Ergative verbs

An ergative verb is active in form but passive in meaning. In Arabic, they are called "افعال المطاوعة". Consider the following:

1. He opened the door.
2. The door opened.

In the second example, the meaning of the verb 'open' is passive because it is an ergative verb. In Arabic, we can translate the same example as:

3. (انفتح الباب)

These Arabic verbs are set in the form of "انفعل".

One of the characteristics of ergative verbs in English is that they accept transitivity. Take the following:

4. He broke the window.
5. The window broke.

In (4), the verb (break) is transitive since it takes the object (window). In (5), the verb (break) is ergative. Such verbs have the ability to transform a mono- transitive verb into intransitive. Such verbs differ from passive and active verbs in that the action is automatic, though with an external effect. Take for example the Arabic verb (انكسر) as in (انكسر القلم). Such Arabic verbs can be in the forms of (انفعل / افتعل/ فعلل / فعّل : فعل / استفعل / تفعلل/ تفعّل / تفاعل / تفعّل etc). Ergativity in Arabic means accepting the effect. One of their features in Arabic is that such verbs agree in meaning and form as in: (كسرت الاناء فانكسر) or they agree just in meaning as in (طردت الرجل فذهب). We cannot say (انطرد) in the second example.