

Why Does IT Always Rain on Me?

On Weather Verbs

1. Aim

-to discuss a possible argument structure representation for weather verbs in the framework proposed by Hale & Keyser, in “Prolegomenon to a Theory of Argument Structure” (2002): V+ N (*rain*= ‘FALL RAIN’)

Question: Is this analysis cross-linguistically adequate in the case of those languages which have weather verbs (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian a. o.)?

N. B. There are various ways of talking about the weather, even in languages which have weather verbs:

- (i) impersonal constructions (*Piove., It rains.*)
- (ii) weather paraphrases (*Tombe la pluie.*)
- (iii) extraposed ‘subject’ constructions (*Il a plu toute la journée une petite pluie fine., It rained a heavy rain.*)
- (iv) agent constructions (*The Lord thundered from heaven., He rained his tears on me.*)

2. The Data:

2.1. Weather Verbs in Germanic languages

2.1.1. Weather Verbs in English:

- (a) which take the expletive pronoun ‘it’:

-to rain: *It rains.*

-to snow: *It snows.*

-to hail: *It's hailing.*

-to drizzle: *It's drizzling.*

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-to blow: *The wind is blowing.*

-to shine: *The sun is shining.*

(c) which take as subject either the expletive 'it' or a nominal:

-to pour: *It's pouring./ The rain is pouring.*

-in the above cases ((b) and (c)), the nominal occupying the subject position is not an Agent, but it can very well be an Agent: *God will rain a heavy rain on you if you don't start smiling.* (transitive structures), *whenever God shines His Light on me* (Van Morrison)

2.1.2. Weather Verbs in German:

(a) which take an expletive pronoun:

- *regnen*-to rain: *es regnet heute* (it is raining today).

--*schneien*- to snow: *es wird morgen schneien* (it will snow tomorrow)

-*blitzen*-to flash: *es blitzt und donnert* (it flashes and fulminates)

--to hail: *es hagelt*

-to drizzle: *es nieselt.*

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-*wehen*-to blow: *ein heftiger Wind weht* (a heavy wind blows)

-*scheinen* -to shine: *die Sonne scheint* (the sun shines)

(c) which take as subject either the expletive 'it' or a nominal

- in colloquial German, (1) alternates with (2):

(1) *es regnet schon wieder*
it rains already again

(2) *das regnet schon wieder!*

this rains already again

(1) is the neutral way of talking about the weather; the subject "es" is the standard German expletive pronoun that also shows up in constructions such as "es gibt Probleme" (it gives problems; there are problems) or "es wird getanzt" (it is danced, one dances).

-in (2), "es" is replaced by the demonstrative pronoun "das". (2) expresses strong negative feelings about the weather (and those living in Central Europe know why) and cannot be used as a neutral statement

-the construction is restricted to atmospheric predicates

-it may also express surprise:

(3) *das regnet ja nicht mehr!*

this rains particle no longer

(yesterday's standard utterance)¹

2.1.3. Weather Verbs in Dutch

Dutch has a system similar to German in that HET and DAT can alternate (both being translations for

English 'it' as in 'it rains', but the latter being emphatic).

BUT in Dutch dialects, not in standard Dutch

-the use of DAT is absolutely impossible in the standard language (ABN = Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands)²

2.1.4. Weather Verbs in Icelandic

-Hoeskuldur Thrainsson points out that in Icelandic, one can either have the regular dummy "thadh" 'it, there' or "hann" 'he'

-differences between the regular expletive and this weather-*he*:

-stylistic difference between the two, the latter being somewhat more colloquial

-clear syntactic difference

-semantic difference – somewhat similar to the difference between the use of "es" and "das" in impersonal constructions in German

- a sentence like (4) would be more neutral than (5), the latter expressing "negative feelings about the weather":

¹ Jan Olsen olsen%unipas.fmi.uni-passau.de@RICEVM1.RICE.EDU, <http://linguistlist.org/issues/2/2-340.html>

² <http://linguistlist.org/issues/2/2-340.html>

(4) *Thadh er faridh adh rigna*

it is started to rain

'It's raining'

(5) *Hann er farinn adh rigna*

he is started to rain

'Oh, sh*t, it's raining again!'

-a possible explanation: when the rain (snow, etc) bothers people, they need someone to get angry with; by using the personal pronoun "hann" 'he' instead of "thadh", they make up an enemy (God?)

-the difference in meaning is not clear; (4) can also have a negative meaning, and (5) can be a neutral statement BUT insofar as there is any difference, "hann" is more negative than "thadh" in weather constructions³

2.2. Weather Verbs in Romance languages

2.2.1. Weather Verbs in Italian:

-Italian-*pro*-drop language

-weather verbs

(a) which take *pro* as subject:

-piovere (rain): *Piove*.

-nevicare (snow): *Nevica*.

-grandinare (hail): *Grandina*.

-piovigginare (drizzle): *Pioviggina*.

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-soffiare (blow): *Il vento soffia*. 'The wind blows.'

-brillare (shine): *Il sole brilla*. 'The sun shines.'

(c) which take as subject either the expletive 'it' or a nominal (?)

-two possible constructions: 'fare + weather expressions (N, A)' (6), 'essere + weather expression' (*c'è*) (7)

³ <http://linguistlist.org/issues/2/2-340.html>

- (6) a. *Che tempo fa?* (How is the weather?)
 b. *Fa bel tempo.* (The weather is nice.)
 c. *Fa cattivo tempo.* (The weather is bad.)
 d. *Ha fatto caldo.* (It has been warm.)
 e. *Qui fa sempre freddo.* (It's always cold here.)
 f. *In primavera fa sempre fresco.* (In spring it's always cool.)

(7) a. *Oggi c'è il sole.* ('Today there is the sun.' = it is sunny.) vs. *Fa caldo.*

b. *BBRRRRR ... Mamma mia, ma c'è un freddo bestiale là fuori !!!!!*
 ('Brrrrr...mamma mia, there's a terrible cold outside.')

2.2.2. Weather Verbs in Spanish

Spanish-*pro*-drop

-weather verbs: (a) which take *pro* as subject:

-> *lluvia* (rain)

-> *nieve* (snow)

-> *tronar*: *Trueno.* = It is thundering./ It thunders.

-> *lloviznar*: *Llovizna.* = It is drizzling./ It drizzles

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-*Il vento sopla.* = The wind is blowing.

-*El sol brilla.* = The sun is shining.

-three possible weather constructions: making use of the verb *hacer* (8), the verb *hay* (9), the verb *estar* (10):

(8) *Hace frío.* = It's cold.

Hace calor. = It's hot.

Hace viento. = It's windy.

Hace sol. = It's sunny.

Hace buen tiempo. = The weather is good.

Hace mal tiempo. = The weather is bad.

Hace fresco. = It's brisk.

(9)

Hay niebla. = It's foggy.

Hay neblina =It's misty.

Hay sol. = The sun is shining.

Hay luna. = The moon is out.

Hay relámpagos. = It's lightning.

Hay humedad. =It's humid.

Hay nubes. = It's cloudy.

Hay lluvias torrenciales. =It's pouring.

Hay un vendaval. =There's a windstorm.

Hay granizo. =It's hailing.

Hay lloviznas. =It's sprinkling.

(10) weather expressions that use the verb 'estar' along with an adjective:

Está oscuro. = It's dark.

Está nublado. =It's cloudy.

Está lluvioso. = It's raining.

2.2.3. Weather verbs in French

-weather verbs: (a) which take *pro* as subject:

->*pleuvoir*: Il pleut.

-> *neiger*: Il neige.

-> *tronar*: Truena.= It is thundering./ It thunders.

-> *lloviznar*: Llovizna.= It is drizzling./ It drizzles

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-*Il vento sopla.* =The wind is blowing.

-*El sol brilla.* = The sun is shining

-weather expressions using the verb 'faire'

(11) a. Quel temps fait-il ?

Il fait...

chaud=hot

froid=cold

frais=cool

beau= nice out

mauvais= bad weather

humide= humid

lourd= heavy

du vent= windy

du soleil= sunny

du brouillard= foggy

nuageux= cloudy

orageux= stormy

BUT

b. Il y a du soleil. = ‘There is sun’, =It is sunny.

2. 2. 4. Weather Verbs in Romanian

(a) which take *pro* as subject:

-ploua: *Plouă*. 'Rains.'

-ninge: *Ninge*. 'Snows.'

(b) which take a nominal as subject:

-bate/ suflă: *Suflă puternic vântul astăzi*. 'Blows heavily wind-the today.'

-străluci: *Soarele strălucește azi*. 'Sun-the shines today'

-weather expressions using the verb *a fi* (to be) (12), the verb *a se face* (to make) (13), the verb *to give* (14)

(12) *Este soare*. = 'Is sun'.

Este frig. = 'Is cold'.

Este cald. = 'Is warm'.

(13) *Se face frig*. = 'refl-CL makes cold.'

(14) *Dă cu ninsoare azi*. = 'Gives with snow today.'

2.2. 5. Weather Verbs in Latin

-> *pluit* = 'it has rained'

-> *tonuit* = 'it has thundered'

-> *ninxit* = 'it has snowed'

-impersonal weather verbs

BUT Q: Why would the clause feature a 3rd person form of the verb if there were no subject?
(Paul (1937:130-133))

Meillet 1937: the construction with subject was original (*Iove tonante*., *Iupiter pluvius*.)

-guided by the animistic concept that he ascribed to the early Indo-Europeans, who were assumed to explain natural phenomena by referring to gods and goddesses

-development from personal to impersonal

-a comeback to personal (religious explanation: in Christian times, *dominus*, *caelum* came to be used with weather verbs in Latin)

BUT counterarguments (Ruwet & Goldsmith (1991)):

-the majority of weather verbs are referred to without reference to a god-Agent or any other subject

-the occurrence of subjects is not systematic, neither cross-linguistically, nor within a given language (Greek, Sanskrit, Latin)

-verbs without an explicit subject-not uncommon

2.3. Weather Verbs in Chinese

-there are no weather verbs in Chinese, but weather expressions made up of the equivalent of the verb 'fall' and a noun related to the weather

(15) Jintian xia yu.

Today fall rain.

'It is raining today.'

(16) Dongtian xia xue.

Winter fall snow.

'It snows in the winter.'

3. Are Weather Verbs Unaccusative or Unergative?

-the traditional distinction between unergatives and unaccusatives-different semantic and syntactic properties (Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986, Chomsky 1981):

a. Unergatives:

-denote volitional acts

-their argument is the Agent of the event

-their argument has control over the event

-unergatives denote mainly atelic events

-at D-structure-an external argument but no internal argument:

(17) VP

/ \

NP V'

/ \

V

-can assign Accusative case in special configurations

e.g. *smile, laugh*

b. Unaccusatives:

-denote mainly non-volitional acts

-their argument is never the Agent

-their argument does not have control over the event

-unaccusatives denote mainly telic events

-at D-structure-an internal argument but no external argument:

(18)

VP

/ \

V'

/ \

V NP

-are unable to assign the Accusative case

[Burzio's Generalization: a verb which has no external argument cannot assign Accusative case.]

e.g. *freeze*

The difference between these verbs seems to lie in the status of the subject: whether it is an external argument or an internal argument.

Unaccusativity tests: *there*-sentences, locative inversion, resultatives, past participle used as a modifier inside NPs, auxiliary selection (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, Avram 2003)

English-specific tests

(i) *There*-sentences

Only prototypical unaccusatives (verbs of existence, verbs of appearance) can occur in *there*-sentences.

(19) a. *There rained a lot yesterday.

b. It rained a lot yesterday.

(ii) Locative inversion

Unergatives cannot occur in locative inversion constructions, only unaccusatives can.

(20) a. Outside poured a terrifying rain.

b. */??In our country snowed a lot this year.

(iii) Resultatives

(21) *It rained into oblivion.

-they behave like unaccusatives

(iv) Past Participle used as a modifier inside NPs (modifiers of 'subject')

The past participle of unergatives cannot be used as a modifier inside NPs.

(22) a. ???the rained rain

b. ?? the snowed snow

-different from "snowed inn", "snowed car"

(v) auxiliary selection

- in Italian, weather verbs can select both the verbs 'avoir' / 'avere' and 'être' / 'essere'

-the data => weather verbs sometimes behave like unaccusatives and sometimes like unergatives (in different languages, as well as in the same language) BUT mostly like unaccusatives!

-from a semantic point of view, weather verbs are unaccusatives (**It intentionally rained on us.*)

=>we have to take into account the fact that subjects of unergatives occupy a different position in the structure from 'subjects' of unaccusatives (SpecV versus complement of V)

-apart from intransitive uses, weather verbs can also enter other types of constructions (transitive, or with a prepositional complement a.o.), which might be thought to pose problems to our analysis of weather verbs as 'FALL SOMETHING.'

PROPOSAL:

-based on the fact that in a language like Chinese there are no weather verbs but, instead, a construction using the verb *fall* and a weather noun (*rain, snow*), and that weather sentences in various languages can be paraphrased using this construction => *rain*= 'FALL rain', *snow*= 'FALL snow'

-> Hale & Keyser, "Prolegomenon to a Theory of Argument Structure" (2002): a conflation theory of verb formation

(23) V

∧

V N

FALL rain

-we speak about the causative-inchoative transitivity alternation:

(24) a. The pot broke. (inchoative)

b. I broke the pot. (causative)

BUT (25) a. The engine coughed.

b. *I coughed the engine.

-this is captured by saying that:

(26) V

/ \

DP V

/ \

V R

the pot break

-the root requires a specifier (for them the Specifier is actually the ‘complement’)

(27) V

/ \

V R

cough

-the root does not require a specifier

-the causative-inchoative alternation-different from the unaccusative-unergative ‘alternation’ (e. g. a verb like *monter* can take either *avoir* or *être* in the *passé composé*) [the term ‘alternation’ is not even used in the last case]

-> What about weather verbs?

->Are they a case of inchoative-causative alternation?

-> Do they rather exemplify an unaccusative/ unergative ‘alternation’?

OR both?

(28) a. It rained.

b. *God rained it.

c. *The rain rained.

d. God rained a heavy rain.

-the inchoative/ transitive alternation –**imperfect** {*it*-pseudoreferential}

(29) It rained

=God/ the sky rained.

OR

=The rain rained.

-this is in consonance with the German, Dutch, and Icelandic facts mentioned when presenting the data (i.e. , instead of an expletive, we can have either a demonstrative pronoun or a personal pronoun 'he')

-it is also in consonance with the facts from the history of language (e.g. Latin)

[! interestingly, even in French, we have 'il pleut', not 'elle pleut']

-the verb enters two possible structures:

-unergative: CAUSE [FALL RAIN]⁴

Hale & Keyser (2002): unergatives are transitives underlyingly

-the verbs selects a *have* auxiliary in the languages where we have a *to be/ to have* alternation

-the subject is a pronoun, not an expletive in languages where this is possible

-unaccusative: FALL RAIN

-> in this case, we can have a transitive/ unaccusative alternation: *God rained this rain on us to punish us.*

3. On the Nature of the Cognate Object

-in "Syntax and Human Experience" (1991), Nicolas Ruwet and John A. Goldsmith argue that the extraposed 'subject' in an example such as:

⁴ Rappaport Hovav & Levin, "Building Verb Meaning" (1998)

- UG provides five possible lexical semantic representations: [x ACT_{<MANNER>}] (activity), [x <STATE>] (state), [BECOME [x <STATE>]] (achievement), [[x ACT_{<MANNER>}] CAUSE [BECOME [y <STATE>]]] (accomplishment), [x CAUSE [BECOME [y <STATE>]]]

(30) Il a plu toute la journée une petite pluie fine. ((40) (a))

‘There rained all day a little drizzling rain.’

is actually a cognate object

⇒ it must have the properties of cognate objects

BUT COs have been claimed to have certain properties (they mainly occur with unergatives, they can be promoted under passivization, they can undergo *it*-pronominalization (in situ))(Iwasaki 2007) BUT it seems that these are not actually properties of COs

--we must take into account agent constructions such as:

(31) God rains this rain to make us feel brand new.

⇒ we will assume it is a cognate object (actually, a lexicalized version of the object that is already present underlyingly)

5. Control Issues. The Subject.

-the status of the ‘subject’ of weather verbs (an expletive, a *pro* or even a PRO), leaving aside the poetic cases when it is an Agent nominal

-in order to account for the fact that there is control between *it/pro* and the PRO following it in “It sometimes rains after PRO snowing.” (Chomsky 1981: 324), we adopt the view that *it* is (pseudo-) referential

-sometimes IT is GOD, sometimes IT is the entity denoted by a weather noun

-weather IT-different from expletive IT

Yoon (2003)

-expletive IT in a sentence like “It is obvious that the world is round.” is analyzed as generated in Spec C, and then moving into Spec T due to the EPP feature of T

BUT where is weather IT generated?

-due to its being pseudo-referential=> Spec V, and it raises to SpecT to check the EPP feature of T

6. Conclusion

-weather verbs basically enter two possible structures:

-unaccusative: FALL RAIN

-> transitive/ unaccusative alternation: *God rained this rain on us to punish us.*

(32) V

^

IT V

^

V N

FALL RAIN

IT-coindexed with RAIN (It is raining now.)

-unergative: CAUSE [FALL RAIN]

(33) V

/ \

IT V

/ \

CAUSE V

^

V N

FALL RAIN

IT=GOD (It rains with vengeance on us.)

-sometimes we have silent RAIN and sometimes we have a silent GOD: when they do speak, they are IT

-the alternation-present both in diachrony and in synchrony

-Aristophanes, *Clouds* (367-368):

‘ **Socrates:** What Jupiter? Do not trifle. There is no Jupiter.

Strepsiades: What do you say? Who rains then?’

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