

Marked vs. unmarked unaccusativity with alternating verbs: Linking diachronic and experimental data.

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In this talk, we discuss how psycholinguistic studies can help in determining what constitutes a verb class and how this class changes over time. We focus on alternating verbs that can occur in transitive (causative) as well as intransitive (anticausative, unaccusative, inchoative) structures, such as Italian *rompere* ‘to break’. In languages like French or Italian, unaccusative verbs can be either be marked by a reflexive pronoun (R), as in *La chaise se casse* (‘the chair breaks’), or not (U), as in *La température augmente* (‘the temperature raises’). Although exhibiting different morphological properties, both marked and unmarked unaccusatives are said to share the same event structure, i.e. the absence of external causation and a subject with non-agentive properties (e.g., Dowty 1979, Jackendoff 1987, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995).

Many of the verbs which are marked with the reflexive pronoun in Modern French used to be unmarked in Old French (ex: *fondre* ‘to melt’ in Old French became *se fondre* ‘to melt’ in Modern French), suggesting that change has occurred in this verb class. Auxiliary selection is a second diagnostic that changed, e.g. from OF ‘be’ (*l'eau estoit refroidie* ‘the water has become cold’) to ModF ‘have’ (*l'eau avait refroidie*). We aim to determine what triggered this change from Old to Modern French. Specifically, we investigate whether their shared syntactic structure (presence or absence of the reflexive marker) or semantic factors (shared event structure) play a more decisive role.

We use psycholinguistic methods to address this question in experiments targeting these typical UA properties. In line with previous language processing and priming work by, e.g., Felser (2017) and Kootstra & Muysken (2019), we assume that instances of historical change can also be elicited in synchronic experimental conditions (“change in the lab”) and that the factors causing these changes should also elicit strong priming effects. In this sense, we believe that the use of psycholinguistic methods can shed light on the mechanisms underlying language change.

Several authors have pointed out that Old French displayed a situation similar to that found in Modern standard Italian (e.g. Gougenheim, 1973). In Old French as well as in Italian the diagnostics provide a well-defined definition of unaccusatives, as opposed to Modern French. Therefore we present two experiments on Italian, and plan similar experiments for Modern French in order to parallel the historical change from Old to Modern French.

In a first experiment, we tested the hypothesis that alternating verbs, when primed in their unaccusative form (e.g. *The vase broke*), elicit more unaccusative target structures than when primed with their transitive counterparts (e.g. *The wind broke the vase*). The results of a priming task with 48 native speakers of Italian show evidence of UA priming when primes and targets share the same verbs.

In an ongoing experiment, we explore whether UA priming obtains even if primes and targets contain different verbs. If we observe priming effects, they can be associated either with the syntactic (surface) structure (i.e. the presence or absence of a reflexive marker) or with the semantic (event) structure (i.e. the absence of external causation).

To disentangle the two factors, we designed a follow-up experiment, where the same production task is carried out with cross-lexical prime-target items involving different types of unaccusative verbs (reflexive marked unaccusatives, such as *la sedia si rompe* ‘the chair breaks’ vs. unmarked unaccusative verbs, such as *la pentola bolle* ‘the kettle boils’). Such an experiment will provide evidence as to whether syntactic overlap between prime and target (identical marking) leads to more priming than semantic overlap only (different marking). On the basis of these findings, we will discuss possible links between processing experiments and diachronic change. For instance, if the findings of the experiment reveal that syntactic structure has a stronger priming effect than event structure, we would expect change to occur with verbs that share the same surface structure (either reflexive-marked or unmarked). Conversely, if event structure exhibits a stronger effect, we expect change to have affected both unmarked and marked verbs simultaneously, by virtue of sharing the same semantic properties. More generally, we explore the hypothesis whether priming effects of event structure independent of syntactic overlap suggest that historical change occurs with reference to verb classes that are defined semantically (by shared event structure), rather than syntactically (by presence or absence of the reflexive marker).

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