θ Roles and Verb Types: A Refinement

Everything on this handout is relevant for the final exam!

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1 The Problem

Remember that on a previous handout we distinguished **unergatives** and **unaccusatives** as subclasses of **intransitive** verbs by the semantic role they assign to their sole argument:

- **unergatives**: AGENT role (external argument)

- **unaccusatives**: (also called **ergatives**): NON-AGENT role (e.g., PATIENT – internal argument)

- **transitives**: AGENT role + NON-AGENT role

In passives, the AGENT role is deleted, and the passivized verb behaves much like an unaccusative (having only one, namely an internal/NON-AGENT argument). We correlated unaccusativity with formation of the perfect using the *be*-auxiliary like Ger. *sein*, It. *essere*. Consider the contrast in:

(1) Peter **ist** gefallen. (NON-AGENTive, not volitionally controlled → unaccusative verb)

(2) Peter **hat** eingekauft. (AGENTive, volitionally controlled → unergative verb)

We noticed, however, that this is not a good test for English (where there only is one perfect auxiliary), and that it gives unintuitive results for **verbs of motion** like *gehen* which all take *sein* (same in Italian), but seem to refer to actions/events volitionally controlled by an AGENT. *Walking* does not just happen to you, you **do** it. Because of the auxiliary test, we classified them arbitrarily as unaccusatives.

2 Better Tests

We now introduce two new tests for unergativity/unaccusativity, which function well in English, and which will lead us to a reevaluation.

A. The Unaccusativity Test: If you can form an attributive adjectival passive participle from an intransitive verb, it is an unaccusative. This follows nicely from the idea that passivization leaves over only an argument bearing internal/NON-AGENT role:

(3)　the **fallen** woman ✓ passive participle ok → unaccusative

(4)　* the **shopped** woman ↯ p.p. not ok → unergative

B. The Unergativity Test: If you can form a *do/perform/carry out* + N_{V_i} paraphrase for an intransitive verb V_i (using some event nominalization N_{V_i} of it), it is an unergative. Since the verbs mentioned are prototypical active/agentive verbs, this seems plausible. Notice that the paraphrase may sound unusual even if it is ok, but it will be grammatical in the right cases.

(5)　* He did a fall. ↯ paraphrase not ok → unaccusative

(6)　He did a shopping. ✓ paraphrase ok → unergative

3 Reconsidering Verbs of Motion

We will now discover that verbs of motion like *walk* pattern as unergatives according to the new tests, contradicting the pattern we discovered using the auxiliary test!

(7)　Shelley walks. / Shelley carries out a walk. ✓ paraphrase → unergative

(8)　* The walked girl. ↯ p.p. → unergative

Since the new tests have solid semantic grounds and seem to work language-independently, we now adopt this classification and call verbs of motion unaccusatives. We should therefore reconsider the situation in German, Italian, French, etc. where the auxiliary test gives the right results **except** in the case of verbs of motion. To solve the mystery, we look at **telic verbs of motion**, verbs which describe motion directed towards a certain goal. Telic verbs of motion have have an intrinsic endpoint in some way. Let's take *arrive* as a typical telic verb and *dance* as a prototypical non-telic verb.

(9)　* the danced woman ↯ → unergative

(10)　She did a dance. ✓ → unergative

(11)　the arrived woman ✓ → unaccusative

(12)　* She did an arrival. ↯ → unaccusative

There's a simple solution: It is generally assumed that in the languages under discussion (French, German, Italian) the *be* auxiliary (originally the marker of unaccusativity) was generalized to all verbs of motion, although only the telic ones are true unaccusatives. This means that we cannot decide simply on the basis of the θ semantics of a verb which auxiliary it will take. So, to some extent, the information which auxiliary is needed must be **lexical**. Notice that in French, the list of verbs which take *être* is even much smaller and completely arbitrary from a synchronic point of view.