

The ergative-absolutive system

This is about sentences with nouns and **verbs** (action words), and how we know who is doing the action (and who they are doing it to). In English, we often use **word order** to tell us this information: think about the difference between “the bird ate the worm” and “the worm ate the bird”.

In Muruwari we use noun endings (suffixes) to tell us this information.

| Job in the sentence | Linguistic name | Abbreviation |
|--|--|--------------|
| Doer (the person or thing that does something) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ intransitive subject○ subject○ nominative○ absolutive | S |
| Doer-to (the person or thing that does something to another person or thing) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ transitive subject○ agent○ nominative○ ergative | A |
| Done-to (the person or thing that something is done to) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ object○ direct object○ patient○ accusative○ absolutive | O, P |

Green means intransitive subject: the **doer** in an intransitive sentence (a sentence where there is a doer noun but no done-to noun).

Red means transitive subject or agent: the **doer-to** in a transitive sentence (a sentence that has a doer-to noun and a done-to noun).

Blue means direct object or transitive object or patient: the **done-to** noun in a transitive sentence; the one having something done to it.

Murrawarri uses different patterns of suffixes (word endings) to show these different **S**, **A** and **O** jobs.

Note: Murrawarri uses a split System for suffixes, one for nouns and one for pronouns

Murrawarri uses the **ergative-absolutive** system for nouns.

Let's go back to our two sentences: “the bird ate the worm” and “the bird is flying”. An **ergative-absolutive** language would mark these sentences like this:

1. **The bird-ERG** ate **the worm-ABS**.
2. **The bird-ABS** is flying.

“The bird” in sentence 2 (the **intransitive** sentence) has the same suffix as “the worm” in sentence 1 (the **transitive** sentence). Linguists call it the **absolutive suffix** (or ABS). “The bird” in sentence 1 has a different suffix. Linguists call it the **ergative suffix** (or ERG).

In Murrawarri, the **doer** and the **done-to** (the **absolutives**) do not have any suffix at all. Linguists might call this a “bare” noun (a noun with no suffixes), “zero suffix” or “null marker”, or use the \emptyset symbol. This is common in many Australian Aboriginal languages. The important thing in these languages is marking doer-to nouns.

For example; look at these transitive sentences:

1. wangalaa **giiwii-nggu gaarn**
 chased **cat-ERG snake**
 ‘[The] **cat** chased [the] **snake**’.

2. wangalaa **giiwii gaarn-du**
 chased **cat snake-ERG**
 ‘[The] **snake** chased [the] **cat**’.

We can see that it does not matter if the **doer-to** is at the end of the sentence or in the middle: we know it is doing the action because it has the **-nggu** or **-du** ending. This is the ergative suffix.

The **done-to** in each sentence (“snake” in sentence 1 and “cat” in sentence 2) does not have any suffix. That’s because, in Murrawarri, the absolute is unmarked.

Note: There are five ergative suffix which change based on the last letters of the noun the suffix is attached to, but they mean the same thing.

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>-nggu</i> | <i>-du</i> | <i>-dhu</i> | <i>-dju</i> | <i>-u</i> |
| for nouns ending in i,a, u and y | for nouns ending in n | for nouns ending in nh | for nouns ending in nj | for nouns ending in l, rl, r, rr, rn |

Now look at this intransitive sentence in Muruwari:

3. **giiwii dhanggi**
cat ran
 ‘The cat ran’.

We can see that the **doer** does not need a special suffix: it is obvious that the cat is doing the running. **Cat** in sentence 3 looks the same as **cat** in sentence 2: they are both the absolute nouns in these sentences and, in Murrawarri, the absolute does not take a suffix.