

Unaccusativity handout

1. An **unaccusative** verb is a verb that has an internal argument (or arguments) but lacks an external argument. In languages that use both *have* and *be* as auxiliary verbs for perfect/past tense, it is common for unaccusatives to take *be* and unergatives to take *have*. One way to detect unaccusatives in English is to look for verbs with causative/unaccusative alternations:

- (1) a. The navy sank the submarine. [patient direct object]
b. The submarine sank. [patient subject]
- (2) a. We closed the door.
b. The door closed.
- (3) a. The waiter dropped a glass.
b. A glass dropped.

A **raising** verb is simply an unaccusative verb that takes an infinitival IP argument. Raising verbs are a type of unaccusative verb.

2. An **unergative** verb is a verb that has an external argument but lacks an internal argument.

The misleading term "transitive"

The term **transitive** traditionally picks out verbs that have an internal argument. In the modern world, the term becomes confusing, since unaccusatives don't "look" transitive, but really are. We will try to use the clumsy term "non-unaccusative intransitives" wherever confusion might otherwise result.

Unaccusatives do not take passive morphology

Properties of passive morphology:

1. A passive verb does not assign accusative case [but see below].
2. A passive verb does not select an external argument in Spec,VP.

In some languages, passive morphology can yield property 1 vacuously, i.e. passive verbs do not need to license accusative case in the first place.

- (4) Es wurde getanzt.
It was danced.
'[unspecified] danced]
- (5) a. Er wordt hier door de jonge lui veel gedanst.
it becomes here by the young people much danced
'There's a lot of dancing by young people here.'
- b. Hier wordt (er) veel gewerkt.
here becomes there much worked
'Here people work a lot.'
- (6) Bylo napisano ob ètom v gazete.
was written about this in the paper
'[unspecified] wrote about this in the paper'

- (7) Il a été tiré sur le bateau.
it was shot at the boat
'[unspecified] shot at the boat'

In most/all languages, passive cannot achieve point 2 vacuously. Verbs that do not select an external argument in their active form do not have a passive form.

[This phenomenon is called the "1 Advancement Exclusiveness Principle", for reasons we will not worry about here.]

- (8) a. De lijken zijn al gerot/ ontbonden.
the corpses are already rotted/decomposed
b. * Door de lijken werd al gerot/ ontbonden.
- (9) a. In de zomer wordt er hier vaak gezwommen.
'In the summer it is swum here frequently.'
- b. * In de zomer wordt er hier vaak verdronken.
'In the summer it is drowned here frequently.'

Auxiliary verb selection

- (10) **Italian**
a. Giovanni è arrivato. 'John arrived' (**be**)
b. Il nave è affondato. 'The ship sank' (**be**)
c. Giovanni **ha** telefonato. 'John telephoned' (**have**)
d. Giovanni **ha** letto il libro. 'John read the book' (**have**)
- (11) **Dutch**
a. Jan is gevallen. 'John fell' (**be**)
b. Jan heeft gelachen. 'John laughed' (**have**)
- (12) **Perfective Auxiliary Selection in Old Japanese**
[K. Takezawa (1989 talk; citing Yoshida 1973)]:
a. **-tsu**: oki-tsu ('have placed'), tsuge-tsu ('have told'), kiki-tsu ('have listened'), chirash-tsu ('have scattered' trans.), shi-su ('have done'), etc. [normal transitives, unergatives]
b. **-nu**: ki-nu ('have come'), nari-nu ('have become'), he-nu ('have passed'), sugi-nu ('have elapsed'), chiri-nu ('have fallen/scattered' intr.), etc. [unaccusatives]

If a language uses both *have* and *be* as auxiliary verbs for a past or perfect tense, it will use *be* only for unaccusatives.

- Some languages use *have* for all and only unergatives and use *be* for all and only unaccusatives (e.g. **Italian, Dutch**)
- Some languages use *have* for some unaccusatives (e.g. **French**)
- Some languages use only *have* or only *be*:
Spanish, English: always *have*
Hindi, Serbo-Croatian: always *be*

A famous argument that *be*-verbs are unaccusative in Italian: *ne*-cliticization

Italian: Finite I may license nominative on DPs that remain in VP. Never mind the details for now.

Key fact:

A nominative DP argument of a passive or unaccusative verb behaves like a direct object in allowing and requiring the clitic *ne* ('of them') when the DP is a "bare quantifier".

Conclusion:

In a language like Italian in which movement of a nominative to Spec, IP is not forced, you see the argument DP of unaccusatives and passives in direct object position.

(13) **Direct-object bare quantifiers require *ne***

a. Gianni inviterà molti studenti.
Gianni will-invite many students

b. *Gianni inviterà molti.
Gianni will-invite many.

c. Gianni **ne** inviterà **molti**.
Gianni of-them will-invite many

(14) **Preverbal subject bare quantifiers do not allow *ne*.**

- a. ***Molti ne** inviteranno Gianni.
 - b. ***Molti ne** telefoneranno.
 - c. ***Molti ne** saranno invitati.
 - d. ***Molti ne** affondarono.
- [all ok without *ne*]

(15) **Post-verbal nominative bare quantifiers with passive and unaccusative verbs not only allow, but require *ne*.**

- a. **Ne** saranno invitati **molti**.
- b. **Ne** affondarono **molti**.

(16) **It's not just a matter of preceding vs. following the verb: a postverbal nominative bare quantifier with an unergative verb disallows *ne* (and is actually bad except in particular circumstances).**

- a. Telefoneranno molti studenti.
'Many students will phone.'
- b. *Ne telefoneranno molti studenti.

Burzio's generalization

(17) **Burzio's generalization**

If a verb licenses accusative case, it has an external argument.

That is, there is no verb YPEN (cf. *open*), used as follows:

(18) *It ypened the door. [dummy *it*]
'The door opened'.

True? Seems to be true except when there are two objects. Then one of them may receive accusative case from V even though V lacks an external argument:

(19) a. John struck Mary [as __ intelligent].
b. *Mary was struck as intelligent by John.

(20) a. Sally's name escaped me for some reason.
b. *I was escaped by Sally's name for some reason.

(21) a. We reached Iceland the next morning.
b. *Iceland was reached by us the next morning.

(22) a. Bill got a bad cold.
b. *A bad cold was gotten by Bill.

(23) a. Bill has a new car.
b. *A new car is had by Bill.

Unaccusativity in English:

(24) a. *The universe is existed.
b. *John was arrived.

(25) a. *It is existed by the universe.
b. *It was arrived by John.

Excluded because of the ban on vacuous elimination of the external argument?
Or excluded because English disallows vacuous absorption of accusative case?

One can distinguish these possibilities with unaccusative verbs that take a PP argument in addition to an NP argument. Due to a quirk of English, these verbs should be able to undergo a process that does perhaps give them an accusative case to assign.

In English, if a verb selects a case-licensing P, V+P have a passive form. V+P seem to form a single word in such cases. What seems to happen is that P "incorporates" into V, and the "de-accusativizing" effect of passive morphology affects V+P as a whole.

This construction is called a *pseudo-passive* (though there's nothing "pseudo" about them!).

- (26) a. The table was sat on by Fred.
b. Mary has been spoken to.

Unaccusatives:

- (27) a. *The package was accumulated on by dust.
b. *The room was burst in by the bubble.
c. *The dome was collapsed under by the model.
d. *The bridge was existed under by trolls.
e. *The bed was fallen on by dust.
f. *The hill was grown on by grass.
g. *The hall was increased in by the noise.
h. *The oven was melted in by the ice cube.
i. *The woods were vanished in by Little Red Riding Hood.

[Perlmutter and Postal (1984) "The 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law" in D. Perlmutter and C.G. Rosen, eds. *Studies in Relational Grammar 2*, University of Chicago Press]

Ambiguous verbs:

- (28) a. The table was sat on by Fred.
b. *The table was sat on by the lamp.
- (29) a. The closet was slid into by Mary.
b. *The closet was slid into by the soap.

Agent->subject // Patient->Direct object

A *ne*-like test for unaccusativity in English: Resultative constructions

- (30) **A resultative predicate modifies the underlying direct object of an active verb, not an object of a preposition.**
a. Tom cut the steak into slivers.
b. *Tom cut into the steak into slivers.
- (31) a. The GE 1521 will blow your hair dry in seconds!
b. *The GE 1521 will blow at your hair dry in seconds!
- (32) **A direct object that becomes a subject in a passive sentence counts:**
a. The steak was cut into slivers
b. *BUT*: *The steak was cut into into slivers.
- (33) **But a subject that has never been an object may take a resultative:**
a. *John shouted the news hoarse.
b. *The navy sank the ships to the bottom of the sea.

- (34) **Some subjects of active verbs take a resultative; these are the unaccusatives!**

- a. The rug shook clean.
b. The door came open.
c. The cookie broke into pieces.

- (35) **A subject of an unergative does not count:**

- a. *John danced tired.
b. *They cried wet.
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