

Unergative and/or unaccusative: the argument structure, semantics and syntax of semelfactives in Hungarian

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This paper is concerned with the relationship between the syntactic behaviour and semantic characterization of semelfactive verbs in Hungarian. My starting point will be the observation that semelfactives cannot be neatly categorized either as unergatives or unaccusatives as they regularly occur in syntactic structures taken to be symptomatic of unergatives and also in ones normally associated with unaccusatives. It will be argued that this mixed behaviour can be derived straightforwardly from the semantic characterisation of the verbs in question. More precisely, a syntactic model is proposed where the arguments of semelfactive verbs have multiple potential (optional) merge locations.

The unaccusative hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978) stipulates that single-argument verbs fall into two distinct classes based on whether their argument displays syntactic behaviour similar to that of either the subject or the object of two-argument verbs. This behaviour is strongly correlated with the semantic characterisation of the verb: lexical semantic approaches seek to derive the appropriate syntactic configurations from the lexical-semantic properties of the verb by recourse to linking rules (Dowty 1991, Levin-Rappaport-Hovav 1995), whereas in constructionist approaches, unaccusativity is taken to be a sentence-level, compositional phenomenon (Borer 1998, van Hout 2000). Some researchers (Sorace 2000, Alexiadou 2004) reject the strictly dichotomic concept of unaccusativity and hypothesise an unergative-unaccusative continuum, albeit without providing an explicit syntactic model for it.

According to the standard tests, semelfactives in Hungarian show a mixed syntactic behaviour. Based on some tests (such as the cooccurrence with the pseudosubject *egyét* 'on(c)e'), semelfactives appear to be unergatives; however, the results of other tests classify them with unaccusatives (cooccurrence with verbal particles and semantically incorporated subjects); and some tests provide mixed results (cooccurrence with resultatives).

In this paper, it will be shown that the dual unergative-unaccusative behaviour of semelfactives can be derived straightforwardly from their semantic characterisation. Also, a syntactic model will be proposed where the arguments of semelfactive verbs have multiple potential (optional) merge locations. This model has a better explanatory power and more desirable theoretical properties than earlier proposals.

Since the hypothesis of an unergative-unaccusative continuum has been mostly examined in certain Indo-European languages (such as Italian, German, French and Dutch) and based on a single diagnostic (auxiliary selection); this paper will also be a useful addition to this debate as it proves the existence and semantic basis of the unergative-unaccusative continuum on the example of a non-Indo-European language and several unaccusativity diagnostics.