

UNACCUSATIVE VERBS IN DUTCH AND THE SYNTAX-SEMANTICS INTERFACE

ANNIE ZAENEN

Abstract – This paper shows that the phenomena that have been treated as reflexes of the unaccusative/unergative distinction in Dutch actually characterize two different classes of intransitive verbs. I also show that both verb classes can be characterized semantically so that the behaviour of Dutch intransitive verbs does not show the need for a syntactic distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs.

Dutch was one of the first languages to be studied in some detail in connection with the so-called Unaccusative Hypothesis. Perlmutter (1978) shows that not all intransitive verbs in Dutch behave in the same way with respect to the formation of impersonal passives. A relevant contrast is given in (1) and (2):

- (1) (a) De jongens werkten.
The boys worked/were working.
(b) Er werd (door de jongens) gewerkt.
There was worked by the boys.
- (2) (a) De jongens vielen.
The boys fell.
(b)* Er werd door de jongens gevallen.
There was fallen by the boys.

In Relational Grammar, this contrast was made to follow from the hypothesis that an intransitive verb like the one in (1) has an initial 1 and that the one in (2) has an initial 2. Verbs like the one in (1) are called ‘unergatives’ and those illustrated in (2) ‘unaccusatives’. Subsequently the term ‘Unaccusative Hypothesis’ has been used rather loosely to refer to any account of contrasts like the one given above that appeals to the idea that the subjects of some intransitive verbs have properties in common with the objects of transitive verbs. In the example under consideration according to the initial account the similarity was that both the objects of personal passives and the subjects of unaccusatives have been advanced from 2 to 1. Perlmutter’s original account also contained the claim that the class of unaccusative verbs could be semantically characterized but Rosen (1980,

1982) argued that the assignment of initial grammatical relations could not be semantic because in different languages different verb classes exhibit the properties that are supposed to be the diagnostics for unergativity or unaccusativity. The claim, of course, rests upon showing clearly that in all the cases discussed, the diagnostics are indeed diagnostic for something that can be plausibly argued to be the same phenomenon, namely the classification of the intransitive verbs in these two classes; nobody would claim that all the differences in behavior between two classes of intransitive verbs have to be reduced to the difference between unergatives and unaccusatives, e.g. one can account for the contrast between (3) and (4) without appealing to the unaccusative hypothesis.

(3) John is eating.

(4)* John is knowing.

I will argue here that the contrast between (1) and (2) is one of the many contrasts which distinguish between semantically motivated verb classes in Dutch, that the distinction indeed does not pick out the same class of verbs picked out e.g. by *ne*-cliticization or auxiliary selection in Italian but that a semantic characterization can very well provide the basis for a syntactic account of these constructions, although not as simple as the one envisioned by Rosen. The characterization of the semantic properties of the verbs under discussion, however, raises a few problems as to what needs to be considered as part of the meaning of a particular word, what is part of its syntax and what can be left out as being generally predictable. It also raises the question about what role intermediate notions like 'theme' and 'agent' can play in cross linguistic characterizations of verb classes. So my point is not to show that Rosen (1980, 1982) was literally wrong but that the interface between syntax and semantics should not be ignored.

1. POSSIBLE REFLEXES OF THE UNACCUSATIVE/UNERGATIVE DISTINCTION AND THE MISMATCHES

Although Perlmutter's original work for Dutch is careful not to claim any other effects of the unaccusative distinction in that language than the contrast in passivizability, other researchers

have tried to argue that there are other reflexes of the unaccusative/ergative distinction. From a theoretical point of view this makes perfect sense of course: if the distinction only explains one set of facts, it is not much better than just stating that there are two classes of verbs. For Dutch, Hoekstra (1984) relates three sets of contrasts to the unaccusative/unergative distinction.

1. Impersonal passives (see (1) and (2))
2. Auxiliary selection, as illustrated in (5) and (6)

- (5) (a) Jan heeft getelefoneerd.
John has phoned.
(b)* Jan is getelefoneerd (active reading).
John is phoned.
- (6) (a) Jan is gearriveerd.
John is arrived.
(b)* Jan heeft gearriveerd.
John has arrived.

On the basis of examples like the ones above one might entertain the hypothesis that unaccusative verbs select *zijn* (to be), whereas unergative verbs select *hebben* (to have).

3. Prenominal past participles.

- (7) (a)* De gewerkte man.
The worked man.
(b) De werkende man.
The working man.
- (8) (a) Het gevallen blad.
The fallen leaf.
(b) Het vallende blad.
The falling leaf.

Here it seems that only unaccusative verbs allow for a past participle used in prenominal position with an active meaning, whereas both types of verbs allow for the prenominal use of the present participle¹.

1. Only verbs that are clearly intransitive are discussed here; the use of *zijn* with verbs like *vergeten* (forget), *bevalen* (please) is not discussed.

Tempting as the idea that these three phenomena have a common explanation may be, I will show that it is impossible to reduce all the facts to one conditioning factor. I will now present some examples of verbs that appear to be unaccusative according to one of the tests but are unergative according to the other.

1. Verbs that have no impersonal passive but select *hebben* as their auxiliary:

As pointed out in Levin (1986), auxiliary selection and impersonal passive formation do not correlate very well. Some examples, originally given in Permuter (1978), are²:

- (9) (a) Het concert heeft een hele tijd geduurd.
The concert has lasted a long time.
(b)* Er werd (door het concert) een hele tijd geduurd.
There was lasted a long time (by the concert).

2. A fourth possible test might be found in *-er* nominalizations as illustrated in (i) and (ii):

- (i) De werker
The worker.
(ii)* De valler.
The faller.

Unergative verbs seem to allow *-er* affixation, whereas unaccusatives do not.

As this is a less productive word formation rule, it is less clear what the data shows; my feeling is that all the verbs that allow impersonal passives also allow *-er* affixation, provided that the activity can be seen as habitual and that the *-er* is not blocked by an already existing word. A few existing examples are given in (iii):

- (iii) (a) de danser, slaper, spreker, denker.
the dancer, sleeper, speaker, thinker.
(b)? de blaffer, klopper, hoester.
the barker, knocker, cougher.
(c)* de mompeler (cf. mompelaar).
the mutterer.

For the other verb classes things are less clear:

- (iv) (a)* de groeier, stikker, valler.
the grower, suffocater, faller
(b)? de stinker (the word exists but with a different reading).
the stinker.

I will not consider this criterion in what follows.

- (10) (a) Dat hout heeft goed gebrand.
That wood has burned well.
(b)* Er werd door dat hout goed gebrand.
There was burned well by that wood.

Most of the verbs that Perlmutter calls duratives behave in this way.

The other set of exceptions are 'verbs of non-voluntary emission of stimuli that impinge on the senses' (Perlmutter, 1978):

- (11) (a) De badkamer heeft gestonken.
The bathroom has stunk.
(b)* Er werd (door de badkamer) gestonken.
There was stunk (by the bathroom).

I know of no clearcut exceptions in the other direction, namely of verbs that take only *zijn* as an auxiliary and allow for an impersonal passive. Levin (1986) gives a few examples but we will see later that they are only acceptable with a special interpretation.

2. Verbs that take *zijn* as their auxiliary and prenominal participles:

Here the match is nearly perfect: the only verbs that take *zijn* but do not allow a prenominal past participle that I am aware of are given in the (b) forms of (12) to (14):

- (12) (a) Hij gebleven.
He is remained.
(b)* De gebleven jongen.
The remained/stayed boy.
(c) De thuis gebleven jongen.
The boy who stayed home.
- (13) (a) Hij is gegroeid.
He is grown.
(b)? De gegroeide jongen.
The grown boy.
(c) De opgegroeide jongen.
The grown boy.
- (14) (a) Hij is/heeft gegaan.
He is/has gone.

- (b)* De gegane jongen.
The gone boy.
(c) De naar school gegane jongen.
The to school gone boy.

These verbs and the verb *zijn* (to be) itself will remain problems under my account³.

3. Impersonal passives and participles.

The past participles of verbs that allow impersonal passives do not occur prenominally; however there are verbs that do not allow impersonal passives but nevertheless have no prenominal past participles, as illustrated in (15):

- (15) (a)* Er wordt gestonken.
There is stunk.
(b)* De gestonken badkamer.
The stunk bathroom.

These are again the duratives and the verbs of non-voluntary emission of stimuli that impinge on the senses.

2. AN ACCOUNT

The data suggest that instead of a 2-way distinction between unergatives and unaccusatives, we need a 3-way distinction, as diagrammed in (16):

(16)

| | | |
|----|-------------|----------|
| | B | -B |
| A | telefoneren | aankomen |
| -A | stinken | sterven |

3. One might attempt to analyze *blijven* (to remain) as 'not leave', as for example, in Leech (1970) but that will not help us. As will be argued below, the basic distinction between the intransitive verbs that take *zijn* and those that take *hebben* is that the former are telic but *blijven* does not behave like a telic verb; forms like those in (i) are perfectly acceptable.

- (i) Hij is urenlang bebleven.
He stayed for hours.

The remaining task is to give some semantic content to A and B. In this attempt, I will follow the discussion of semantic verb classes given in Dowty (1979). I will try to present here just enough information about the proposal made in Dowty (1979) to motivate the distinctions that underlie the Dutch facts.

The distinction between A and -A, I claim, is the distinction between processes that are easy to control and those that are not. A test for this is the naturalness of the adverbial qualification *opzettelijk* (on purpose)⁴, illustrated in (17)-(18):

- (17) (a) Hij heeft opzettelijk getelefoneerd.
He has phoned on purpose.
- (b) Hij heeft opzettelijk geniesd.
He has sneezed on purpose.
- (18) (a)? Hij heeft opzettelijk gestonken.
He (has stank) stunk on purpose.
- (b)? Hij heeft opzettelijk gebloed.
He (has) bled on purpose.
- (19) (a) Hij is opzettelijk te laat aangekomen.
He (is) arrived too late on purpose.
- (b) Hij is opzettelijk vertrokken.
He (is) left on purpose.
- (20) (a)? Hij is opzettelijk gestorven.
He (is) died on purpose.
- (b)? Hij is opzettelijk verbrand.
He (is) burned on purpose.

Another test is the possibility of embedding these verbs under *dwingen* (to force):

- (21) (a) Zij heeft hem gedwongen te telefoneren.
She forced him to phone.
- (b) Zij heeft hem gedwongen te niezen.
She forced him to sneeze.
- (22) (a)? Zij heeft hem gedwongen te stinken.
She forced him to stink.
- (b)? Zij heeft hem gedwongen te bloeden.
She forced him to bleed.

4. *Opzettelijk* might not be totally equivalent to 'on purpose'. For an insightful discussion of the English terms expressing purpose, see Austin (1966). My impression is that the phenomenon in question does not hinge on a distinction between these different terms.

- (23) (a) Ze heeft hem gedwongen op tijd te komen.
She forced him to arrive on time.
(b) Ze heeft hem gedwongen te vertrekken.
She forced him to leave.
- (24) (a)? Ze heeft hem gedwongen te sterven.
She forced him to die.
(b)? Ze heeft hem gedwongen to verbranden.
She forced him to burn (completely).

Dowty (1979), elaborating Vendler's verb classification, characterizes this set of verbs as having the subpredicate DO. (For a more detailed discussion of the semantics of this subpredicate I refer to his study.)

The B/-B distinction can be characterized as an aspectual one. The relevant contrasts are given in (25)-(26) and (27)-(28)⁵:

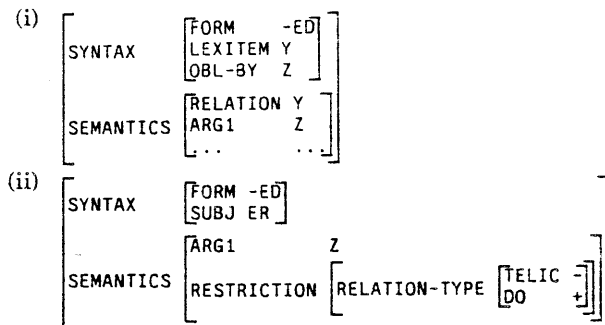
- (25) (a) Hoelang heeft hij getelefoneerd? Hij heeft urenlang getelefoneerd.
For how long has he phoned? He has phoned for hours.
(b) Hoelang heeft hij geniesd? Hij heeft urenlang geniesd.
For how long has he sneezed? He has sneezed for hours.
- (26) (a) Hoelang heeft hij gestonken? Hij heeft urenlang gestonken.
For how long has he stunk? He has stunk for hours.
(b) Hoelang heeft hij gebloed? Hij heeft urenlang gebloed.
For how long has he bled? He has bled for hours.
- (27) (a)? Hoelang is hij aangekomen? Hij is urenlang aangekomen.
For how long has he arrived? He (is) arrived for hours.

5. The English 'for hours' can in some cases refer to the resulting state; the Dutch *urenlang* is not ambiguous in that way: 'He went home for two hours' has the translation: *Hij is voor twee uur naar huis gegaan*, meaning that he went home and stayed there for two hours. *Hij is twee uur lang naar huis gegaan* would mean that, for two hours, he was in the process of going home, but it is ill formed.

- We do not need to go into very sophisticated distinctions here; the ones made by Vendler will suffice. According to Vendler's classification, there are 4 aspectual classes of verbs: states, activities, achievements and accomplishments. Only the former two can be combined with an adverbial like *urenlang* (for hours); the other two cannot; (in Dowty's elaboration the two later ones contain the subpredicate BECOME, whereas the former do not). What distinguishes the -A class from the +A class in the intuitive sense is that the verbs in the -A class refer to processes which have a built-in endpoint⁷.

6. The English translation has an irrelevant good reading here because English does not make the distinction that Dutch makes between *branden* and *verbranden*.

7. One might want to factor out what is common to personal and impersonal passives, namely their syntax, by splitting this up into two subgraphs as in (i) and (ii):



One might also object that the account does not explain why impersonal passives are restricted to activities. In Dutch, like in English, this restriction does not hold for personal passives as is illustrated in (iii):

- 325

We see then that in Dutch the impersonal passive construction is limited to verbs that have a dimension of 'intentionality'. The auxiliary *zijn* (to be) on the other hand is reserved for telic verbs. This is summarized in (29):

| | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|--|
| (29) | B: atelic activities states | –B: telic accomplishments achievements |
| A +DO | telefoneren IMP.PASSIVE | aankomen |
| –A –DO | stinken | sterven AUX:ZIJN |

3. SOME FURTHER ALTERNATIONS AND PREDICTIONS

3.1. *Standard alternations*

Our hypothesis gives a natural account of some further alternations. As is well known some verbs of motion allow either *zijn* or *hebben* as their auxiliary but with a difference in meaning that

It is well known from comparative studies and from child language acquisition data that the passives of transitive activity verbs are the core cases of passive. If a language has passives, it will have those and those are the ones that are first acquired. In different languages children have to learn which extensions the passive construction can take. In Dutch, children will have to learn that intransitive verbs allow for passives, as this is by no means a universal. No further extensions of this subcase are learned whereas for personal passives there is positive data that allows further extensions. Note in this connection that personal passives are not as unconstrained as is generally assumed; when the *door* (by)-phrase is omitted, they also impose some constraints on their interpretation. A sentence like (iv) is strange because it cannot be interpreted as expressing the idea that some inanimate thing sustains the bridge:

- (iv)# De brug wordt ondersteund
The bridge is sustained.

The difference between the impersonal and the personal passives here is that in the case of the personal passives, one can add a by-phrase as in (v) making clear that an inanimate/non-human is meant whereas for the impersonal passive this is impossible.

- (v) De brug wordt door vier pilaren ondersteund.
The bridge is sustained by four pillars.

can be characterized as telic versus atelic use. This is illustrated in (30) and (31):

- (30) (a) Hij heeft/*is geslapen.
He has/is slept.
(b) Hij is/* heeft ingeslapen.
He is/has fallen-asleep.
- (31) (a) Hij heeft/* is gelopen.
He has/is run.
(b) Hij is/? heeft naar huis gelopen.
He is/has run home.

Note that these sentences also contrast with respect to the telic/atelic test that we appealed to earlier:

- (32) (a) Hij heeft urenlang geslapen.
He has slept for hours.
(b)* Hij is urenlang ingeslapen.
He is fallen-asleep for hours.
- (33) (a) Hij heeft urenlang gelopen.
He has run for hours.
(b)?? Hij is urenlang naar huis gelopen.
He is run home for hours.

Moreover we predict that impersonal passives with the telic uses of verbs of motion will be impossible, as illustrated in (34):

- (34) (a) Er werd gelopen.
There was run.
(b)* Er werd naar huis gelopen.
There was run home.

As a description of a single event (34) (b) is not possible (but see the next point for a possible reading). We find the same contrast with the prenominal past participle:

- (35) (a)* De geslapen jongen.
The slept boy.
(b) De ingeslapen jongen.
The fallen-asleep boy.
- (36) (a)* De gelopen jongen.
The run boy.
(b) De naar huis gelopen jongen.
The home run boy.

3.2. Possible alternations

As is also predicted by the analysis, the non activity verbs can receive a more activity-like interpretation when used in the impersonal passive. This is illustrated in examples like (37) and (38):

- (37) Waar gewacht wordt, moet aangekomen worden (translation from Brecht).
Where is waited must be arrived.
- (38) In dat hotel heb ik geen oog dicht gedaan, want er werd the hele nacht.
In that hotel I didn't sleep a wink, for there was the whole night.
aangekomen en vertrokken.
arrived and left.

Here we have an iterative meaning, an effect that is very common when an accomplishment/achievement verb is coerced to an activity sense, as is illustrated with the following English contrasts:

- (39) (a) I found an error in the text
(b) I was finding an error in the text.
(c) I was finding more and more errors in the text.

Under this iterative reading, impersonal passives are acceptable and the examples given in the literature as counterexamples to the claim that verbs taking *zijn* as their auxiliary do not allow for impersonal passives are as far as I know susceptible to this iterative interpretation.

3.3. Jokes

As the examples in (40) and (41) show, with human subjects the volitional parameter can also be manipulated; although conventionally it is not possible to stink on purpose, it is possible to force such a reading to a certain degree. But in this context the corresponding impersonal passive is also possible:

- (40) Er werd door de krengen gestonken.
There is stunk by the nasty women.

There is a marginal meaning for (40): the literal meaning of *kreng* is 'carcass' and under that reading there is no interpreta-

tion of (40) but the word also has the figurative meaning: 'nasty woman'. With this meaning we can get a reading for (40), although mainly as a joke: the *krengen* are nasty women stinking on purpose. Another case where we find this additional volitional implication is given in (41) (Perlmutter, 1978):

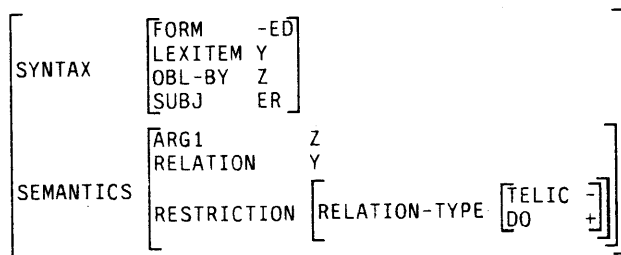
- (41) In het tweede bedrijf werd er dor de nieuwe acteur op het juiste ogenblik gevallen.
In the second act there was fallen by the new actor on cue.

This again has the intentional reading. In (41) both conditions on the use of the impersonal passive are violated but as a joke it is interpretable. These examples, however, also show the limits of this manipulation: (40) and (41) are not natural sentences; no native speaker would use them to express the intended meaning except as a joke. In that respect they are different from the examples given earlier where the result is perfectly grammatical. The verbs of motion do not seem to be inherently telic or atelic but verbs like *stinken* (to stink) seem to imply that the activity referred to is not controllable.

4. FORMALIZATION

Within the BG (Bay area Grammar) notation I propose to capture the generalization about impersonal passives in the following lexical template. Further information about the verbs in question has to be compatible with what is already given here.

(42)



This subgraph links the semantic constraints to the syntactic construction.

I have not fully worked out the entries for *hebben* (to have) and *zijn* (to be). Ideally one would want an account that general-

izes over other uses of *zijn* and I have not looked into those in any detail. (Note, however, that the passive auxiliary in Dutch is not *zijn* but *worden* (also: to become)). Partial information is given in (43):

- (43) *zijn*: RELATION-TYPE = c + telic;
naar huis: RELATION-TYPE = +telic
hebben: RELATION-TYPE = -telic.

This way of putting the information together will allow us to maintain (44), which seems to be the unmarked association convention between semantic arguments and syntactic functions (see Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson, 1985, for discussion).

- (44) If a(n active) verb has only one argument, that argument is its subject.

The similarity between unaccusative subjects and objects of transitive verbs follows from the mapping principles between semantic arguments and syntax: one of these principles has to state that the argument of the DO-subpredicate precedes the arguments of other subpredicates. Mapping principles of this type will be necessary whether one uses a decompositional analysis as is proposed here (following the Generative Semantics literature and Dowty, 1979) or whether one uses thematic roles as in Kiparsky (forthcoming), and Bresnan and Kanerva (forthcoming).

To sum up the points made so far, the account presented above has the following advantages:

1. It does not force us to choose between two conflicting types of evidence for unaccusativity in Dutch;
2. It also does not force us to classify the verbs of motion as unergative and unaccusative but instead links the difference in behavior to semantic distinctions that also account for the adverbial cooccurrence restrictions;
3. Under our account it is no mystery that judgments about impersonal passives are not a hard and fast distinction between grammatical and ungrammatical but depend on the interpretation.

5. THE PLACE OF NOTIONS LIKE 'THEME' AND 'AGENT'

Notions like 'theme' and 'agent' are under the account advocated here reconstructable in terms of subgraphs; the argument

of a DO sub-predicate is an agent, that of a +TELIC sub-predicate could be a theme. This is following a suggestion that was, for example, made in Ross's (1972) paper 'ACT'. The proposal leads to 'natural classes' of combinations of 'relation types'; the classes used in Dutch have been characterized above. The same distinctions are used in Centineo (1985) to account for Italian auxiliary selection but with statives grouping with activities. What is hypothesized in the approach taken here and in Centineo is that the aspectual distinctions define a space in which one can describe the principles underlying auxiliary selection, restrictions on impersonal passives, etc. This is not to say that each language makes the same distinctions. It is also not claimed that all the effects of 'thematic role' assignment can be reduced to natural classes over the domain given above; more analytic work is necessary to see which other factors play a role.

At this point, however, we can see that some current linguistic practices are dangerous for cross linguistic comparisons: in this paper I have used notions of theme and agent that are suited to the data described but some other set of data might lead to another notion of agent and theme, e.g. Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) argue that locative inversion in Chichewa is adequately described as being possible with intransitive verbs that have as highest argument 'a thing of which location or state is predicated or change of location or state', they refer to that argument as the theme. While of course neither Bresnan and Kanerva nor I own the copyright on the use of the term, our joint use is extremely dangerous as a different class of verbs is picked out: under their definition statives have a theme argument, under mine they do not. In fact, closely related languages can use slightly different notions for very similar phenomena: as Paul Kiparsky pointed out to me there are dialects of German in which some statives at least select *sein* (to be) as their auxiliary; a possible contrast is given in (45)

- (45) (a) Hij heeft/*is gestaan.
 He has/*is stood.
 (b) Er ist gestanden.
 He is stood.

Similar problems, some of them even occurring within the same language, come up with the use of the term 'agent' (some of them are discussed in Cruse, 1972, and Dowty, 1979). The

practice of using the same terms for these similar but not identical notions is not entirely unreasonable or not necessarily attributable to sloppiness. In their linguistic use these terms do not have a fixed meaning, they are relative terms within a set of distinctions: a theme can be opposed to an agent both in Chichewa and in Dutch without having exactly the same 'meaning' in both (one can actually take this to be the general point made in Rosen (1980) rather than a claim about the strong independence of syntax and semantics). Thus, notions like theme and agent are not primitive terms, and it is not reasonable to expect that empirical studies of natural language will ever lead to a universal definition. But in practice there is the temptation to assume that they provide a basis for crosslinguistic comparison of the meaning of lexical items. As our discussion indicates, their use is in fact likely to lead to confusion.

6. THE DESCRIPTION OF MEANING

While I think that the account just given represents some progress compared to the account given in Perlmutter (1978), a number of problems remain. It is clear from the discussion that we cannot assume a simple correspondence between the form of an utterance and a state of the world 'out-there'. What we are talking about is descriptions of the world that are mediated by conventions about verb meanings and speaker intentions. This might be called more appropriately Cognitive Structure (see Jackendoff, 1984, for a conception that in its broad outlines is compatible with what is claimed here). In my view these conventions are not part of linguistic syntax, as Dowty observes: 'not only is this not a categorization of verbs, it is not a categorization of sentences but rather of the propositions conveyed by utterances, given particular background assumptions by the speaker and/or the hearer about the nature of the situations under discussion'.

Actually, more than just the background assumptions of the speaker/hearer seem to be relevant: even when somebody has committed suicide it is not felicitous to say (46):

(46) He died on purpose

To die seems conventionally to imply an event that is not under the control of the person that undergoes it and its meaning can-

not be manipulated by the individual speaker. Although background assumptions and the like play a role, the language itself seems also to impose some constraints. The same point can be made with the Dutch examples in (32) and (35); although their meaning is perfectly clear and one can easily imagine situations that would be described by these meanings, the sentences are not perfect.

Auxiliary selection presents the opposite problem; there are cases in which the auxiliary does not change even when a modifier is added that gives the sentence a different aspectual reading:

- (47) Men is/*heeft urenlang vertrokken en aangekomen.
They left and returned for hours (iterative reading but the aux. remains to be).

Thus, although the auxiliary selection reflects the telic/atelic distinction in the simple cases, the conversion of achievements / accomplishments to activities in an iterative situation does not affect it. This state of affairs points to some interesting problems of lexicography: how much of the information that I have discussed above needs to be stated/ can be stated in the lexicon? The general practice here seems to be that completely predictable information should not be stated but whether something is predictable or not will of course depend on what one already knows. If I am correct, native speakers of Dutch know something about *sterven* (to die) that will prevent them from using it in a linguistic context where the possibility of control is presupposed; this knowledge, however, can be language specific. Verbs that are given as translations of each other or are even defined in very similar terms in different languages can exhibit subtle differences in meaning; with respect to the distinctions at hand, *vallen* (to fall) in Dutch seems to refer only to the point at which the English *fall* starts and not include the duration of the fall: most speakers of English have no problem with 'He fell for 5 minutes' whereas the Dutch 'translation' (Hij is 5 minuten lang gevallen) sounds extremely strange. The difference between Dutch *vallen* and English *fall* is similar to the difference in English between *fall* and *drop*: where one can say both versions of (48) one cannot say (49) (b):

- (48) (a) The stockmarket fell this morning.
(b) The stockmarket dropped this morning.

- (49) (a) Between 9 and 10, the stockmarket was falling.
(b)* Between 9 and 10, the stockmarket was dropping.

This kind of difference between verbs does not get treated systematically anywhere in the description of the languages: the syntactic descriptions of phenomena like impersonal passives would either give a representation according to which the impersonal passive of a verb like *vallen* is completely impossible (by assuming it has an initial object or the like) or make it ambiguous, losing any insight into the fact that the impersonal passive is strange. The accounts that assume that whether the impersonal passive is felicitous or not is dependent on the meaning of the verb would have to rely on a detail of description that, as far as I know, is nowhere available.

What I hope this investigation of some aspects of the behavior of a few verbs in Dutch has shown is that it is more productive to try to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the interface between syntax and semantics than to assume a strong autonomy-of-syntax thesis.

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