

Unaccusative and/or Unergative: Semelfactives in Hungarian

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Central European Conference in Linguistics for
Graduate Students

Budapest-Piliscsaba, August 31st 2011

The Riddle

In Hungarian, single-argument verbs
are typically either associated with
verbal particles (such as *meg*):

A nyelvész meg-érkezett.

The linguist PRT-arrived.

‘The linguist arrived.’

Or with the pseudo-object *egyet*
(morphologically, the accusative of the
numeral one or the indefinite article):

A nyelvész énekelt egyet.

The linguist sang one-ACC.

‘The linguist sang/had a sing.’

But not vice versa:

**A nyelvész érkezett egyet.*

The linguist arrived one-ACC.

‘The linguist arrived.’

**A nyelvész megénekelt.*

The linguist PRT-sang.

‘The linguist sang.’

The Riddle

Semelfactives (verbs denoting punctual events that have no preparatory stage or result state) can have it both ways, though:

A fény megvillant.

The light PRT-flashed.

‘The light flashed.’

A fény villant egyet.

The light flashed one-ACC.

‘The light flashed.’

But, importantly, only one at a time:

**A fény megvillant egyet.*

The light PRT-flashed one-ACC.

‘The light flashed.’

Why are semelfactives so special?

What does this tell us on a more general level?

A clue to start with: verbal particles are thought to be associated with unaccusatives, pseudo-object *egyet* with unergatives.

Setting The Stage

Semelfactives in general:

- Informally: verbs denoting punctual events that have no preparatory stage or result state
- Formally (Smith 1991 extending upon Vendler 1957):
 - States: stative, durative, atelic
 - Activities: dynamic, durative, atelic
 - Accomplishments: dynamic, durative, telic
 - Achievements: dynamic, instanteneous, telic
 - Semelfactives: dynamic, instantaneous, atelic

Setting The Stage

Semelfactives in Hungarian:

- Syntactic diagnostic: compatibility with time adverbials (Kiefer 2006):

A fény hat órakor megvillant.

The light six hour-at PRT-flashed.

‘The light flashed at six o’clock.’

**A fény hat óra alatt / hat óráig / hat órán keresztül megvillant.*

The light six hour under / six hour-till / six hour-on through PRT-flashed.

‘The light flashed in six hours / until six o’clock / for six hours.’

- Morphology: typically associated with suffixes *–An*, *–dul*, *–int*, of which *–An*-suffixation is productive.

Setting The Stage

Unaccusativity

Unaccusativity Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1980): single-argument verbs can be neatly subdivided into two disjoint subgroups based on whether the argument behaves syntactically like the subject or the object of two-argument verbs.

Tests for unaccusativity (overview: Alexiadou 2004), e.g.:

Auxiliary selection (and agreement):

Marie est arrivée en retard.

'Marie arrived late.' -> unaccusative

Marie a rougi de honte.

'Marie turned red with shame.' -> unergative

Setting The Stage

Tests for unaccusativity (continued):

Cooccurrence with resultatives: only theme arguments (objects of transitives or the arguments of unaccusatives) in a resultative structure (Levin-Rapaport-Hovav 1995: Direct Object Restriction, Csirmaz 2006):

John painted the door red.

**John shouted hoarse.* ('John shouted himself hoarse.')

The bottle broke open.

In Hungarian, only transitives or unaccusatives can be associated with a verbal particle, if verbal particles analyzed as secondary predicates of theme arguments (É. Kiss 2005):

Feri megsütötte a kenyeret.

Feri PRT-baked the bread-ACC.

'Feri baked the bread.'

Feri megérkezett.

Feri PRT-arrived.

'Feri arrived.'

**Feri elénekelt.*

Feri PRT-sang.

'Feri sang.'

Setting The Stage

Tests for unaccusativity (continued):

The pseudo-object *egyét* only associated with unergatives (Kiefer 1992, Pinon 2001), with unaccusatives, both the surface subject and the pseudo-object would need to be merged in the internal argument position:

Feri futott egyet.

Feri ran one-ACC.

‘Feri had a run.’

**Feri érkezett egyet.*

Feri arrived one-ACC.

‘Feri arrived.’

Association with semantically incorporated subject (Szabolcsi 1986 , É. Kiss 1995): ->
Unaccusativity

Vendég érkezett.

Guest arrived.

‘A guest arrived./Guests arrived.’

**Munkás dolgozott.*

Labourer worked.

‘A labourer worked./Labourers worked.’

Setting The Stage

Tests for unaccusativity (continued):

Resultative structure (Csirmaz 2006): -> Unaccusative

Juli darabokra törte a vázát. (transitive)

Juli pieces-onto broke the vase-ACC.

‘Juli broke the vase into pieces.’

A váza darabokra van törve. (passive)

The vase pieces-onto is broken.

‘The vase is broken into pieces.’

A váza darabokra tört. (unaccusative)

The vase pieces-into broke.

‘The vase broke into pieces.’

**Juli betegre nevetett.*

Juli ill-onto laughed.

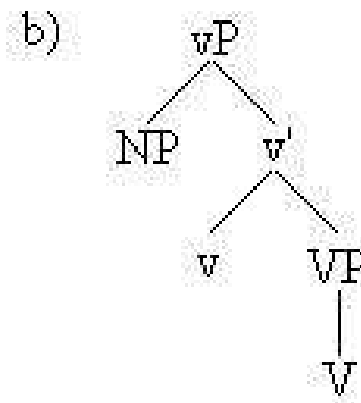
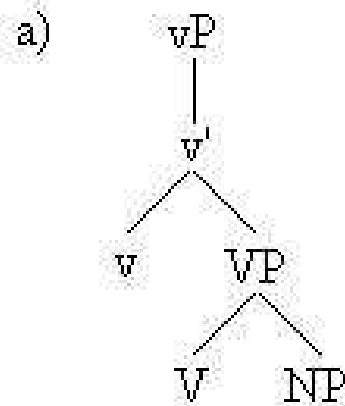
‘Juli laughed (herself) ill.’

Setting The Stage

The Syntax of Unaccusativity:

Diagnostics are partly language-specific, but tell the same story of object-like vs. subject like behaviour. This leads to the standard assumption:

- Subject of unaccusatives are merged in the internal argument position.
- Subjects of unergatives are merged in the external argument position.



Setting The Stage

The Semantics of Unaccusativity:

How to correlate semantic make-up to syntactic behaviour?

- Lexical Semantics: unergativity/unaccusativity of a predicate is coded in the lexicon via its semantic features:
 - proto-roles (Dowty 1991),
 - linking rules (Levin-Rappaport-Hovav 1995)
- Compositional approaches: unergativity/unaccusativity a sentence-level property, strong relationship between aspect and unaccusativity (e.g. Borer 1998 and van Hout 2004).

Unaccusativity: a blurred distinction

- While many verbs appear to be purely unergative or unaccusative, some showed mixed behaviour both intra- and cross-linguistically (Sorace 2000, Alexiadou 2004).

Setting The Stage

Unaccusativity: a blurred distinction

Some verbs/verb classes (such as verbs of existence) are unergatives in some languages and unaccusatives in others (all examples Sorace 2000):

I vampiri non sono mai esistiti. -> unaccusative

‘Vampires never existed.’

There exist three versions of the manuscript. -> unaccusative

*Die Dinosaurier haben/ *sind wirklich existiert.* -> unergative

‘Dinosaurs did exist.’

*Il a/ *est été a l’université.* -> unergative

‘He was at the university.’

In a given language, certain verbs/verb classes may display mixed behaviour:

La villa ha appartenuto/è appartenuta alla mia famiglia.

‘The villa belonged to my family.’

Setting The Stage

Unaccusativity: a blurred distinction

- no strictly and neatly dichotomic distinction
- an unergative-unaccusative continuum (spectrum)
- clearly unergative and clearly unaccusative verbs at either end, and verbs with varying degrees of mixed behaviour at the corresponding relative position inside the spectrum
- stochastic versions of lexical semantic approaches can readily accomodate this (e.g. Dowty 1991)
- Sorace (2000) proposes a hierarchy, with purely unaccusative or unergative verb classes at each end, and verb classes more prone to mixed behaviour in the middle

Forensics

Syntactic behaviour of semelfactives in Hungarian

- Association with pseudo-object *egyét* -> unergative

A fény villant egyet.

The light flashed one-ACC.

‘The light flashed.’

- Association with verbal particle -> unaccusative

A fény megvillant.

The light PRT-flashed.

‘The light flashed.’

- Association with semantically incorporated non-specific subjects -> unaccusative

Fény villant.

Light flashed.

‘A light flashed./Lights flashed./There was a flash of light.’

Forensics

Syntactic behaviour of semelfactives in Hungarian

- (continued)
Membership of *-ik* paradigm in some dialects (historically confined to unaccusatives)

Pattanik ('bounce'), *robbanik* ('explode'), *mozdulik* ('make a move')

But: **bólintik* ('nod'), **köhintik* ('cough') -> see later

- Resultative construction

?*Az űrsikló apró darabokra robbant.*

The space shuttle tiny pieces-onto exploded.

'The space shuttle exploded into pieces.'

?*A deszka szilánkokra reccsent.*

The plank splinters-onto cracked.

'The plank cracked into splinters.'

Forensics

Semantics of semelfactives in Hungarian

Semantic characteristics and their syntactic correlates

- Agent-theme cluster:
 - low agentivity (more experiencer than agent): -> Unaccusative
 - low volitionality: -> Unaccusative
 - low control: -> Unaccusative
 - high affectedness: -> Unaccusative
- Internal causation cluster:
 - internal causation: -> Unergative
- Event structure
 - dynamicity -> Unergative
 - atelicity: -> Unergative

Solving the Puzzle

Syntactic model

- standard approach: internal argument (the object or the subject of an unaccusative verb) is merged inside VP, whereas the external argument (the subject of transitives and unergatives) is merged outside VP (e.g. in Spec vP).
- the predicate (or the event denoted by the predicate) places restrictions on the types of arguments, in terms of semantic features, that it can accept.
- restrictions are straightforward with most verb classes as semantic features are associated either with Agent or Theme (proto)role -> argument to be merged either as external or internal argument.
- semelfactives: semantic restrictions define a strongly mixed set of features in terms of proto-agent and proto theme -> no unequivocal selection is to take place and both the external and the internal argument position are legitimate loci for merging the argument.

Predictions

Agentive semelfactives

Köhint ‘cough’ and *bólint* ‘nod’: different semantic makeup:

- Agent-theme cluster:
 - high agentivity (more agent than experiencer): -> Unergative
 - high volitionality: -> Unergative
 - high control: -> Unergative
 - low affectedness: -> Unergative
- Internal causation cluster:
 - internal causation: -> Unergative
- Event structure
 - dynamicity -> Unergative
 - atelicity: -> Unergative

Predictions

Agentive semelfactives (continued): Unequivocal unergative syntactic behaviour:

A fiú köhintett egyet.

The boy coughed one-ACC.

‘The boy coughed./The boy made a cough.’

**A fiú megköhintett.*

The boy PRT-coughed.

‘The boy coughed./The boy made a cough.’

**Fiú köhintett.*

Boy coughed.

‘A boy coughed./Boys coughed.’

**Köhintik.* (i.e. *köhint* does not follow the *-ik* paradigm in any dialect)

**A fiú rekedtre köhintett.*

The boy hoarse-unto coughed.

‘The boy coughed himself hoarse.’

Predictions

Magától

Prediction: depending on the actual locus of merging the argument, either the agent or the theme reading would be more accessible.

Az ajtó magától megmozdult.

The door itself-from PRT-moved.

‘The door moved by itself.’

#Az ajtó magától mozdult egyet

The door itself-from moved one-ACC.

‘The door moved by itself.’

Magától here asserts the lack of interference of an external causer/instigator. In the second sentence, this reading asserted by *magától* is already present as the subject clearly has an Agent reading because of the presence of *egyet*. This redundancy causes the second sentence to be infelicitous (even if grammatical).

Alternative accounts

Csirmaz (2006): a tangential discussion of the topic

- semelfactives analyzed as unaccusatives
- pseudo-object *egyét* is taken to be merged in an adjunct position in the case of semelfactives, in all other cases, it is supposed to be merged in the internal argument position
- cooccurrence of *egyét* and the verbal particle (such as *meg-*) is ruled out by the Single Delimiter Constraint (Tenny 1994)
- criticism:
 - empirical: no account for the *magát*-test above
 - theoretical: the assumption that *egyét* is merged as an adjunct with semelfactives and as internal argument elsewhere is arbitrary and circular in the absence of any independent motivation
- our proposal put forward in this paper actually predicts the outcome of the *magától*-test and has no need for stipulating a pseudo-object-as-adjunct.

Alternative accounts

Levin Rappaport-Hovav (1995): verbs of emission

- LRH (1995) analyze verbs of emission as verbs of motion which are unergatives on a manner of motion reading and unaccusative on a directed motion reading
- adopting this analysis for semelfactives in Hungarian is tempting, as many verbal particles do have a direction reading:

A labda felpattant.

The ball up-bounced.

‘The ball bounced up.’

- However:
 - all semelfactives are grammatical with the verbal particle *meg*, which clearly lacks a direction reading.
 - more generally, not all verbs of emission are semelfactives, thus, any explanation of the mixed syntactic behaviour of semelfactives solely based on their being verbs of emission would apply to non-semelfactive verbs of emission as well

Fitting into The Big Picture

Conclusion

- Explanation of mixed syntactic behaviour of semelfactives on unergative-unaccusative terms by recourse to semantic features
- Behaviour linked to the hypothesis of unergative-unaccusative continuum
- Contribution to unaccusativity literature:
 - Non-Indo-European language
 - Several diagnostics used (as opposed to focus on a single one – auxiliary selection – in many studies)
- Mixed syntactic behaviour of semelfactives is modeled by assuming that their single argument has two optional merge positions:
 - Better empirical coverage than earlier proposals
 - More desirable qualities from a theoretical point of view.