On identifying unaccusativity

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'German names almost always do mean something, and this helps to deceive the student. I translated a passage one day, which said that "the infuriated tigress broke loose and utterly ate up the unfortunate fir forest" (Tannenwald). When I was girding up my loins to doubt this, I found out that 'Tannenwald' in this instance was a man's name.'
(from Mark Twain "The awful German language")

1. Background and claim

This discussion proceeds from the claim that, at best, different languages identify different notions of unaccusativity (Perlmutter & Postal 1984) or ergativity (cf. Burzio 1993), and, at worst, that much of the current literature identifies fundamentally different notions of it. The latter, no doubt, is to be deplored. One derived sense of unaccusativity has been tested and identified mainly in case and aspect, or aktionsart. Languages such as German maintain a notion of unaccusativity derived from verbal intransitivity by way of derivative morphological processes (mainly deriving perfective intransitivity) or else by temporal or aspectual derivation (Abraham 1983, 1993, 1995, 2000), motivating this notion on grounds of split-ergativity in a number of Indo-European languages (Abraham 1996, 2000). The typical unaccusative predicate is the resultative perfect participle (RPP, as opposed to the active past participle, APP) which is devoid of its assigned external argument by 'absorption'. Clearly in languages such as German and Dutch, this aspectually based notion of unaccusativity needs to be extended to cover complex predicates and complement and adverbial phrases. In other work ergativity has been seen to underlie either thematic/ experiencer or else VP-internal subjecthood. I will not consider this latter notion at all, as its implications would lead us to far astray from the intended discussion (see Den Besten 1989, Belletti & Rizzi 1988, Pesetsky 1995, Abraham 1995, ch. 11.)

In Perlmutter/Postal's as well Burzio's sense this is what unaccusative/ergative essentially boils down to: unaccusative or ergative predicates select only internal arguments. First, such lexical predicates determine non-thematic subject positions because they are derived by subject 'absorption' (for example, by passivization or a similar syntactic or lexical process). Second, any thematic property for the external argument position such as Theme or Experiencer disqualifies a predicate for unaccusativity. This may suffice to deselect the position alluded to at the end of the above paragraph for further discussion. Suffice it, for the time being, to point out that RPPs are always derived, that their subject position has been deleted, and that their aspectual identity is clearly perfective/resultative.

In a short discussion McCloskey (1993) concluded that the position advocated by Belletti & Rizzi (1988) may be seen to support his own conclusions about his new linguistic material. Belletti & Rizzi take predicates such as *worry, interest, frighten* (cf. Den

Besten 1992) to be unaccusatives on the grounds that they project no external argument and that the remaining two internal arguments are Theme and Experiencer. Think, for example, of a predication as in (1).

(1)   The game strategy(Theme) of the 49ers pleases them(Experiencer)

One essential component of Belletti & Rizzi's argument is that in Italian the Experiencer position carries oblique case and, thus, is in a complement position and that the Theme argument is VP-internal. This analysis was challenged by Pesetsky (1992) mainly on the ground that the lexical thematic structure of the *piacere* verbs is in fact quite different from other unaccusative verbs and that they form a subclass of the causatives. Now, McCloskey argues that idiomatic swear predicates such as *fuck all, bugger all* and *sod all* behave like psych-predicates of the *preoccupare*-class and thus qualify for the unaccusative class like the *piacere*-verbs discussed by Belletti & Rizzi (1988).

The present discussion contests that. It will show that, at least from the point of view of German, what is neglected is case as a subject identifier. Moreover, it will identify a type of syntactic homonymy and, consequently inadequate subject reconstructability in English, that may be the reason for an analysis that appears not to be supportable. In the case that this view developed on material from German is strong enough to transfer to English, Belletti & Rizzi's extension of unaccusativity will lose one of its main corroborating arguments. In general, furthermore, the view that the identification of unaccusativity is language-type dependent will be dismissed as not covered by central methodological aspects of Universal grammar. What remains is that central notions such as lexical unaccusativity or ergativity need be identified by case and aspect languages such as German and Dutch and that extended identifications cannot be correct.

Let us first identify unaccusative predicates on the basis of German as a case and aktionsart language and let us follow this up by a brief presentation of the data discussed by McCloskey (1993).

2. Unaccusativity in German: a unified semantic-syntactic category

The following diagnostic tests for unaccusative predicates suggested by Haider (1984) form a solid heuristic basis.

(2)   a   nominal attributability: *der   *(ein)geschlafene   Junge*
                                       the   in-slept   boy
                                       "the boy that fell asleep"

      b   *be*-participle: *ist/*hat eingeschlafen* vs. *hat/*ist geschlafen*
                                       is/has in slept   vs. has/is slept
                                       "has fallen asleep"   vs. "has slept"

      c   agent nominals: *Schläfer*   vs. *Einschläfer*
                                       sleeper   vs. in-sleeper

      d   impersonal passive: *es wurde von allen (*ein)geschlafen*
                                       it was by all   (*in)slept

All of these diagnostics properties for unaccusativity can uniquely be explained to hide behind qualities of the passive perfect participle, at least in a language that makes overt

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auxiliary distinctions on the basis of perfectivity/resultativity. Thus, *sein=be* as an Aux for the past participle predication can only be assigned if the lexical participle is resultative; otherwise it needs to be *haben=have* in German (as well as Dutch and Yiddish). This covers the diagnostic in (2b). It is crucial to see that the rest follows from this directly: attributive participles can only be used if they are resultative, i.e. if they are *be*-predicates. This takes care of criteria (2a,c). Notice, moreover, that resultative participles need not be *passive* participles. Criterion (2d) follows from the fact that *be*-past participles cannot be bearers of agentive subjecthood and that, as adjectives, they cannot bear external arguments in the first place. Since passivity in German is contingent upon agentivity ('only agentive predicates passivize') (2d) is derivable from the adjectivehood and therefore from the Aux *be* going with resultative participles. The bottomline of these diagnostics is that unaccusatives in German are perfectives or resultatives semantically and participles (in a small variety also adjectives; see Cinque 1990; different in Abraham 1983, 1993, 1995) formally. As a consequence, it is patently false to speak about unaccusatives or ergatives in their (non)finite present tense forms and, therefore, also appearing in the form of present tense infinitives. All we can identify as unaccusatives are a well-defined class of past participles (and, marginally, adjectives). It has been argued along these lines that the semantics of resultativity has a direct and unique syntactic reflection as a secondary predicate (small clause with verbal particles, affixoids as well as complex directional adverbials as small clause BE-predicates; Abraham 1993, 1995, 2000).

This single-language based insight about ergativity is in itself supported by the type of languages that are case- and function-ergative only in the past or perfective (split ergative languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Balochi; see the discussion in Abraham 1993, 2000). Split-ergative case languages follow the nominative-accusative typology in the non-past tenses or non-perfective aspects, while projecting the absolutive-ergative pattern in the past or perfective. This supports in itself the single-language based derivative character of unaccusativity developed above. Under an UG perspective it would be wrong to disregard such typological aspects of ergativity.

3. A type of swear word unaccusativity

The following swear-phrases were introduced into the discussion about unaccusatives by McCloskey (1993).

(3)   a   They wrote *fuck all* this year.
            "I've written absolutely nothing this year"
    b   They've done *bugger all* about this year.
            "They've done absolutely nothing this year."
    c   I know *sod all* about connectionism.
            "I know absolutely nothing this year."

Crucially, McCloskey (1993) noted the following difference of these swear-phrases as regards their subjecthood (selection from McCloskey's (6a-j) as well as (a-d) and (8a-e)).

Restriction on subject position:
(4)   a   **Fuck all* would make us turn back now.
    b   **Fuck all* would refute this hypothesis.

c   *Fuck all could refuse that argument.

Suspension of the Restriction on subject position in Existential phrases:

(5)   a   There's fuck all (that) would make us turn back now.
        b   There's fuck all (that) would destroy these walls.
        c   There's fuck all (that) could control this mob.

Suspension of the Restriction on subject position in derived subject position of Passives:

(6)   a   Fuck all has been done about this problem.
        b   Fuck all was conceded in this strike.
        c   Bugger all has been written about this so far.

Although the grammaticality ratings are far from unambiguous (cf. Fn. 1 below), Mc-Closkey draws the following conclusions from these examples (as well as others).

(7)   a   The swear-phrase under inspection is a QP; see there is fuck all rice left.
        b   The subject position in (6) and (7) is a derived subject position as long as the QP in question is the lowest member in an A-chain (reaching down into the VP).
        c   The overt subject position in (5) is out because there is no categorial projection for the external argument. All it can appear as is as an internal argument despite its nominativity (as evident from (5) and (6) above).
        d   The swear-phrase goes also as an overt subject with what has been diagnosed as unaccusativity verbs such as happen, grow, emerge, change, eludes, start, escape etc., and it is clearly ungrammatical with what are equally undisputed unergative adjectives like good, relevant, dangerous.
        e   Likewise, the swear-phrases cooccur with psych-predicates such as in (8) below – predicates which have been taken to be unaccusatives of the pre-occupare-class much akin to the piacere-class.

(8)   a   Fuck all worries me anymore.
        b   Fuck all interests him anymore.
        c   Fuck all frightens them.
        e   Fuck all bothers them.
        f   Fuck all amuses them.
        g   Fuck all surprises her.
        h   Fuck all amuses them.
        i   Fuck all embarrasses her.

McCloskey's argument, to be sure, is based on comparison of clause-first positions of identical phrases as well as comparison of predicate classes, some of which have been identified as unaccusative. My counter claim will have to meet either identification: the first-clause position argument as well as the verb-paradigmatic comparison.

4. Swear words: argument or adjunct status?

The German equivalents of the English swear words show that case is involved which disallows identifying any of these phrases as clausal parts. Rather, they appear to be in-

terjections as is displayed by their appearance in accusative case. For (9) compare (4) above, the examples illustrating ungrammaticality on the overt subject occurrence.

(9)   a   *Ein*(en) Scheiß/Dreck* würden wir jetzt noch umdrehen
            a.ACC/*NOM shit   would we now still turn around
      b   *Ein*(en) Scheiß/Dreck* werden wir diese Annahme zurückweisen.
            a.ACC/*NOM shit   will we this assumption refuse
      c   *Ein*(en) Scheiß/Dreck* lehnen wir das ab.
            a.ACC/*NOM shit   refuse we that

In the two transitive clauses, (9b,c), the complement accusative position is occupied by *diese Annahme* and *das*, respectively. Therefore, the swear-phrase needs to be an adjunct. The swear-phrase cannot be the subject either since there is a genuine animate subject in the first place, in line with the semantic selection of the verbs.

Recall now that, in contrast to *fuck all* in underived subject function, the phrase was possible as a derived function. This is what happens with the swear-phrase in German passives. Compare (6) above.

(10)   a   *Ein(en) Scheiß* ist alles dagegen gemacht worden.
            a.NOM.(/ACC.) shit
            Fuck all has been done about this problem.
      b   *Ein(en) Scheiß* wurde in diesem Streik nachgegeben.
            Fuck all was conceded in this strike.
      c   *Ein(en) Scheiß* wurde bisher alles darüber geschrieben.
            Bugger all has been written about this so far.

Adopting accusative case, the swear-phrase is an adjunct and *alles* "all" is the subject of the clause as in (10a,c). The key issue is (10b), where *Ein Scheiß* may turn up as nominative and therefore qualifies for the subject (singular agreement on *wurde!*). But this conclusion would be wrong: (10b) is an impersonal construction with the agreement placeholder *es* in first position unless this position is occupied by the nominative adjunct *Ein*.NOM. *Scheiß*. See (10d).

(10)   d   *Es* wurde in diesem Streik *ein*(en) Scheiß* nachgegeben.

This forces the conclusion that there is a functional homonymy of the nominative phrase in the sense that the swear-phrase in clause-initial position may be misunderstood ('reconstructed') as subject. This, no doubt, is a valid conclusion for German, due to the option between accusative and nominative adjuncts. Is such a conclusion possible for McCloskey's English examples, too, where we have no case distinctions to determine the clausal status of the swear-phrase?

5. Syntactic homonymy, reconstruction, and the double constructional status of the swear-phrase.

Notice that German has no Q-lexical in its equivalent of what is probably a quantifying phrase in English. Notice the clausal accent position, which is emphatic and non-default (SMALL CAPS).

(11) a   There's FUCK all rice left.   (McCloskey 1993: 21; his ex. (4))
      b   Es ist einen SCHEIß/DRECK Reis übrig.
      c   Einen SCHEIß/DRECK ist Reis übrig.

This would legitimate an interjection status of *fuck* and thus clearly an adjunct status. See (12a) below. However, since the phrase never goes without the Q-lexical *all*, it extends scope over the ensuing measure phrase as well making plausible a different complex quantifying phrase in the sense of (12b). Notice the distinct placements of focus: FUCK *(it)* appears to go with the interjection reading as in (12a) (just as the American-English version of it, *fucking*), whereas *fuck (all)* operates as a negative focus operator on RICE in (12b). Thus, different distinct accents trigger, or go with, different distinct syntaxes of what is a lexically homonymic clause.

(12) a   There's [$_{VP}$ FUCK [$_{VP}$ [$_{QP}$ *all* [$_{NP}$ rice]]]] LEFT
      b   There's [$_{VP}$ [$_{QP}$ *fuck* [$_{QP}$ *all* [$_{NP}$ RICE]]]] left

In (12a), I take *fuck* to be a VP-adjunct separate from *all*[1]; in (12b), however, *fuck* is in constructional solidarity with *all*, and *fuck all rice* is a double scope extending Q-phrase: *fuck* (negative) extends scope over *all*, while *all* has narrow scope over the measure nominal *rice*. My claim is that the swear-phrase in English is ambiguous between these two constructional readings, (12a) and (12b). German, however, is different from English in that the Q-less equivalent in German allows only for the reading in (12a). That, indeed, English has the negative scope extension as in (12b) is made plausible by the fact that explicit negation is out in English. Recall that the semantics in each case is something like "nothing at all". The German equivalents support the double-negation and positive polarity item reading in English and the implied restriction on negating indefinites. Cf. (13a-c) in English and (14a-c) in German.

(13) a   *I've not written *fuck all* this year   (McCloskey 1993: 21; (5a-c))
      b   *Nobody has done *bugger all* this year.
      c   *I've never known *sod all* about connectionism.
(14) a   Ich habe (*nicht) einen Scheiß/Dreck dieses Jahr geschrieben.
           Ich habe *keinen Scheiß/Dreck dieses Jahr geschrieben.
      c   Ich habe (*nie) einen Scheiß/Dreck über Connectionism begriffen.
           Ich habe *keinen Scheiß/Dreck über Connectionism begriffen.

Note that the true non-negated equivalents of (13a-c) in German would include a genuine indefinite pronominal complement, *etwas* "something".

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[1] I take the version in (12a) to mean as much as the American variant of it, *There is fucking no rice left* or *There is no fucking rice left*. In either case, one can leave out *fucking*. Clearly, here, the swear phrase is parenthetical and can be dropped without affecting the grammaticality of the sentence. No doubt, however, this reading and analysis is out for *bugger/sod all*.

(15) a Ich habe dieses Jahr einen Scheiß/Dreck *etwas* geschrieben.
      c Ich habe einen Scheiß/Dreck jemals *etwas* über Connectionism begriffen.

In a way, then, the *fuck/bugger/sod* component of the English quantifying swear-phrase appears to cover the incorporated negative semantics of *Scheiß/Dreck*, which have been identified all along as positive polarity items in the first place. What is more, *ein(en) Scheiß/Dreck* is a solid idiom which an explicit negation cannot extend scope into. Cf. (14a,c) above. Extended to the English illustrations, this means that the swear-phrase has both the properties of an open phrase with the swear component extending scope over the Q-element, *all*, and that of a frozen phrase, closed idiomatically to the intrusion of scopal force. The claim here is that it this Janus-headed syntax and semantics that triggers the specific behavioral properties of the English swear-phrase. This interpretation would seem to allow the following analyses simultaneously.

(16) a They wrote nothing, *fuck/bugger/sod*, all this year.
      b They wrote nothing at (=*fuck,bugger/sod*) all this year.

It appears, then, that the undecided grammaticality status of (4), as opposed to the clearer (3), as well as (5)-(6)[2] could be due to the constructional ambiguity demonstrated above. It is to be emphasized that McCloskey himself quotes informants whose judgments on (3) are directly opposite to the one he developed his conclusions from.

This appears to account for the first of our questions above, i.e. the quest for a syntactic solution of the behavior of the swear-phrase in English. What remains to be discussed is McCloskey's argument based on the paradigmatic similarities.

6. Psych verbs, VP-internal subjects, and true unaccusativity.

According to the German diagnostics Psych verbs cannot be unaccusatives unless they are perfectives. From among all the examples of the *piacere* and the *preoccupare* class McCloskey lists only a few qualify for perfectivity: *grow, emerge, change, start; escape* (McCloskey's (9)-(10)). *come* qualifies as an unaccusative only if it attains the sense of *arrive* (McCloskey's (9f)). I disagree with both Cinque (1990) and McCloskey (1993) that such adjectives as *certain, clear* and *sure* are unaccusative (see for arguments Abraham 1995: 268ff.) any more than *good, relevant* or *dangerous*. For the class of Psych verbs, the fact that their subject is non-agentive, i.e. Theme, despite the fact that it is animate, should not be taken to have anything to do with unaccusativity. The same holds for the Italian equivalents whose animate Experiencers are in oblique case (*questo*(Theme-nominative) *mi*(Experiencer-Oblique) *piace* "this pleases me" = "I like that"). In Abraham (1983, 1995, 2000) it has been argued at great length that VP-internal subjects often are non-specific and, consequently, rhematic. Such VP-internality cannot be explained on the basis of thematic role distribution (see Pesetsky (1992) opposing the views extended by Belletti & Rizzi 1988) nor derivative syntactic behavior. Whatever the force of argu-

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[2] Cf. McCloskey (1993: fn. 2 p. 22): "Not all speakers find these examples ((3) in the present article; W.A.) fully grammatical [...]" nor are those that McCloskey characterized as ungrammatical rejected by all informants.

ment of McCloskey's examples of this sort, it does not appear to have anything to do with unaccusativity.

Apart from this paradigmatic type of support for unaccusativity, two criteria need to be met for the unique identification of a grammatical class: semantic as well as paradigmatic unification. It is claimed here *iterum atque iterum* that English is not a good, i.e. morphologically reliable, language to meet either of these criteria. German may not be the best either. Since the cross-linguistic, typological ergativity (which underlies the unaccusativity notion of both Perlmutter & Postal (1984) and Burzio (1986)) not only supports the unifiable mono-lingual syntactic diagnostics displayed in (2) for German, but also covers the diagnostic characteristics for English (as demonstrated originally by Keyser & Roeper 1984), it appears to form a strong case for the claim developed here. The answer to the question implied in the title of this article "(At least) two types of unaccusativity - or none at all" thus must be: "only one, but then on the basis of perfectivity". If this is correct, McCloskey (1993) has not identified a new phenomenon of unaccusativity, nor have Belletti & Rizzi (1988) or many others in the mainstream of modern formal syntax.

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