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Affected object unergatives

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In this snippet à la Eminem, I try cleaning out a skeleton-containing closet, this one from late 20th century linguistic theory. The issue that still lingers is the lexical semantics of the verbs *eat*, *drink*, *read*, *write* and *smoke*. Although generally regarded as transitive verbs, unlike true transitives they optionally appear without their “sub-categorized arguments”, e.g., *I eat sashimi* vs. *I eat*.

I argue that such verbs are unergatives belonging to Perlmutter 1978’s volitional acts subclass, e.g., *dance* and *run*. Note that unlike recognized unergatives, *eat* and several of its kin do not have cognate objects. One can say *to dance a dance*, but there is no equivalent for *eat*. Cross-linguistically, however, one often finds *eat-class* unergatives with cognate objects, e.g., Turkish:

- (1) Yazi yazmak.
written-thing write.
‘To write.’
- (2) Yemek yemek.
edible-thing eat
‘To eat.’ (Thomas, 1967: 129)

In their intransitive forms, there is a typically a cultural dimension to their interpretation; *to dance* means to move the body in a manner recognized as a dance; *to eat* means to consume something recognized as food. Naturally, interpretations of what constitutes a dance or food are culturally determined.

Transitive versions of the verbs *dance* and *eat* are analogous. *To dance the tango* and *to eat sashimi* have post-verbal NPs that are just more specific examples of a dance and food, respectively. Submission of *eat-class* unergatives to two resultative diagnostics that discriminate transitives from unergatives supports my case.

The DIRECT OBJECT RESTRICTION (Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 1995: 33) requires all resultatives to be predicated of immediately post-verbal NPs in English. Despite the terminology, not all are Direct Objects:

Transitive Resultatives

- (3) The boxer punched his opponent senseless.

Unergatives require a “dummy reflexive” to syntactically save the construction:

Unergative Resultatives

- (4) They danced themselves unconscious.
- (5) They laughed themselves sober.

Eat-class unergatives also require such a reflexive. With its “subcategorized argument”, *eat* is unacceptable, a paradox for the view that it is transitive. Only an unaffected object such as *bowl*, below, saves it, similar to the role of the reflexive:

Eat-Class Resultatives

- (6) He ate himself comatose
- (7) She read herself blind.
- (8) She ate the bowl/*rice empty.

Examples 9, 10, and 11 again show *eat-class* verbs conforming to unergatives:

Transitive Nominalizations

- (9) The watering of tulips flat is a criminal offense in Holland.
(Carrier and Randall, 1992: 201).

Unergative Nominalizations

- (10) *The dancing of oneself unconscious is highly admired by denizens of Manhattan’s discos.

Eat-Class Nominalizations

- (11) *The drinking of oneself stupefied is a popular pastime among linguists.

There is one apparent problem, however. Chomsky (1986: 9) notes the contrast between *a dancing bear* and **an eating man*. This pinpoints a significant distinction. The *eat-class*, in contrast with recognized unergatives, takes internal arguments that are concrete. I suggest that, as is the case with true transitives, these objects are affected in some relevant sense, and therefore, like transitive verbs, need to specify an internal argument in participial adjective constructions, e.g., *a flesh-eating man* (cf. transitive: *a bunker-destroying missile/*a destroying missile*).

References

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