

# Unaccusativity Mismatches and Unaccusativity Diagnostics from Derivational Morphology

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## 1. Introduction: The intransitivity split and unaccusativity mismatches

The present paper investigates tests employed to diagnose the split between unergative and unaccusative predicates in English and Polish. Particular attention is given to conflicting predictions of two or more unaccusativity tests. It is argued that although word-formation processes are constrained by semantic, morphological, and pragmatic restrictions, they can serve as useful unaccusativity diagnostics.

As has frequently been observed in the literature (Perlmutter 1978, Hoekstra 1984, Burzio 1986), monadic (i.e., single argument) verbs fall cross-linguistically into two classes, referred to as unaccusatives (ergatives) and unergatives.<sup>1</sup> The single argument of an unergative verb exhibits agent-like properties and behaves syntactically like the subject of a transitive verb. In the case of ergative (unaccusative) predicates, the sole argument surfaces in the subject position, but

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1. In typological studies on ergativity, e.g., in Dixon 1994, the term “split-S systems” is used with reference to languages in which intransitive verbs are divided into two sets, depending on the syntactic behavior and/or morphological marking of their subjects.

patterns syntactically with objects of transitive verbs. Semantically it denotes a participant which undergoes a change of state or location, hence carries the thematic role of Patient or Theme.

Some languages signal the distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs in their inflectional morphology (namely case marking or verb agreement). In Lakhota, for instance, the same inflectional ending marks objects of transitive verbs and surface subjects of unaccusative verbs (Grimshaw 1987). In other languages the distinction between unergative and unaccusative predicates is reflected in their felicity in particular syntactic constructions. As observed in Dutch, German, and Italian, among others, unaccusative predicates select the *be*-type auxiliary verbs in perfect tenses while unergative and transitive predicates require *have*-type auxiliaries. This is exemplified in (1) for Dutch (cf. van der Putten 1997: 120):

- (1) a. Jan is gevallen. (unaccusative)  
       Jan is fallen
- b. Jan heeft gewerkt. (unergative)  
       Jan has worked
- c. Jan heeft een taart gegeten. (transitive)  
       Jan has one cake eaten

Another syntactic test for the unaccusative status of a verb, proposed for Dutch and German in Perlmutter 1978, is its inability to occur in the impersonal passive construction. Unergative verbs are felicitous in impersonal sentences, as is shown for Dutch in (2) after Mulder (1992: 23):

- (2) a. Er werd gelachen (door Jan). (unergative)  
       there was laughed (by Jan)
- b. \*Er werd gevallen. (unaccusative)  
       there was fallen

Some other syntactic constructions found to be sensitive to the distinction between unergative and unaccusative verbs include *ne*-cliticization in Italian (Burzio 1986) and locative inversion,<sup>2</sup> investigated at length for Italian, Spanish,

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2. *Ne*- 'of-them' can be extracted out of a DP in Italian if this DP appears as a direct object of a transitive verb or as a postverbal subject of an unaccusative verb, hence the contrast between *Ne arriveranno molti* 'lit. of-them will arrive many' containing an unaccusative verb and \**Ne telefoneranno molti* 'lit. of-them will telephone many' with an unergative verb (cf. Burzio 1986: 22ff.). In the locative inversion construction a locative phrase occurs sentence-initially while a surface subject DP follows an unaccusative verb. Unergative verbs are believed not to occur in this construction (but see section 2 for some comments).

English, and Russian (cf. Burzio 1986, Torrego 1989, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995, Babyonyshev 1996). The standard analysis of the intransitivity split within GB theory, as outlined in Burzio 1986, associates unaccusative and unergative verbs with distinct syntactic configurations, given in (3). The sole argument of an unergative verb is its external argument while an unaccusative verb takes an internal argument (and lacks the external one).<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. NP [V]<sub>VP</sub> Peter laughed. (unergative)  
 b. [V NP]<sub>VP</sub> Peter arrived. (unaccusative)

It was proposed in the literature on the subject as early as 1980 that processes of derivational morphology are also sensitive to the distinction between both classes of intransitive verbs. Horn (1980) argues that the rules of *-ee* and *-able* suffixation, reversative *un-*, and *re-* prefixation in English select either unaccusative or transitive verbs as their bases, as in (4a). They cannot operate on unergative bases, as in (4b).

- (4) a. escapee, shrinkable, unfreeze, reerupt (unaccusative bases)  
 b. \*sneeze, \*jumpable, \*unlaugh, \*resmile (unergative bases)

Burzio (1986), on the other hand, points out that the English agentive/instrumental *-er* suffix attaches to transitive or unergative bases, but not to unaccusative verbs.

- (5) a. jumper, singer, teacher (unergative or transitive)  
 b. \*dier, \*arriver, \*vanisher (unaccusative)

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3. Some other ways of representing the intransitivity split syntactically have been proposed in the literature. The syntactic configuration associated with unergative verbs in Hale and Keyser 1993, 1998 contains a phonologically empty verb head which selects a nominal complement (to be incorporated into the selecting head) but projects no Specifier position. Unaccusative verbs are analyzed as taking an adjectival complement (which conflates with the null verb head) and projecting a Specifier position for the internal argument. Babyonyshev (1996) postulates that unergative and transitive verbs in Russian have a “little vP” projection above VP, which is absent in the case of unaccusative verbs. Borer (1998) claims that unaccusative verbs require the presence of the aspectual projection AspP(EM) in their syntactic derivation. This aspectual projection gives an argument that passes through it a delimited or measured-out interpretation. In Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998 unaccusative verbs are associated with “little v1” (standing for [+external causer]) while unergative verbs have “little v2” (standing for [+internal causer]).

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