



ASSOCIACIÓ DE JOVES LINGÜISTES

XXIII TIAJL GIRONA, 26-28 DE MARÇ DE 2008

www.joveneslinguistas.org

The interplay between synchrony and diachrony in the analysis of perfect auxiliary selection in Italian.

Alessandro Pipitone
ap428@st-andrews.ac.uk
University of St Andrews

This paper aims to provide a critical review of the so-called Unaccusative Hypothesis and to show that the problem of the selection of perfective auxiliaries in Italian can be better understood by taking into account the interplay between diachrony and synchrony within the semantics-syntax interface. The traditional dichotomy between transitive verbs and intransitive verbs fails to explain the variations in auxiliary selection occurring nowadays not only in Italian but also in French, German and Dutch. The Unaccusative Hypothesis, set forth by David M. Perlmutter in 1978, challenges this traditional classification of verb classes as it considers the different grammatical relations of a clause in terms of the notion of 'stratum', and shows that a verb can be transitive in one stratum and intransitive in another. By focusing on the syntactic analysis of the subject in initial strata, Perlmutter reconsiders the concept of intransitivity and divides the clauses whose initial stratum is intransitive into two groups: 'initially unaccusative clauses', and 'initially unergative clauses'. The distinction between these two subgroups is reflected in the auxiliary verb that they select and it enables, according to Perlmutter, to state a preliminary generalization ruling this selection in Italian. However, this analysis has not gone unchallenged. In fact the Unaccusative Hypothesis, based on the claim that the dichotomy between unergativity and unaccusativity is syntactically determined and that semantic notions cannot account for the auxiliary selection rule, appears to have a high degree of abstractness and arbitrariness and fails to explain the so-called 'unaccusative mismatches', that is the cases in which the predictability of the unaccusative/unergative distinction is called into question.

This paper suggests that the synchronic variations that contradict the selection rules formulated by Perlmutter, such as the existence of individual verbs that appear to be classified as both unaccusative and unergative, may have been generated by diachronic processes in action. By considering a sampling of compound perfects in a corpus of early Italian texts dating from the 13th to the 17th, I will show that an adequate account of perfect auxiliary selection in modern Italian cannot be independent of a historical survey of verb constructions, and that only an integrated analysis of syntactic and semantic factors can fully explain the behaviour of Italian intransitive verbs. The examination of the historical development of the two perfective auxiliaries *avere* ('to have') and *essere* ('to be'), and of their synchronic distribution in Romance languages will enable to identify possible aspects of verb meaning that are syntactically relevant, and will try to illustrate the motivation for the use of a given auxiliary. I will consider possible revisions of the Unaccusative Hypothesis on the basis of some noteworthy contributions to the research concerning intransitive verbs, and I will also seek to integrate the study of diachronic change in auxiliary selection with a critical account of the classification of unaccusative semantics proposed by Antonella Sorace.