

# The Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH)

Mostly based on Baker 1997: Thematic Roles and Syntactic Structure from -

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- *The Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH)*

Identical thematic relationships between items are represented by identical structural relationships between those items at the level of D-structure.

(Baker 1988, 1997)

- Which of the participants in a given event is the subject of the sentence?
- Which of the participants is the object?
- What about participants that are oblique NPs or appear with adpositions?

In a simple active transitive sentence, the verb and the theme form a constituent to the exclusion of the agent. That is, the agent asymmetrically c-commands the theme.

This is how we have been drawing our trees but it can also be tested. There are tests that show that the verb and the theme can form a constituent to the exclusion of the agent (Baker '97):

1a. John [<sub>VP</sub> hit the table ] and Bill did [<sub>VP</sub> (so) ] too.

b. John said he would hit the table, and [<sub>VP</sub> hit the table] I guess he did --.

2a. \* [<sub>XP</sub> John hit ] the table and [<sub>XP</sub> (so) ] did the chair.

b. \*John said he would hit the table, [<sub>XP</sub> John hit] I guess -- did it.

Asymmetrical c-command is also evidenced by  
Binding tests (Baker '97):

- 3a. John<sub>i</sub> washed himself<sub>i</sub>  
b. John<sub>i</sub> washed pictures of himself<sub>i</sub>

- 4a \*Heself<sub>i</sub> washed John<sub>i</sub> .  
b. \*Friends of himself<sub>i</sub> washed John<sub>i</sub>

⇒ agents are higher than themes  
(UTAH)

- Some difficult cases: psych verbs  
(near) synonymous verbs with opposite linking  
patterns (Baker '97):

5a. John likes long novels.

b. Peter fears dogs

c. Mary worries about the ozone layer

6a. Long novels please John.

b. Dogs frighten Peter.

c. The ozone layer worries Mary.

So what to do in the light of (5-6)?

- I. Give up the UTAH
- II. There is some syntactic operation that obscures the original sites of generation (movement)
- III. The theta-roles in (5-6) only look similar. They are different, so are linked to different positions.

Dowty:

Alternative linking due to neither participant being an obvious choice for agent or patient. *John* is animate and sentient (agentlike), but the novels cause an emotional reaction in *John* (less agentlike).

Examples in (6) can be inchoative. Not so the ones in (5). So there is a difference in the meaning of the verbs.



Pesetsky:

The following two are not the same:

7a. John is angry at the article.

b. The article angered John.

Can you tell a difference?

7a: the target of the anger is the article

7b: the target of the anger does not have to be the article:  
*The article made John angry at the government.*

So, *John* is undergoing a change of state in (7b) and so is a theme, while *the article* is the cause, and so like an agent.

Q: “Does the UTAH stipulate the exact positions of each argument, or does it only put conditions on their position relative to one other?” (Baker '97)

What does this question mean? What are the different predictions of the two choices?

RUTAH vs UTAH

In favor of RUTAH:

Recipients can be a subject but only in the absence of an agent  
(Baker '97, Speas):

- 8a. John received a package from Baraboo.
- b. Mary sent a package to John from Baraboo.

Instruments can be a subject but only in the absence of an agent  
(Baker '97, Levin):

- 9a. John loaded the truck with a crane.
- b. The crane loaded the truck.

What would you say about (8, 9) if you wanted to defend UTAH?

- 10a. John loaded the truck with a pitchfork.
- b.\* The pitchfork loaded the truck.

In favor of UTAH:

Intransitive verbs.

What does RUTAH predict for intransitives?

What does UTAH predict for intransitives?

UTAH => “unaccusativity hypothesis”: with verbs whose sole argument is a theme, that argument is generated initially as an object.

We find unaccusativity diagnostics in more and more languages.

What are unaccusativity diagnostics?

Here are some:

a) *Auxiliary Selection*

In most Romance and Germanic languages (English and Spanish being exceptions) unaccusative verbs, like French *arriver* (arrive), select BE, while unergatives, like French *rougir* (become red), select HAVE (see Ackema 2000, Cocchi 1994, Haider and Rindler-Schjerve 1987, Perlmutter 1989; Reuland 2000; Chierchia 2004, Randall et al. 2004, Sorace 2004).

11a. Marie est arrivée en retard

‘Marie arrived late’

b. Marie a rougi de honte

‘Marie became red with shame’

c. Marie est arrêtée

‘Marie was arrested’

## b) *Resultative constructions*

Resultative phrases may be predicated only of the object of a transitive verb, never of the subject.

Intransitive verbs split into two groups: resultative phrases appear with unaccusatives, but not with unergatives (Levin and Rappaport-Hovav 1995, Tsujimura 1994, Van Voorst 1986, see also Rappaport-Hovav and Levin 2001):

12a. She licked the knife clean

b. \*Dora shouted hoarse

c. The bottle broke open

c) *Perfect/passive adjectival participles.*

Participles of transitive verbs can be predicated of the nouns corresponding to their direct objects (4a). Unergative verbs cannot form adjectival participles (4b), while this is possible with unaccusative ones (4c) (Williams 1981, Grewendorf 1989, Hoekstra 1984, Levin & Rapaport 1986; Grimshaw 1990; Zaenen 1993 among many others; see Pesetsky 1995 for critical discussion of the validity of the diagnostic for English):

- 13 a. der geküßte Student  
the kissed student
- b. \*der gearbeitete Student  
\*the worked student
- c. der eingeschlafene Student  
the fallen-asleep student

d) *ne-cliticization*

In Italian, cliticization of a partitive phrase by the clitic *ne* is only possible with direct objects (5a). Unaccusatives permit *ne*-cliticization (5b), unergatives do not (5c) (see Belletti and Rizzi 1981, Burzio 1986, Lonzi 1985, among others):

14a. Giovanni *ne* ha insultati due  
John of them has insulted two

b. *Ne* arrivano molti  
of them arrive many

c. \**ne* telefonano molti  
of them telephone many

For other languages similar looking tests, based on extraction, have been proposed: *en-* extraction in French (Legendre 1989), *wat-voor/was-für* split in Dutch/German (Den Besten 1982).



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