Types of Case-Marking Systems

Case-marking systems are categorized by how the subject of a verb without an object (an intransitive verb) is marked, how the subject of a verb with an object (a transitive verb) is marked, and how the object of a transitive verb is marked. It is possible for a language not to mark case on noun phrases at all—in those languages you might view all three NPs as being marked the same way.

1. **Nominative-Accusative**
   The subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs are marked one way; the object of a transitive verb is marked another.

   **Example: Latin**
   a. Dominus venit. ‘The master came’
      Master-nom came
   b. Dominus amicum audit. ‘The master heard the friend’
      Master-nom friend-acc heard
   c. Amicus dominum audit. ‘The friend heard the master’
      Friend-nom master-acc heard

2. **Ergative-Absolutive**
   The subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb is marked one way; the subject of a transitive verb is marked another.

   **Example: Western Desert-Ooldea**
   a. tiṭi yulaŋu ‘The child cried’
      child cried
   b. tiṭiŋku papa pirina ‘The child scratched the dog’
      child-erg dog scratched
   c. papaŋku tiṭi paŋaŋu ‘The dog bit the child’
      dog-erg child bit

3. **Active**
   The subject of a transitive verb, the subject of an intransitive verb, and the object of a transitive verb are all marked differently.

   **Example: Nez Perce**
   a. Mary hiwaqsa:qa. ‘Mary woke up’
      Mary awoke
   b. Marynim ha:mane pamc’isa:qa. ‘Mary heard the man’
      Mary-tsubj man-obj heard
   c. Hamanim Maryne pamc’isa:qa. ‘The man heard Mary’
      man-tsubj Mary-obj heard