Unergative-Unaccusative Distinction: A Case Study of Sason Arabic

Faruk Akkuş
Yale University

In the literature, cognate objects (CO), namely the objects which an intransitive verb can take, have been used as a diagnostics to differentiate between unergative and unaccusative verbs. It has been argued that intransitives which can take a cognate object are typically unergative verbs, i.e., verbs whose subjects are (non-)volitional initiators (1a-b), but not unaccusatives with undergoer subjects (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995, Massam 1990, Larson 1988, Keyser and Roeper 1984, Macfarland 1995). However, it has also been shown that a subset of unaccusative verbs can also take COs subject to certain semantic restrictions (2a-b) (Kuno and Takami 2004, Nakajima 2006). The aim of this study is to investigate the patterns of COs in Sason Arabic (SA) – an endangered dialect of Arabic spoken in Turkey - which can be used not only with unergatives but also very productively with all types of unaccusatives without any semantic restriction. We will propose that COs of both unergatives and unaccusatives in SA are not true arguments, but constitute rhematic complements in the lines of Ramchand (2008), therefore cannot be used as a diagnostics for unergative-unaccusative distinction in the language.

(1) a. Malinda smiled her most enigmatic smile. (Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 1995: 40)
    b. The baby slept a sound sleep. (Nakajima 2006: 677)
(2) a. The tree grew a century's growth within only ten years. (Nakajima 2006: 674)
    b. The stock market dropped its largest drop in three years today.

As in (3-4), in SA not only unergatives but also unaccusatives can very productively take COs:

(3) a. zake-ma   kotti   zak.   b. sabi bayu   ibki
       laugh-a   bad   laughed.3m   boy crying   cry.3m
       'He laughed a bad laugh.'   'The boy is crying a cry.'
(4) a. badılcanad pat-ma   gıze kotti patto.   b. çiçak ubs-ma   boş kotti ubes.
       tomatoes   rottening-a such bad rottened.3pl   flower fading-a very bad faded.3m
       'The tomatoes rottened such a bad rottening.'   'Flower faded a bad fading.'

Kuno and Takami (2004) argue that COs are acceptable if they denote a resultant object/product of an activity/process that the verb denotes. If the verb denotes only the result without involving a process, as in the case of *break, occur, appear*, or only the manner of the process, then COs are not possible. However in SA there is no such restriction, as not only the verbs denoting processes, but also the ones denoting only results (5) or manner (6) are compatible with COs:

(5) a. şuşa qarf   ınqaraf
       glass breaking   broke.3m
       'The glass broke a breaking.'
    b. nahar talu-ma   koys   tala   ala sari
       sun   appearing-a   beautiful   appeared.3m   this morning
       'The sun appeared a beautiful appearance this morning.'
    c. dave   say   sare,   hama boş   nes ma-ca.
       wedding   occurring   occurred.3f but   many person neg.3m
       'The wedding occurred an occuring, but not many people came.'
(6) a. babe   fadu-ma   hedi ınfada
       door   opening-a   slow opened.3m
       'The door opened a slow opening.'
    b. John maju-ma xıfef ca   c. şelç zabu-ma   hedi zab
       John coming-a quick came.3m   snow melting-a   slow melt
       'John came a quick coming.'   'The snow melted a slow melting.'

Nakajima (2006), furthermore, makes a distinction between argumental and adverbial COs. He argues that argumental COs are only possible with unergatives, whereas the COs certain unaccusatives take are adverbial, thus, they are adjuncts, as only the COs of unergatives (7a), but not those of unaccusatives (7b) can be passivized.

(7) a. A sound sleep was slept by the baby.

    b. *A century's expansion was grown in only ten years by the tree trunk.

In SA, however, both COs of unergatives and unaccusatives behave as non-argumentals. First, unlike English, no COs in SA can be the target for passiviziation:

(8) a. * nom ın-nam   b. * pat   ın-pat

    sleep pass-slept   rottening   pass-rottened

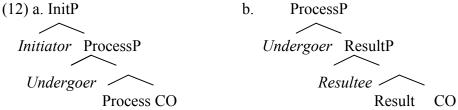   'Sleep was slept.'   'A rottening was rottened.'

Second, while true non-specific objects can occur postverbally in neutral word order (9), COs of both unergatives and unaccusatives cannot occur in the postverbal position (10), thus, they behave differently than true object arguments:

(9)   zıxar ayalo dondurma   (10) a. * faqaztu faqız   b. *şuşa ınqaraf qarf

       kids ate.3pl ice cream   ran.1sg running   glass broke.3m breaking

       The kids ate ice cream.   I ran a running.   The glass broke a breaking.

Finally, COs in SA can only be questioned with the wh-word *ıştaba* 'how', rather than *şıne* 'what', which can be used to question true objects. This implies that they are adverbials:

(11) a. kemal faqız-ma   ıştaba faqaz.   b. badılcanad pat-ma   ıştaba   patto.

      Kemal running-a   how ran.3m   tomatoes rottening-a   how   rottened.3pl

      How a running did Kemal run?   How a rottening did the tomatoes rottened?

Thus, the COs in SA are not argumental, but behave more like adjuncts. We argue that they constitute rhematic materials, that is, they are complements which modify the subevent they attach to in the sense of Ramchand (2008). COs that unergatives take are the rhemes of ProcessP (12a), while the ones in unaccusatives are the complements of ResultP (12b):

(12) a. InitP   b.   ProcessP

    Initiator ProcessP   *Undergoer* ResultP

        Undergoer   *Resultee*

            Process CO   Result   CO

The highly productive and unrestricted use of COs in SA is due to their non-argument status and as such COs cannot be a testing ground for unergative-unaccusative distinction in the language.

References:

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