Handout 3: Unaccusativity

Seminar: The verb phrase and the syntax-semantics interface, Andrew McIntyre

1 Introduction

• The notion of unacceptability or split intransitivity resides in a distinction between two types of intransitive verbs:
  • Unergative verbs: NP argument is an agent/causer.
  • Unaccusative verbs: NP is a theme/patient and behaves like the object of a transitive verb in some ways. (Unacc. verbs are sometimes misleadingly called ergative.)
• Why unacceptability is important: (i) many grammatical phenomena are only possible with one of the classes of intransitives; (ii) the treatment of unacceptability has big implications for the nature of the overall theory of grammar.

2 Differences between the two classes

2.1 Auxiliary selection

• Some languages form perfect with have with unergatives and be with unaccusatives:

  (1) Sie hat [gearbeitet/telefoniert/gekokht/gegeracht] [German]
  she has worked/telephoned/cooked/smoked
  (2) Sie ist [gestorben/alt geworden/runtergefallen/aufgewacht]
  she ‘is’ died/become old/fallen down/woken up
• English used to have a be perfect but lost it. The last verbs to lose it were come & go:

  (3) a. Joy to the world, the Lord is come (Christmas carol)
  b. I am come that you might have life. (King James Bible)
  c. The wheel is come full circle (Shakespeare, King Lear)
  d. He is gone; He is decended from royalty (standard, fixed expressions)
• The situation in French is open to interpretation (see section 4).
  • See Sorace (2000) for a more nuanced picture of auxiliary selection.

A. Variable behavior verbs behave sometimes like unergatives and sometimes like unaccusatives. Can you find a reason for the variable behavior of the following German and Italian verbs:

  1. Wir haben geschwommen. 2. Wir sind ans Ufer geschwommen
  3. Bienen haben gesummt. 4. Bienen sind ins Fenster gesummt
  5. Giorgio ha corso per tre ore. 6. Giorgio è corso al cinema.
  a. We have swum we are to the bank swum bees have buzzed bees are into the window buzzed Giorgio has run for three hours Giorgio is run to the cinema

2.2 Resultative constructions

• Resultative predicates (AP/PP describing result of event) can relate to NP arguments of unaccusatives, but with unergatives, one must insert a reflexive or X’s way in object position. More on this below.

  (4) the box broke open; the door fell shut; the toast burnt black; the river froze solid
  (5) he worked himself to death; he shouted himself hoarse; he smoked himself sick
  (6) he [argued/talked/fought/thought] his way out of trouble

2.3 Inversion constructions

We sometimes find that a prepositional phrase or an expletive there occupies the position where we normally find the subject. The NP argument remains in the object position (behind the verb). This is typically possible with unaccusatives but not unergatives:

  (7) On the hill appeared a horse. Into the house ran a child. On the table stood a statue.

(8) There appeared a large ship in the distance. There occurred an accident. In the corner there stood a statue of Elvis.
(9) *In the kitchen cooked several people. *In the garden played some children.
(10) *There worked three people. *There sang a heavenly choir.
• Do not confuse these constructions with structures where a PP is sentence-initial, but the subject is in its normal position (witness the fact that the sentence is ok without PP):

  (11) in the kitchen [sitting] group of people] were playing cards

2.4 Adjectival use of perfect participles

• Some languages form perfect with be with unergatives and have with unaccusatives:

  (12) fallen leaves, sunken ships, wilted lettuce, increased prices, escaped convicts
  a. Joy to the world, the Lord is come (standard, fixed expressions)
  b. He is gone; He is decended from royalty
  c. It was working/cooking/dancing (=There was working/cooking/dancing)
  d. It was died/got old/fallen (=People were dying/aging/falling)

2.5 No passive with unaccusatives

• German allows passives with unergatives but resists them with unaccusatives. (This test is irrelevant in English since English disallows passives with any kind of intrans. verb.)

  (13) murdered people, stolen books, destroyed buildings, rebuilt houses

B. What do the above data tell us about adjectival participles?
C. What (if anything!) do the following participial constructions allow one to infer about the unacceptability of the verbs in question?

  1. a failed attempt 2. an overworked employee
  3. a run-away child 3. *a run child

2.6 Italian ne-clitisation

D. How does Italian ne in the data below relate to unacceptability? Can you find parallel constructions in French?

  (14) Es wurde gearbeitet/gekokht/getaart
  it was worked/cooked/danced
  (15) Es wurde gestorben/alt geworden/gefallen
  it was died/got old/fallen
  (16) Ne arrivano molti
  no. of. them arrived many
  Ne telefona molti
  no. of. them phoned many
  Ne saranno invitati molti
  no. of. them will be invited many

2.7 Perfect participle agreement in French

• Participle agrees with NP/DP with unaccusatives but not unergatives in standard French. Cf. participle-object agreement (which, however, has extra condition that object must be to the left of the participle).

  (17) Elle est morte hier.
  (18) Elle a écrit pendant toute la journée.

E. How could the constructions below, called cognate object constructions, be used as an unacceptability test? Can you think of exceptions involving the verb die?

  1. I thought a strange thought. We fought the good fight. They danced a funny dance.
  2. *I arrived a late arrival. *The house exploded a nasty explosion. *It broke a nasty break
3. Unaccusativity

F. Some concepts are expressible by unaccusative verbs in some languages and by unergative verbs in others. Some linguists regard this as evidence against deriving unaccusativity from verb meaning. This conclusion would be disputed by most linguists who have worked on argument structure in detail. Can you find reasons for this in the following data involving "blush" and its translations.

1. I flushed my way through the day.
2. Dutch blozen forms its perfect with have
3. Italian arrossire (rosso 'red') forms a be-perfect
4. German rot werden 'turn red' and erödten 'blush' take the be-perfect.

G. The data below involving the expressions sod all ('nothing') have been used as an argument for the unaccusative hypothesis (McCloskey 1993). How would the argument work?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>a. Sod-all happens around here.</td>
<td>b. Sod-all else grows in my garden.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Sod-all ever changes around here.</td>
<td>d. Sod-all emerged from the discussions.</td>
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<td>e. Sod-all else came my way, so I took the job as a laveratory cleaner.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>a. *Sod-all would make us turn back now.</td>
<td>b. *Sod-all supports this roof.</td>
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<td>c. *Sod-all could destroy these walls.</td>
<td>d. *Sod-all would control this mob.</td>
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<td>e. *Sod-all could refute that argument.</td>
<td>f. *Sod-all ever make me trust them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>a. They wrote sod-all this year.</td>
<td>b. They've done sod-all about this mob.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. I know sod-all about connectionism.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>a. Sod-all has been done about this problem.</td>
<td>b. Sod-all was achieved by this.</td>
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<td>c. Sod-all has been said about unemployment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Sod-all was written about this.</td>
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H. If 1 and 2 below were the only relevant data, how would -er affixation relate to unaccusativity? 3 gives exceptions. Hard question: can you think of reasons for the acceptability difference between 2 and 3?

1. worker, thinker, speaker, runner
3. late arriver, early riser

3. The syntactic approach to unaccusativity

- The Unaccussative Hypothesis (also called the Split Intransitivity Hypothesis): NP argument of unaccusatives starts in object position and moves to subject position (accepted by many Chomskian linguists). Example (with syntax simplified):

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<td>(23)</td>
<td>[s [TP The plate, VP broke t]]</td>
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|   | Hence the plate starts in the same position as it would in the transitive (causative) variant of the sentence:
| (24) | [s [TP Someone, VP broke [TP the plate]]] |

- See Van Valin 1990 for a critique of the syntactic interpretation of unaccusativity.

- Among the simpler arguments in favour of the Unaccussative Hypothesis:
  - Inversion constructions: the NP argument of the verb appears in the position where you would normally find an object. This is easy to explain if we assume that the NP argument of unaccusatives is inserted in the object position, but cannot move to the subject position because the PP/there blocks that position.
  - Resultatives: a common idea is that resultative phrases can only relate to a NP in object position (the Direct Object Restriction, Levin/Rappaport 1995). If we assume that the NP arguments of unaccusatives start in object position, then we can easily explain the facts about resultative phrases.

| (25) | I broke/smashed boxes open | [result phrase describes object] |

4. More on unaccusativity in French

- French be-perfect confined to the verbs in (29) (unless these are used transitively: je les ai retourné/passeyés).

| (29) | arriver, décéder, descendre, entrer, monter, naître, passer, rester, retourner, sortir, tomber, venir (also prefix verbs based on them like rentrer, devenir, parvenir, revenir) |

- Otherwise be-perfect only found with reflexive verbs;

| (30) | a. Il s’est abîmé. b. Il s’est lavé les mains. |
|   | Unlike e.g. German, Italian, French has many state change verbs with have-perfect: |

| (31) | a. Il s’est cassé trois branches. b. *Il ont cassé trois branches. |
|   | c. *Sod-all could destroy these walls. d. *Sod-all would control this mob. |
|   | Unlike e.g. German, Italian, French has many state change verbs with have-perfect: |

| (32) | a. Il s’est cassé trois branches. b. *Il ont cassé trois branches. |
|   | c. I know sod-all about connectionism. |

- Labelle (1992) argues that French state change verbs which lack se are unergative rather than unaccusative. She shows that the auxiliary selection test is not the only unaccusativity test that they fail. Examples:

| (33) | a. *Sod-all would make us turn back now. b. *Sod-all supports this roof. |
|   | Unlike e.g. French, Italian, has many state change verbs with have-perfect: |

| (34) | a. Il s’est cassé trois branches. b. *Il ont cassé trois branches. |
|   | c. Marie vieillit. d. Marie se vieillit. |
|   | Labelle argues that the intransitive state change verbs express processes that can happen autonomously, spontaneously, without external influence, while the reflexive state change verbs express changes which have some (possibly unexpressed) cause external to the argument in question. Some of her evidence:

| (35) | a. Jean (*se) rougit. b. Il vit le mouchoir *(se) rougir soudain. |
|   | Marie vieillit. Marie se vieillit. =is making herself look older |

J. If Labelle is right in the last point, how would it connect with the observation that state change verbs with se behave like unaccusatives and those without se like unergatives?


5. References