Handout 3: Unaccusativity
Seminar *The syntax-semantics interface: Argument structure*, Andrew McIntyre

1 Introduction
- The notion of **unaccusativity** 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 unaccusativity is important: (i) many grammatical phenomena are only possible with one of the classes of intransitives; (ii) the treatment of unaccusativity 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/gekocht/geraucht}   [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; She is descended from royalty   (standard, fixed expressions)
- Optional: See section 4 on the rather different situation in French.
- 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
    We   have swum   we are to.the bank swum
  3. Bienen **haben** gesummt.   4. Bienen **sind** ins Fenster gesummt
    bees have buzzed   bees are into.the window buzzed
  5. Giorgio **ha** corso per tre ore.   6. Giogio **è** corso al cinema.
    Giorgio has run for three hours   Giogio is run to.the cinema

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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** [subject a group of people] were playing cards

2.4 Adjectival use of perfect participles
- (12) fallen leaves, sunken ships, wilted letuce, increased prices, escaped convicts
- (13) *worked people, *sung children, *dined people, *thought philosophers
- (14) murdered people, stolen books, destroyed buildings, rebuilt houses

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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 unaccusativity of the verbs in question?
  1. a failed attempt   2. an overworked employee
  3. a run-away child   4. *a run child

2.5 No passive with unaccusatives
- German impersonal passives are less acceptable with unaccusatives than with unergatives. (This is irrelevant in English since English disallows passives from intransitive verbs.)
- (15) Es wurde gearbeitet/gekocht/getanzt
      It was worked/cooked/danced   (=There was working/cooking/dancing)
- (16) ??Es wurde gestorben/alt geworden/gefallen
      it was died/got old/fallen   (=People were dying/aging/falling)

2.6 Italian *ne*-cliticisation

D. How does Italian *ne* in the data below relate to unaccusativity?

- (17) Ne   arrivano   molti
      of.them   arrived   many
- (18) *Ne   lavorano   molti
      of.them   worked   many
- (19) Ne   saranno   invitati   molti
      of.them   will.be[passive] 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).
- (20) Elle est   mort<u>e</u>   hier.
      she   is   died(<u>fem</u>) yesterday
- (21) Elle a   écrit   pendant toute la journée.
      she   has written   during the whole day
- (22) La porte ? Je l'ai   ouvert<u>e</u>   ce matin.
      The door ? I   it.have opened(<u>fem</u>) this morning

E. How could the constructions below, called **cognate object** constructions, be used as an unaccusativity 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. *It broke a nasty break

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 blushed my way through the day.*
2. Dutch *blozen* forms its perfect with *have*
3. Italian *arrosire* (<*rosso* 'red') forms a *be*-perfect
4. German *rot werden* 'turn red' and *erröten* '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? (*Sod all* can be replaced by *f*ck all* and *b*gger all* with the same results.)

1. a. Sod-all happens around here.   b. Sod-all else grows in my garden.
   c. Sod-all ever changes around here.   d. Sod-all emerged from the discussions.
   e. Sod-all else came my way, so I took the job as a lavatory cleaner.
2. a. *Sod-all would make us turn back now. b. *Sod-all supports this roof.
   c. *Sod-all could destroy these walls.   d. *Sod-all would control this mob.
   e. *Sod-all could refute that argument.   f. *Sod-all could ever make me trust them.
3. a. They wrote sod-all this year.   b. They've done sod-all about this.
   c. I know sod-all about connectionism.
4. a. Sod-all has been done about this problem.   b. Sod-all was achieved by this.
   c. Sod-all has been said about unemployment.   d. Sod-all was written about this.

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
2. *arriver, *die-er, *happener, *enterer, *faller, *remainer
3. late arriver, early riser

3 The syntactic approach to unaccusativity

- THE UNACCUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS (also called THE SPLIT INTRANSITIVITY HYPOTHESIS): NP argument of unaccusatives starts in object position and moves to subject position (accepted by many Chomskyan linguists). Example (with syntax simplified):

(23) [s [NP The plate]ᵢ [VP broke tᵢ]]

- Hence *the plate* starts in the same position as it would in the transitive (causative) variant of the sentence:

(24) [s [NP Someone] [VP broke [NP the plate]]]

- See Van Valin 1990 for a critique of the syntactic interpretation of unaccusativity.
- Among the simpler arguments in favour of the Unaccusativity 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]

(26) **I broke/smashed boxes tired*   [intended meaning 'I broke/smashed boxes, becoming tired'; result phrase can't describe subject]

(27) *She drank/worked herself to death*   [reflexive inserted so that there's an object which the result phrase can describe]

(28) *The box broke/fell/split open*   [result phrase describes NP, so this could be an argument that the NP is an object]

I. Is a theory using a thematic hierarchy (handout 2) compatible with the syntactic unaccusative hypothesis as described here? If not, why not?

4 Appendix: Another case study: unaccusativity in French

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

(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** abêti.   b. Il **s'est** lavé les mains.

- Unlike e.g. German, Italian, French has many state change verbs with *have*-perfect:

(31) Ils ont grandi/fondu/pourri/séché/vieilli...

- 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:

(32) a.   Il s'est cassé trois branches.   [inversion construction]
        b.   *Il ont cassé trois branches.

(33) a.   Il s'en est cassé trois.   [*en*-cliticisation]
        b.   *Il s'en est cassé trois.

- 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:

(34) a.   Jean (*se) rougit.
        b.   Il vit le mouchoir *(se) rougir soudain.

(35) a.   Marie vieillit.
        b.   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?

- See Legendre & Smolensky (2009) for a critique of Labelle (1992).

5 References

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