

V11 Unaccusativity

Course in Semantics · Ling 531 / 731
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One of the most important discoveries in argument structure is that not all intransitives are alike. Some have arguments that behave like objects, while others have arguments that behave like subjects.

It began with Perlmutter 1978, who distinguished Dutch intransitives that could take a passive from those that could not.

Unaccusatives:

1. alternate with causative (transitive).

- (1) *We closed the door / the door closed*
- (2) *We sang a number-one hit / *A number-one hit sang*

2. do not take the passive.

- (3) Dutch
 - 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)

3. take different auxiliaries, especially in Romance languages

- (4) French
 - a. *Le navire a coulé* – The vessel {has} sunk
 - b. *Le navire est arrivé* – The vessel {is} arrived

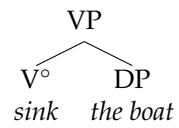
4. allow adjectival participles to modify subjects

- (5) *fallen leaves, sunken ships, *sung singers, #worked linguists*

5. Allow expletive construction

- (6) a. *There arrived a boat.*
- b. **There sang a choir.*

The idea is that unaccusatives have a single argument that starts in ‘object position’: Complement of the verb. It doesn’t receive accusative case, but nominative, through ordinary case assignment. It raises to subject position, like the subject of a passive.



Burzio's generalization (1986) : Complements to verbs only get accusative case if there is a distinct subject.

What about the other intransitives? These are unergatives. They have their argument in the [Spec, VP] position.

