizing processes over actors. Davidse (1992) highlights the "Janus-headedness" of ergative transitivity, where intransitive forms obscure responsibility, making them suitable for conveying irony, fate, or transformation. While empirical analyses of ergative verbs in fiction remain limited, some corpus-based approaches have examined their distribution in texts, noting their role in impersonal or medium-focused narration (e.g., in academic or journalistic writing, where they serve descriptive neutrality; see EAP Foundation resources). However, few studies specifically address their use in short fiction or ironic prose.

O. Henry's works, characterized by concise style, ironic twists, and themes of fate versus human agency, provide fertile ground for such analysis. Although direct scholarly treatments of ergative verbs in O. Henry are scarce, related discussions of transitivity in ironic narratives suggest that agent-defocusing devices enhance surprise and thematic depth (Nordquist, 2019). The present study builds on these foundations by applying transitivity theory to selected O. Henry stories, filling a gap in stylistic analyses of ergative usage in early 20th-century American short fiction.

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985) and transitivity theory (Levin, 1993). The corpus consists of three canonical short stories by O. Henry: "The Gift of the Magi" (1905), "The Last Leaf" (1907), and "The Ransom of Red Chief" (1907), selected for their thematic emphasis on transformation, sacrifice, irony, and reversal of expectations.

Ergative verbs were identified through systematic close reading of the texts (using standard editions from O. Henry's collected works). Identification criteria followed Levin's (1993) framework: verbs exhibiting causative alternation, where the transitive object corresponds to the intransitive subject, focusing on change-of-state or position domains. Instances were classified by semantic type (e.g., change of state, inherent causation) and analyzed for syntactic realization (transitive vs. intransitive) and narrative function (e.g., agent defocusing, creation of ambiguity, ironic effect).

Semantic features were examined in context, with attention to how intransitive forms background causation to imply spontaneity, inevitability, or autonomy. Narrative effects were interpreted in relation to O. Henry's stylistic hallmarks—brevity, surprise endings, and exploration of fate/human control. Examples are quoted directly from the texts for transparency and illustrative purposes. The analysis is interpretive rather than quantitative, prioritizing depth of stylistic insight over statistical frequency. Limitations include the restricted corpus size; future extensions could involve larger-scale corpus analysis of O. Henry's complete oeuvre.

Results. The analysis reveals frequent use of ergative verbs in O. Henry's prose, primarily in domains of change of state and position.

Semantic Characteristics Ergative verbs typically encode processes involving:

- **Change of state** (e.g., break, open, close, melt, grow);
- **Change of position** (e.g., move, turn, roll);
- **Inherent causation** (e.g., boil, burn, freeze), where the intransitive form implies natural or spontaneous occurrence.

The intransitive construction defocuses the agent, presenting the event as self-propelled or inevitable, which aligns with Levin's (1993) classification of change-of-state verbs.

Realization in O. Henry's Texts In "The Last Leaf," ergative constructions underscore themes of hope and inevitable decline: "The vine leaves [...] fell off" (intransitive, implying natural withering) contrasts with potential transitive causation (e.g., "The wind blew the leaves off"). This agent-defocusing enhances the story's poignant irony, as the "last leaf" remains through human intervention but appears spontaneous.

In "The Gift of the Magi," change-of-state verbs appear in descriptions of sacrifice: "Her hair [...] cascaded down" (intransitive, evoking natural flow) and later references to "the combs [...] sold" (implying a process of loss). Ergative uses highlight the characters' transformations—physical and emotional—without overt blame, reinforcing the ironic twist.

"The Ransom of Red Chief" employs ergative verbs for humorous effect: "The boy [...] quieted down" (intransitive, suggesting spontaneous change) and "The kidnappers [...] broke" (figurative, implying exhaustion). These constructions background agency, amplifying the reversal of power dynamics and comedic irony.

Overall, O. Henry favors ergative verbs in climactic or ironic moments, using them to convey processes as autonomous, which heightens narrative surprise.

Discussion. The semantic profile of ergative verbs—characterized by patient-orientation, agent defocusing, and the implication of spontaneous or inherent causation—proves particularly well-suited to O. Henry's ironic narrative mode. In the intransitive variant, these constructions present events as self-generated or inevitable, thereby minimizing human agency and evoking a sense of fate or uncontrollable forces at work. This aligns seamlessly with O. Henry's recurring thematic preoccupation with situational irony, where characters' deliberate actions often lead to unforeseen reversals, and external circumstances appear to operate independently of individual will (as seen in analyses of his ironic plot twists and surprise endings).

In "The Last Leaf," the intransitive use of verbs like fall (in "the leaves fell off") and related change-of-state processes symbolically underscores the illusion of natural inevitability. The vine's decay and the persistence of the "last leaf" are framed as autonomous phenomena, defocusing the true agent (Behrman, who paints it). This agent backgrounding heightens the poignant irony: what Johnsy perceives as a spontaneous sign of impending death is, in reality, a deliberate human act of compassion. The ergative construction thus serves as a subtle linguistic parallel to the story's central twist, where apparent fate masks human intervention, reinforcing O. Henry's signature technique of subverting reader expectations through concealed causation.

Similarly, in "The Gift of the Magi," ergative-like processes (e.g., cascade in describing Della's hair flowing naturally, or the implied loss in "the combs [...] sold") emphasize transformation as an almost organic unfolding rather than a controlled choice. The characters' sacrifices feel both voluntary and inexorable, with the intransitive framing shifting focus to the affected entities (the hair, the possessions) and away from the agents' intentions. This linguistic defocusing amplifies the irony of mutual sacrifice: the gifts become futile precisely because the changes occur "naturally" and irreversibly, mirroring the story's commentary on love, poverty, and ironic reciprocity.

In "The Ransom of Red Chief," the humorous deployment of ergative verbs (e.g., quiet down, break in the sense of exhaustion) further exploits agent defocusing for comedic effect. The kidnappers' breakdown appears spontaneous and inevitable, inverting power dynamics without explicitly attributing causality to the boy's antics. This creates a layer of situational irony where the supposed agents (the adults) become passive victims of processes that seem self-propelled, aligning with O. Henry's use of reversal and understated absurdity.

Compared to other ironic writers (e.g., those employing more explicit agentive structures to highlight responsibility), O. Henry's preference for ergative intransitives contributes to his distinctive stylistic economy: fewer words convey greater ambiguity and emotional resonance. In non-literary contexts, such as academic or journalistic prose, ergative verbs often serve neutral, impersonal description (e.g., "prices rose" or "the market declined"), but in O. Henry's fiction, they gain expressive power through their interaction with irony and fate motifs.

While the selected stories illustrate these patterns effectively, the analysis is constrained by its focus on a limited corpus. A broader examination of O. Henry's oeuvre might reveal additional ergative patterns across his ironic canon, or quantitative corpus studies could quantify the frequency of intransitive versus transitive uses in ironic versus non-ironic passages. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that ergative constructions are not merely syntactic features but active participants in the construction of meaning, particularly in fiction that thrives on ambiguity, reversal, and the interplay between human agency and apparent inevitability. By foregrounding the patient and backgrounding the agent, O. Henry linguistically enacts the very ironic twists that define his narrative art.

Conclusion. Ergative verbs in English exhibit key semantic characteristics centered on patient-focus, spontaneous change, and agent defocusing, making them ideal for literary expression of irony and transformation. In O. Henry's selected works, these verbs enhance narrative ambiguity, reinforce thematic reversals, and contribute to stylistic brevity. This analysis demonstrates how ergative constructions function beyond syntax, serving as subtle tools for meaning-making in fiction. Future research could extend to comparative studies with other ironic writers or quantitative transitivity analysis of O. Henry's complete corpus.

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