

# Case and English Unaccusative Verbs

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## Introduction

The ability to assign inherent partitive case to a postverbal NP has been a property associated with unaccusative verbs since Belletti (1988).<sup>1</sup> In this article I propose that inherent accusative case, not partitive case, is assigned by unaccusative verbs and that the indefinite reading results from a constraint of semantic interpretation imposed at the syntax-semantics interface as conceived by Diesing (1992). The central idea is that the postverbal NP of unaccusative structures is captured within the existential closure domain of Diesing (1992), which accounts for the indefiniteness requirement, and the concept of inherent partitive case is subsumed under a more general theory of accusative case.

The article is structured as follows. In section 2. I outline the major currents of research with respect to unaccusative verbs and the structures and properties usually associated with them. In section 3. I review Diesing's (1992) theory of existential closure and show that the postverbal NP of unaccusative structures is captured within the domain of existential closure. In section 4. I propose an analysis of certain structures usually associated with Romance unaccusative verbs, which leads to the conclusion that partitive-accusative variation is interpretive rather than syntactic. Section 5. contains concluding remarks.

## Structures and Properties Associated with Unaccusative Verbs

The unaccusative hypothesis, as most prominently formulated by Perlmutter (1978) and Burzio (1986), establishes the existence of a class of verbs termed unaccusative. Burzio (1986) proposes the following list of verbs as unaccusative in English:

- (1) arise, emerge, develop, ensue, begin, exist, occur, arrive, follow

The list is based primarily on comparisons to the Italian unaccusative data. In Italian this set of verbs selects the auxiliary '*essere*' (to be), which is a consistently reliable diagnostic of unaccusativity in that language.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I don't differentiate between NPs and DPs here. I will use the term noun phrase or NP throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Auxiliary selection is a consistent diagnostic for unaccusativity in Italian, but not as consistent for French. For Spanish and Catalan other diagnostics of unaccusativity are applied. See Cortés (1993) on tests for unaccusativity in Catalan.

In traditional grammars, unaccusative verbs have often been classified as intransitive due to their apparent inability to select an object. The examples below instantiate this observation:

- (2) a. A problem emerged with the design  
b. \* A problem emerged Harry with the design
- (3) a. The most discordant discussion ensued then  
b. \* The most discordant discussion ensued the group then

The central intuition behind Perlmutter's (1978) proposal is that the apparent subject of unaccusative verbs is in fact the thematic object. Thus, the fundamental difference between unaccusative and intransitive verbs is that the former select an internal argument and the latter an external argument, although on the surface level of the syntax the structures may have a similar appearance.

### Word Order and the Definiteness Effect

One of the properties attributed to unaccusative verbs is that the thematic object may appear either preverbally or postverbally. If the thematic object appears preverbally, nominative case is assigned under the specifier-head relation with the inflected verb.<sup>3</sup> If the thematic object appears postverbally, however, the surface subject position is filled by expletive *there*. The examples below illustrate the contrast:

- (4) a. A discussion began about the issue  
b. There began a discussion about the issue

An important property of the postverbal internal argument is that it must be indefinite. This restriction is known as the Definiteness Effect (DE). The examples below instantiate this contrast.<sup>4</sup>

- (5) a. The misunderstanding occurred between John and Mary  
b. A misunderstanding occurred between John and Mary

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<sup>3</sup> See Chomsky (1993) for a description of structural case assignment under the specifier-head relation.

<sup>4</sup> The effects of the DE are not consistent cross-linguistically or cross-dialectally. See Longa, Lorenzo and Rigau (1994), for example, who claim that there are no DE effects in Catalan.

- (6) a. There occurred a misunderstanding between John and Mary  
b. \* There occurred the misunderstanding between John and Mary

A focus of research has been the means by which the postverbal NP is assigned case. The major trends with respect to this topic are discussed in the next section.

### **Case Assignment to the Postverbal NP**

There are two major currents with respect to how case is assigned to the postverbal NP of unaccusatives, case transmission and direct case assignment. Below are outlined the major points of the most representative work for each current. Section 2.2.1. treats Burzio's (1986) proposal of case transmission and section 2.2.2. Belletti's (1988) proposal of direct case assignment.

### **Case Transmission**

In Burzio (1986), the formulation of how case is assigned to the postverbal NP in unaccusative structures is as follows. The thematic object of an unaccusative verb in underlying canonical object position can be marked with nominative case by means of a case transmission relation which works in the following way. A relation is established between the preverbal subject position, which is filled by an expletive element, *there* in the case of English, and the postverbal object position. The relation between the two positions is established by a chain. In other words, the preverbal subject position is assigned nominative case under the specifier-head relation with the inflected verb, and the chain that links the postverbal object position to the preverbal subject position makes nominative case available to the postverbal object position.

### **Direct Case Assignment**

Belletti (1988) capitalizes on Chomsky's (1986) binate theory of syntactic case, in which structural case, i.e., nominative and accusative, is assigned and realized at S-structure with no connection to theta role assignment, while inherent case is assigned at D-structure by a governing lexical head in conjunction with theta role assignment, and subsequently realized at S-structure. Belletti proposes that unaccusative verbs can assign inherent partitive case, and suggest that, given the conditions imposed by Chomsky's theory on inherent case, inherent partitive case can apparently be assigned to the objects of unaccusative and transitive verbs.

Belletti provides data from Finnish, a language with a morphologically rich case system, which shows overtly by morphological case markings that accusative is not the only case for which an object NP can be marked. The examples below show that depending on the reading, the object of the verb *put* can be marked either with accusative or partitive case:

- (7) a. Hän pani kiriat                      pöydälle.  
          *he put the books (acc, pl) on the table*
- b. Hän pani kirjoja                    pöydälle.  
          *he put (some) books (part, pl) on the table*

In a parallel fashion, the underlying object of Finnish unaccusative verbs can be marked with partitive case, as shown in the examples below:

- (8) a. Pöydällä                              on kirjoja.  
          *on the table is (some) books (part, pl)*  
          ‘There are some books on the table.’
- b. Helsingistä                        tulee                      kirjeitä.  
          *from Helsinki comes (some) letters (part, pl)*  
          ‘There come some letters from Helsinki.’

Belletti uses these data as a point of departure to propose that unaccusative verbs, like transitive verbs, may assign morphological partitive case. The central intuition behind the proposal is that the ability of unaccusative verbs to assign structural accusative case is suspended, and, thus, a major distinction is drawn between verbs of the unaccusative and transitive classes. Furthermore, as Belletti states, the proposal captures the effects of the DE, which a theory that supposes nominative case to be transmitted cannot.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusions

If the thematic object of an unaccusative verb appears postverbally, a given set of constraints are imposed on the structure. First, expletive *there* must appear in the preverbal surface subject position, and second, the postverbal thematic object must be indefinite. In the next section the latter question is addressed. The

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<sup>5</sup> Lasnik (1992) supports Belletti's claim against case transmission.

indefiniteness requirement will be shown to be a reflection of semantic interpretation rather than of syntactic case factors. The question of which case is assigned to the indefinite postverbal NP will be addressed in section 4.

### Existential Closure and the Thematic Object of Unaccusatives

I begin this section with a summary of Diesing's (1992) proposal on existential closure. The main objective is to show that the postverbal thematic object of the unaccusative structure is captured within Diesing's domain of existential closure, and that, therefore, the indefiniteness requirement on the postverbal thematic object has a principled explanation in terms of semantic interpretation rather than in terms of syntactic case.

### Existential Closure

As a point of departure, Diesing (1992) relies on the Kamp-Heim approach to the semantics of NPs (Heim 1982, Kamp 1981). Diesing points out that a primary motivation for this approach is based on observations concerning the quantificational variability of indefinites that precludes their being analyzed as existential quantifiers.<sup>6</sup> Indefinites can vary in quantificational force depending on the context in which they appear. The examples below, taken directly from Diesing (1992), show this contrast:

- (9) a. A contrabassoonist usually plays too loudly  
 b. Most contrabassoonists play too loudly
- (10) a. Cellists seldom play out of tune  
 b. Few cellists play out of tune

The point exemplified by these examples is that indefinites, rather than being simply existentially quantified, can take their quantificational force from other elements in the sentence such as the adverbs like *usually*, *seldom* and *often*. The main point is that indefinites are therefore not inherently quantified, but introduce variables into the logical representation. In other words, indefinites have no quantificational force of their own, but must receive quantificational force by being bound by some other operator. To illustrate this proposal, Diesing (1992) analyzes the structures below:

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<sup>6</sup> This line of inquiry goes back to Russell (1919). I provide only a brief outline of the major points. For more details and complete references, see Heim (1982) and Kamp (1981).

- (11) a. A man owns a llama  
b. [x is a man  $\wedge$  y is a llama  $\wedge$  x owns y]

The analysis works as follows. In this structure there is no quantificational element such as the adverbs *usually* or *seldom* in (9-10). Instead, the variable introduced by the indefinite is bound by an implicit existential quantifier that “existentially” closes off the nuclear scope preventing the occurrence of unbound variables. Diesing (1992) departs from the Kamp-Heim approach in the definition of the domain of existential closure. Within the Kamp-Heim theory, existential closure applies to sentences, and further, an existential closure operation applies to the entire text or discourse. In contrast, Diesing defines the domain of existential closure as the VP of the clause.<sup>7</sup>

Further detail regarding the technical aspects of this theory is not necessary here. If it can be shown that the postverbal thematic object of the unaccusative structure is within the domain of existential closure in Diesing (1992) framework, i.e., within VP, the implication will be that any NP appearing in this domain must be indefinite. Thus, the indefiniteness requirement on the postverbal thematic object of the unaccusative structure will be explained in a principled way without having to make reference to case assignment.

### Adverb Placement

In English there is a strict adjacency requirement between a lexical transitive verb and its object. In other words, at the overt level of the syntax, the object must directly follow the verb. No adverb may intervene, as the examples below illustrate:

- (12) a. \* John watches often movies on Saturday night  
b. John often watches movies on Saturday night

The same adjacency requirement exists between an unaccusative verb and its postverbal thematic object:

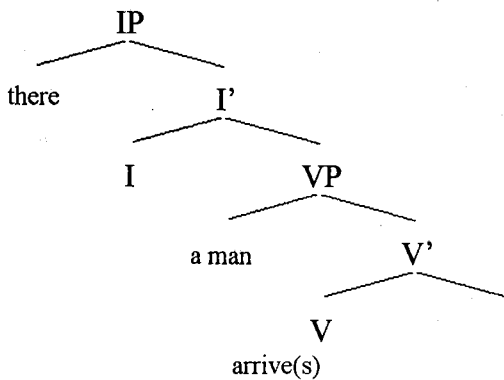
- (13) a. \* There arrives usually a man in the garden every morning  
b. There usually arrived a man in the garden every morning

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<sup>7</sup> Diesing (1992) applies the proposal to English and German data. The analysis is much more complex than is suggested here. One complexity is that existential closure may apply either at the covert or overt level of the syntax. Here I will address only existential closure at the overt level of the syntax.

Emonds (1976, 1978) and Jackendoff (1972) show that English lexical verbs do not raise to amalgamate with inflectional morphemes at the overt level of the syntax.<sup>8</sup> Given the structures above, in which the verb precedes the object, and given that English lexical verbs do not raise out of the verb phrase, it stands to reason that the postverbal thematic object of unaccusative verbs does not raise out of the verb phrase at the overt level of the syntax. The structure below represents example (13b) at the overt level of the syntax (irrelevant structure excluded):<sup>9</sup>

(14)



This analysis allows the conclusion to be drawn that the postverbal thematic object is within Diesing's (1992) domain of existential closure, i.e., the VP. In other words, both the facts of adverb placement and an analysis of the internal clause structure reveal this fact.

#### Adverb Placement and the Verb *be*

A potential problem arises when the English verb *be* is considered under the same light. The postverbal NP has the same indefiniteness restriction, but the adjacency requirement between the postverbal NP and the verb is not upheld:

<sup>8</sup> The fact of how the English verb finally amalgamates with the inflectional suffixes has been a line of inquiry. Following Chomsky (1993), however, it could be claimed that in English verb raising may occur at the covert level of the syntax.

<sup>9</sup> I assume following Larson (1988) and Chomsky (1993) that verbal arguments are generated in VP specifier positions and that verb phrases are composed of the number of shells or layers to accommodate the number of arguments selected by a given verb.

- (15) a. There is usually a tiger striped cat in the garden every morning  
b. \* There is usually the tiger striped cat in the garden every morning

Emonds (1976) and Jackendoff (1972) propose a rule applying to English called *Have/Be Raising*. This rule captures the difference between English lexical verbs, which do not raise, and the English verbs or auxiliaries *be* and *have*, which must raise. The same generalization about the indefiniteness of the postverbal NP can thus be drawn.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusions

The data and analysis in this section demonstrate that the postverbal thematic object of English unaccusative verbs appears in the domain of existential closure proposed by Diesing (1992). The consequence of this fact is that the NP must be indefinite in order to coincide with an existential reading. Thus, one of the questions posed above, i.e., what the relation is between the indefiniteness requirement and the postverbal thematic object of unaccusatives, is answered. The question concerning which case is assigned to the postverbal thematic object remains to be answered. The next section treats certain facts of case marking with Romance clitics. The conclusion drawn will be that the apparent difference between accusative and partitive case can be reduced to an effect of semantic interpretation.

### Romance Clitics and Case Marking

Since the work of Rizzi (1982), Burzio (1986) and Belletti (1988), certain structures and their related properties have been associated with unaccusative verbs. Below I discuss two of these structures, Romance clitic *ne* and bare plural postverbal subjects, to show that they are not strictly associated with unaccusative verbs.<sup>11</sup> I then discuss a contrast in the clitic systems of Catalan, French and Italian on one hand, and Spanish, on the other. I conclude that apparent differences between accusative and partitive case are merely interpretative, not structural.

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<sup>10</sup> Pollock (1989) provides a principled explanation for the pattern of data. In French, but not in modern English, AgrP is not an inherent barrier because as English lost most of its verbal inflections, Agr became more opaque to theta role assignment, hence the loss of verb movement, which became restricted to *have* and *be*.

<sup>11</sup> I refer to the clitic as *ne* because initial work was done on Italian.

### The Romance Clitic *ne* and Bare Plural Subjects<sup>12</sup>

The clitic *ne*, which represents a partitive or quantitative NP, has been associated with the internal argument of unaccusative verbs. Consequently, when *ne* can be extracted from an apparent subject of a given verb, this has been used as a diagnostic of the verb's unaccusativity. The diagnostic, however, is not consistent across the Romance languages. In Catalan the clitic *ne* can be extracted from the external argument of an intransitive verb:<sup>13</sup>

- (16) En dormen tres a sota d'aquest pont  
*of-them sleep three under that bridge*

A second structure associated with unaccusative verbs is the ability to license a postverbal bare plural subject, but in Catalan the external argument of an intransitive verb may surface as a postverbal bare plural subject, as shown in the example below:<sup>14</sup>

- (17) Mengen metges en aquest restaurant  
*at doctors in that restaurant*

These two structures have been assumed to be a reflection of the unaccusative verb's capacity to assign inherent partitive case. The examples above, however, show that these structures can also be associated with intransitive verbs, thus shedding doubt on some of the fundamental underpinnings of the unaccusative hypothesis.

If these structures can instead be associated with an existential interpretation, the patterns of data found both with unaccusative and intransitive verbs can be subsumed under a broader theory of interpretation falling within the domain of the syntax-semantics interface.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a uniform analysis of these phenomena in Catalan, see Cortés (1994).

<sup>13</sup> For discussion see Cortés (1992), Hopkins (1994) and Cortés and Gavarró (1996).

<sup>14</sup> See Torrego (1989) for a discussion of similar data in Spanish and Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) for a more general cross-linguistic analysis.

<sup>15</sup> This line of inquiry may be promising given that speakers of Catalan tend to paraphrase (16) as something like 'There are three of them sleeping under the bridge' and (17) as 'There are doctors eating in that restaurant'. See Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) for further details.

### The Clitic *ne* and Accusative Clitics

French, Italian and Catalan all contain the clitic *ne* in slightly differing morphological variations. The point of this section is to show that the clitic *ne* and accusative clitics are in complementary distribution. In other words, in the context where the clitic *ne* appears, an accusative clitic cannot appear, and *vice versa*. The difference in interpretation is that where the clitic *ne* appears, the interpretation is indefinite, while where an accusative clitic appears, the interpretation is definite. The examples below illustrate this contrast:

- (18) a. Avez-vous écrit des lettres?  
*have you written some letters*  
b. Je \*les/en ai écrit  
*I them/some have written*
- (19) a. Avez-vous écrit les lettres?  
*have you written the letters*  
b. Je \*en/les ai écrit  
*I some/them have written*

This contrast is not unusual in light of the English examples below:

- (20) a. Have you written some letters?  
b. I have written some/\*them
- (21) a. Have you written the letters?  
b. I have written them/\*some<sup>16</sup>

In existential sentences with *hi ha*, the same contrast occurs in Catalan:

- (22) a. Hi ha(n) gats per aquí?  
*there-has cats around here*  
*'Are there cats around here?'*
- b. Sí, n'hi han  
*yes, of-them there have*

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<sup>16</sup> Such a response to this question could be grammatical but with a marked intonation, which makes it irrelevant for the present purposes of the example.

- c. \*Si, els hi ha  
       *yes, them-there have*

Spanish has no overt way to express a partitive response to an existential question because it has no overt counterpart to the clitic *ne*. Consider, however, the contrast Spanish presents with Catalan:

- (23) a. Hay muchos gatos por aquí?  
           *there are many cats around here*
- b. Si, los hay  
       *yes, them there are*

This contrast is puzzling if assignment of partitive case is a function of the syntactic component of the grammar. Instead, the puzzle can be explained in a straightforward manner if the interpretation represented by the conception of partitive case is a function of the interpretative component of the grammar. In this way, accusative and partitive case are subsumed under a single case, and the semantic level of the grammar regulates the interpretation.

### Conclusions

In this article I propose two innovations for the analysis of the postverbal thematic object of unaccusative structures. First, I suggest that the postverbal thematic object is within the domain of Diesing's (1992) existential closure. This claim allows the indefiniteness requirement on the NP to be explained without reference to partitive case. Second, I claim that, while inherent case is assigned by unaccusative verbs to the postverbal thematic object under the same conditions proposed in Chomsky (1986) and assumed by Belletti (1988), the case assigned is inherent accusative, not partitive, and the semantic component of the grammar determines the interpretative value of the postverbal thematic object.

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