

THE ROLE OF LEXICAL SEMANTICS IN UNACCUSATIVE-UNERGATIVE DISTINCTION IN TURKISH

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One of the approaches to understanding argument structure, lexical semantics, and verbal alternations is to presume that verbs belong to distinct classes. I will deal with unaccusativity in Turkish in the spirit of this line of research. Following the lead of Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995), I will assume that unaccusativity is semantically determined but syntactically represented. Building on Levin and Rappaport-Hovav (1995) and the studies of Sorace and her colleagues (Sorace 1995, 2000, Keller & Sorace 2003, Sorace & Shomura 2001), I will argue that impersonal passivization, suggested as a diagnostic for unaccusativity (Perlmutter 1978, Özkaragöz 1986, Nakiboğlu 1998, among others) is sensitive to a thematic/aspectual hierarchy of verb classes, and adjectival passivization shows a split between core unaccusatives and core unergatives. I will propose that certain subsets of verbs manifest indeterminate behaviour, which is either attributable to compositional factors, or to event-structure properties of verb classes. The data I will review will shed light on the semantic determinants of the single argument of intransitive verbs, which in turn will have implications for the argument structure of intransitive verbs.

The Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH) (Sorace 1995, 2000) is the basic framework of this study. It is a thematic/aspectual hierarchy based on the auxiliary selection properties of four Western languages. It maintains that certain intransitive verbs manifest ‘core’ unaccusativity, certain verbs exhibit core unergativity, while others are invariant in their syntactic behaviour. The behaviour of an intransitive verb is largely predictable from its position on the hierarchy (Figure 1).

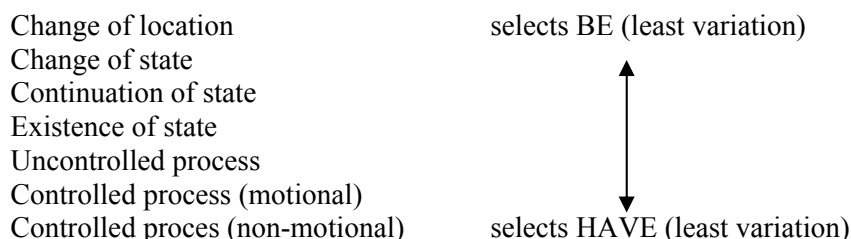


FIGURE1. Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH).

The ASH predicts that intra and crosslinguistically, native speaker judgements about core unaccusatives and core unergatives are categorical, while the judgements about the verbs close to the center are consistently unstable. According to the ASH, there is no language where the position of the verbs occupying the highest and the lowest positions is completely reversed. However, languages may make finer distinctions within individual classes represented on the ASH, merge verb classes, and may have different cut-off points along the hierarchy.

I will regard the ASH as a working hypothesis to analyse unaccusativity in Turkish. I believe that it is a legitimate starting point mainly because it predicts systematic variability in a verb’s behaviour, which is the central motivation behind the semantic approach I am using here. Furthermore, it has been shown that acquisition studies do not fail to confirm the hierarchy’s predictions (Sorace 1995, Sorace & Shomura 2001).

I will limit the discussion to monadic verbs, leaving the verbs entering the causative-anticausative/inchoative pattern for further research (e.g. *Kapıyı kapadım* ‘I closed the door’/*Kapı kapandı* ‘The door was closed’. The results I will report on will be based on native speaker judgements elicited informally.

I will first deal with impersonal passivization (IP) and propose that it is sensitive to agentivity and telicity. I will present data illustrating the fact that as the verbs appearing in IP are increasingly more agentive, the acceptability of the construction would increase. The acceptability of the IP construction would also increase when the telicity of the verb decreases. I will show that these observations are consistent with the predictions of the ASH.

Nakiboğlu-Demiralp (2001) has observed that IP is grammatical with some unaccusative verbs in the aorist, e.g. *öl-* ‘die’, *doğ-* ‘be born’; inducing a generic and an existential reading. She has suggested that this is due to variable verb behaviour, a phenomenon discussed by Rosen (1984) and many others. Building on this observation, I will show that variability extends to a larger number of verbs covering most verbs in the class of change of state verbs. I will propose that the indeterminacy of this class is attributable to compositional factors contributed by the grammatical context in which a verb appears (Pustejovsky 1995, Pustejovsky & Busa 1995).

I will also touch on the behaviour of motion verbs, which are known to participate in event-shift alternations crosslinguistically. Similarly in Turkish, some telic and directional motion verbs (e.g. *alçal* ‘descend’) and all atelic and nondirectional ones (e.g. *yüz* ‘swim’, *koş* ‘run’) are sensitive to temporal adverbs and Path expressions. On the other hand, not all directional and telic verbs (i.e. the change of location class on the ASH) allow adjectival passivization. If adjectival passivization is a test for unaccusativity, it seems that pure path verbs like *çık* ‘exit’, *gir* ‘enter’, etc. would pose a problem for the ASH as they do not allow adjectival passivization. I will attempt to provide an explanation for this situation relying on the generalizations about verb-framed languages (Talmy 2000) and Slobin’s (to appear) refinements of Talmy’s generalizations. I will propose that Turkish merges change of location verbs with change of state verbs.

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