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The case of unaccusatives in Classical Portuguese

Introduction

The present paper is an analysis of the case of the arguments of unaccusative verbs in Classical (16th-18th century) and Modern (19th-20th cent.) Portuguese, where I will show how one diachronic process, the restructuring of Portuguese from a topic oriented language to a subject oriented language, could lead to a change in the attribution of case to the arguments of unaccusative verbs, from being only nominative in Classical Portuguese to also being some other, unspecified case in the modern language. I will start by introducing the syntactic basis of unaccusativity and how unaccusative contexts are best analysed within a generative framework in Modern Portuguese. I will discuss the attribution of case to the subjects of these verbs as described by Costa (2004), and supply examples that show why they can not always be nominative. Then I will move on to my own material from classical Portuguese (Eide 2006) and show how the subjects there must necessarily be nominative. Finally I will relate the change to the syntactic restructuring that took place from Classical to Modern Portuguese.

Unaccusativity

Unaccusative verbs are usually defined as verbs that have only one NP argument and the argument is internal, see for instance Levin and Hovav (1995). This argument is base generated in the object position and often behaves very much like an object, even though it in principle can never have accusative case (Burzio 1986). The structural difference between transitive, intransitive and unaccusative verbs are shown in (1)- (3).

(1) Transitive John bought the book NP [V NP]
(2) Intransitive: John read NP [V]
(3) Unaccusative: John came (came John) [V NP]

In (1) there are two arguments, one external, which is the subject, and one internal which is the object and is inside the brackets. In (2) there is one argument that is external to V, in (3) it is internal to V and the verb is unaccusative.

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The basic structure of the clauses before any movement has taken place have been outlined in a tree structure as in (4), (5) and (6).

Typical unaccusative verbs are verbs of inherently directed motion, such as *return, arrive* and verbs of appearance and occurrence, such as *appear, happen, come, rise*.

The unaccusativity hypothesis divides verbs into three types instead of the ordinary two types: transitives and intransitives. Just like a verb can be transitive in some contexts and intransitive in others, it can also be transitive in some contexts and unaccusative in others. Typical such verbs are the verbs of change of state, such as *open, close, break* as in (7),(8),(9) and (10).

(7) John opened the door  
(8) The door opened  
(9) Bill broke the window  
(10) The window broke
All the above mentioned types of verbs: verbs of inherently directed motion, verbs of appearance and occurrence as well as verbs of change of state are represented in the material described in this paper.

**The Case of unaccusatives in Modern Portuguese**

Since I shall argue that the attribution of Case in Classical Portuguese was different from what we find in Modern Portuguese, I shall outline how Costa (2004) argues that the subject of the unaccusative verb may be assigned Case by movement to Spec, IP or *in situ*. Subjects in Portuguese are usually preverbal and are usually assigned nominative Case when they move to SpecIP. A standard tree analysis of a transitive Portuguese sentence (11) is given in (12)

(11)  João comeu o bolo  
      *John ate the cake*

(12)

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          IP
            O João
              I'
              
                comeu
                V
                t_i
              
                VP
                  t_j
                  
                    V'
                    
                      NP
                        O bolo
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Subjects of unaccusatives are, as mentioned in the introduction, base generated post verbally, as an internal argument to the verb. In Modern Portuguese, in unmarked contexts, these subjects can appear *either* before *or* after the verb. When they are located after the verb, they are analysed as in (13), when they are preverbal, they are analysed as being in Spec, IP (14), like the subjects of transitives and intranstives.

(13)  Chegou o João  
      *Came John*

(14)  O João chegou  
      *John came*

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2 By Case, I mean abstract Case, and it is assumed that “every phonetically realised NP must be assigned abstract Case” (Chomsky 1986)

The question is how the subject in (13) gets Case, since it does not move to Spec,IP. Costa (2004) argues that a solution to the problem of lack of Case is to suppose that the subjects in question may be assigned nominative Case where they are, through government. Evidence for this is provided by the Portuguese pronouns, since these appear in their nominative form whether they are situated before or after the verb. If we substitute the subject noun with a pronoun, we get:

(15) Chegou ele  
     *Come he (not: came him)*

(16) Ele chegou  
     He came

However, this analysis is not unproblematic, since there is no equivalent stressed accusative pronoun form in Portuguese and, as we shall see later in (19) and (20), there is not always agreement between the verb and the subject.

An alternative solution is to suppose that they are assigned some other Case, for instance *partitive* Case, as has been proposed by Belletti (1988) for Italian. Or even, that they are not assigned Case at all. The fact that they cannot always be assigned nominative Case becomes clearer if we look at examples (17) - (21). In (17) the subject is preverbal and receives nominative Case the ordinary way. In (18), the subject is postverbal, and there is agreement with the verb, thus suggesting that it is in fact a subject, and it may be assigned Case through government. In (19), which is a common construction in spoken Portuguese there is no agreement. One could still argue that it is a subject, since it is the only argument in the clause. If we recur to the rule that all clauses must have a subject this could be a probable solution. However, dialectally, we also find examples such as the one from Carrilho (2000) in (21). This example might indicate that (19) could just as well be analysed as having a covert empty pro with which the verb agrees, corresponding to the overt one in (21). In (21) even if *uma trovoada* were plural, the verb would still agree with the expletive *ele* and should not be analysed as a subject, in fact it does not have any subject properties: It does not agree with the verb and it must be in postverbal position. This construction is not possible with a plural subject in preverbal position (20).

(17) Os homens chegaram  
     *The-pl man-pl came-pl*

(18) Chegaram os homens  
     *Come-pl the-pl man-pl*

(19) Chegou os homens  
     *Come-sg the-pl man-pl*
(20) *Os homens chegou.  
*the-pl man-pl came-sg

(21) Ele há-de vir uma trovoada  
*It/He will come a shower  
*There is a shower coming  
(Carrilho 2000)

The clause in (21) is an example of a construction normally found in Scandinavian languages and French where verbs of zero valency always have a dummy subject that null subject languages such as Spanish, Portuguese and Italian usually do not have. The structure is as in (22):

(22) [IP pro V₁ [VP ]]

In dialectal Portuguese this can be exemplified by data from Carrilho (2000) of a weather verb which typically has zero valency:

(23) Ele chove tanto  
*It/He rains a lot  
(Carrilho 2000)

To sum up the analysis of modern Portuguese, the subject can receive Case in IP and group with the subjects or it can remain in its base position where it may receive Case through government or it may even not receive Case at all. In cases where there is no agreement, the arguments resemble objects more than subjects.

**The data from Classical Portuguese**

In the Classical Portuguese material⁴ we have evidence for both pre- and postverbal subjects with agreement, but unlike Modern Portuguese, there is no evidence of postverbal subjects without agreement or of constructions with expletives⁵. In fact, expletives start to appear in the texts from the 19th century, which is when the modern stage of the Portuguese language is usually said to have begun and when a change in the word order had taken place. In what follows is an outline of the word order in Classical Portuguese followed by an analysis of the position and Case assignment of arguments of the unaccusative verbs.

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⁴ The texts analysed are from the Tycho Brahe parsed corpus of Portuguese texts.
⁵ While this type of negative evidence is by no means conclusive, it is still worth mentioning. The lack of expletives could also simply refer to the types of texts we are dealing with, since it is typically a colloquial form.
Classical Portuguese had a verb second like structure, similar to the modern Scandinavian languages. This was in combination with a topic–comment structure, the result being that the topic of a sentence, which was usually old information, would be followed by the verb in second place, and after the verb came everything else. The fact that the verb always was in second place, led to a relatively high number of inversions where an adverb or the object would start the sentence and the subject would then be left in a postverbal position, whether the verb was transitive, intransitive, reflexive, predicative or unaccusative as examples (24)-(28) from the corpus show.

Intransitive:

(24) Na Corte andou este Rei dous anos (Diogo do Couto Décadas)
    at court was this king two years

Transitive:

(25) Isto nos afirmou muito um homem Polaco, chamado Gabriel
    This to-us affirmed strongly a polish man called Gabriel (Diogo do Couto Décadas)

Reflexive:

(26) Com isto se despedio Belchior Fernandes
    With this took his leave Belchior Fernandes (Diogo do Couto Décadas)

Predicative:

(27) E assim era este bárbaro tão afeiçoado aos Cristãos, que ...
    And in this way was this barbarian so friendly towards the christians, that…(Diogo do Couto Décadas)

Unaccusative:

(28) Aqui surgio a Armada, e se deteve trinta e dous dias
    Here appeared the Amada and stayed thirty two days (Diogo do Couto Décadas)

These inversions are usually analysed as a result of the verb moving to a higher functional projection or as movement to C, as illustrated in (29).8

(29)

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6 This structure has not survived into modern Portuguese where subjects appear mostly before the verb (Galves and Sousa 2005).
7 The clitic pronouns are not “counted” in the verb second analysis.
8 In this paper, we avoid the discussion of whether Classical Portuguese was a V2 language or not. For different opinions on the subject, see Galves and Galves (1995), Galves, Britto et al. (2005) and Eide (2006; 2007).
In this tree, the verb has moved to C and is in second place, preceded by the topic Na corte. This leaves the subject in SpecIP whether the subject is of an unaccusative, transitive or intransitive verb. In this way, in Classical Portuguese, with a topic – comment structure, the linear position of postverbal arguments of the unaccusative verbs coincided with that for subjects of transitive and unergative verbs as well as with the objects of transitive verbs: They were all situated after the verb. In fact, one thing that really could distinguish a subject from other arguments such as objects, was agreement.

Implicitly in the V2-like structure above, is a supposition that the subject is always in IP.

(30)  [CP Na corte andou [IP este rei ...]
(31)  [CP Isto nos afirmou [IP um homem polaco
(32)  [CP Aqui surgiu [IP a armada...

One could argue that the subject of the unaccusative verb in (32) is in its base position, within VP, as it is in Modern Portuguese. There are however, indications that the subject does in fact need to move to IP, for instance if we look at a VP delimiter, such as the small predicative adverb bem (well). This small adverb marks the boundaries of the VP in Modern Portuguese(Costa 2004). If an argument is before this small adverb, it is a sign that it is located outside VP. Costa has shown that when objects are new information, they are located after this adverb, while if they are old information, they occur before the adverb. If we assume that this particular adverb has the same properties in Classical Portuguese, the example in
(33), where the subject *o cavalo – the horse* has not been previously mentioned in the text and should be considered new information would indicate that even subjects that are new information move out of VP, unlike what we find for the equivalent sentence in Modern Portuguese (34).

(33) porque lhe não parou o cavalo bem (Diogo do Couto *Décadas*)
    *because him not stop the horse well*
    *because his horse did not quite stop.*

(34) porque não lhe parou bem o cavalo. (Modern Portuguese)

The main point that I make for Classical Portuguese is that the linear order of the argument constituents in this type of verb second like Topic – Comment structure is such that subjects and objects will often appear in the same place, right after the verb. And in many cases the only way to distinguish subjects and objects is whether or not there is agreement with the verb.

In Modern Portuguese, the subject would, in neutral contexts⁹, and in most other cases, be before the verb, as in the examples (35), (36) and (37) which are modern “translations” of (24), (26) and (27)

(35) (Na corte) Este rei andou dois anos
(36) (Com isto) Belchior Fernandes despediu-se.
(37) (Assim) O bárbaro era tão afeiçoado…

These examples would all have the structure in (38)

(38) (XP) [IP S_i V_j [VP_j i j …

But the unaccusative verb in (28) allows for two word orders, even in neutral contexts, as in (39) with two different structures, one as in (40) where the subject is in SpecIP and gets nominative Case and another as in (41) where the subject stays in its base position and may or may not receive nominative Case:

(39) A armada surgiu/surgiu a armada.

Which represent the structures

(40) [IP S_i V_j [VP_j i j … or [IP A armada_i surgiu_j [VP_j i j…

(41) [IP V_j [VP_j S… or [IP surgiu_j [VP_j a armada ...

In Modern Portuguese then, unlike in Classical Portuguese, the argument of unaccusatives behaves differently than the subject arguments of transitives and intransitives and

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⁹ By neutral, I mean that the sentence is an appropriate answer to the open question: “What happened?”
distinguishes itself by sometimes remaining in the designated post verbal object position. The subjects of the transitive and intransitive on the other hand, always move to SpecIP.

Nominative Case must be attributed to the subject, either through agreement in IP or through government. However, when there is no agreement, we cannot assume we are dealing with a subject, and we cannot assume a nominative abstract Case. We must then assume that the argument receives a Case that is not nominative.

The lack of evidence for postverbal arguments without agreement and the lack of evidence for empty pros in Classical Portuguese can then be attributed to the fact that in Classical Portuguese, the subject of unaccusatives always moves to Spec IP and always receives nominative Case. In Modern Portuguese on the other hand, the argument of the unaccusative verb may remain within VP in its base position making its status as subject less evident.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that a typological change from a TVX structure to an SVO structure has implications for the attribution of Case to arguments of unaccusative verbs. In an SVO structure, it is likely that the argument of unaccusatives cooccurs with the object, and may be analysed as an object and receive some other Case than nominative.

In a Verb second structure on the other hand, the subject of the unaccusatives coincided with the subjects of transitives and intransitives. When postverbal, it always occurred in IP and received nominative Case.

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