Building Unergatives (Version 2.0)

Insights from diminutive verbs

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Core theoretical question

Is the nominal core of unergatives a selected argument of the transitive verbalizer v0o (Hale & Keyser 1993, Harley 1999, 2005), or a predicate (or modifier of v, aka a 'manner' root) supplying lexical content to this light verb (Marantz 2013)? Taking our cue from the cross-linguistic behavior of verbs containing diminutive affixes that also attach to nouns, we provide evidence for the former view, specifically showing that the syntax and semantics of 'diminutive' verbs follow from their structure, viz. selection of a nominal layer (here: noun) by the verbalizer.

Core observation

- Identical diminutive morphology in verbs and nouns across various languages:

  1. a. Das Wasser kocht / koch·el·t. (German)
     the water boils / simmers.

  b. fischi-ell-o (Italian, De Belder et al. 2014)
     to whistle, to emit short whistles

  c. giggle (Modern Hebrew, De Belder et al. 2014)
     'to giggle'

  d. flower-cms-15 (Albanian)
     '1 bloom'

  2. a. Bund Bünd·el (German)
      bunch (MASC.)

     'bunch' (NEUT.)

     b. fischi-ell-o (Italian, De Belder et al. 2014)
     to whistle, to emit short whistles

     c. giggle (Modern Hebrew, De Belder et al. 2014)
     'to giggle'

     d. flower cms (Albanian)
     'flower'

Proposal

Both in nouns and in verbs, the diminutive affix spells out the head of a diminutive NP that selects nouns or roots (note the uniaxial of diminutive (-el) -verbs in (1a), triggered by the presence of the nominal diminutive suffix, (2a)). The function of noun is individuation, the creation of (countable) units. Embedded under v, this 'unit-of'-interpretation is reanalyzed as belonging to v and results in an activity verb. The verbalizing head v0o → v0 thus classifies the event as action and may introduce an agent theta-role (Doron 2003), saturated by a DP introduced by a higher Voice head.

A unified and uniform structure (also for unergative/iterative verbs of emission):

(7) a. b.

Since actors (unlike agents) can be animate or inanimate, we thus uniformly derive the properties of the expletive/unergative verbs of emission (cf. Rothmayer 2009) such as herbst·el·t 'be Fall-like', of deverbal diminutives such as köch·el·t 'to simmer'

Our analysis explains why -el-verbs are uniformly unergative, independent of their syncretic base: the derivational basis of -el is always nominal, viz. noun, thus no external argument present unless a higher Voice head is merged subsequently

Moreover, the noun head can be identified with the 'natural atomic function' of Rothstein (2004), who argues that semelfactives and activity predicates contain a set P that selects nouns or roots

We argue that such a similar analysis also holds for other languages in which verbal diminutives behave as (pluractional) activity verbs (e.g. Italian, Tovena 2010)

Corroboration

- Evidence: diminutives denote the "lower boundary" of the event (basic intuition: the meaning of "small", i.e. cms, in the verbal domain is something like 'start to' / 'start turning into')

  1a. Das Wasser köch·el·t seit einer halben Stunde, aber es köch·t einfach nicht.
     the water boils-cms-35c.pm since one half hour but it boils-35c.pm just not
     'The water has been simmering for half an hour, but it just won't boil.'

  b. Es hat monatelang herbst·el·t, aber es war nie richtig Herbst.
     it has for months boils-Fall-cms-FALL but it was never really Fall.
     'It has been Fall-like for months, but it was never really Fall.'

Conclusion:

A derivational account can handle the apparent structural ambiguity of diminutive verbs (i.e. root vs. verbal vs. nominal base), contra Weidhaas & Schmid (2015), Auding et al. (2017), simultaneously providing support for Hale & Keyser's (1993) analysis of unergatives, and Harley's (1999, 2005) extensions to that analysis.