

# Ergative Constructions in Mandarin

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## Abstract

This dissertation investigates the syntax and semantics of ergative verbs and ergative alternation patterns in Mandarin Chinese. Specifically, the major questions it aims to answer include: How ergative verbs and ergative constructions in Chinese are defined, characterized and classified? What factors are involved in determining the likelihood of a verb's participation in the ergative alternation? What generalizations can be made about the status of ergative syntax in Chinese against a broader cross-linguistic background?

It is argued that a unified constructionist approach with inputs from typology, lexical semantics and formal syntax may provide a more desirable solution to the aforementioned questions than previous studies. Drawing insights from recent typological research on inchoative/causative alternation pairs, this study first examines the semantics of ergative alternation with a set of Mandarin verbs. It is shown that the level of agentivity the agent has in the event, transferability of the agentivity, and the likelihood of spontaneous occurrence of the event are among the most important semantic factors conditioning the ergative alternation. The syntactic behaviors of the verbs are examined with three test frames, and explicit representations of their semantics are offered, employing a form of Minimal Recursion Semantics (MRS). Based on a fine-grained classification of the verbs and the constructions they can appear in, it demonstrates that different types of ergative verbs and ergative constructions in Chinese exhibit different markedness patterns, thus forming a continuum along both formal and semantic dimensions. Adapting the framework of Unification Construction Grammar (UCxG), the present work further investigates the conditions on ergative formation, arguing that the alternation is possible only when the semantic frame of a verb can unify with that of a relevant construction.

The research is further extended to cover the resultative compounds that may participate in ergative alternation, and two other related constructions. It concludes that all relevant constructions are linked to one other, forming a family of related types along an inheritance hierarchy.

Key words: Ergative Construction, Alternation, Markness, Causation, Construction Grammar