

## UNERGATIVES IN SUDANESE ARABIC: A MINIMLAIST APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*Verbs are traditionally classified into intransitive, transitive and ditransitive. However, in generative syntax and minimalist program, in particular, verbs are categorized in terms of their lexico-semantic into unaccusative, unergative, accusative, causative, applicative and ditransitive. This paper explores the syntax of the unergative category of verbs in Sudanese Arabic from the theoretical perspectives of minimalist program. The data are derived from the grammatical judgments from 10 native speakers of Sudanese Arabic. Semantically, this category of verbs takes one obligatory external argument in its thematic grid. Structurally, this external argument occupies [Spec, vP] position and receives an agent theta role from the verb, before moving to [Spec, TP] to satisfy features' checking requirement, such as EPP and Case. However, unergatives in Sudanese Arabic can optionally take a cognate object complement. This cognate object appears in [Spec, VP] and receives a theme theta-role from the verb. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that the syntactic typology of unergative verbs cross-linguistically is accounted for language-specific property rather than a common universal principle.*

Key words: Unergative, Sudanese Arabic, minimalist program.

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### Introduction

It has become common practice in the current syntactic theory in the last three decades; to assume that there are significant symmetries between the constituent of nominal structure and verb phrase, Abney (1987). Within the minimalist program, Chomsky (1995, 1998, 1999) and Radford (2004) among several others; have posited that any verb phrase has a complex internal vP shell which is headed by a light causative verb (written as lower-case v) and inner VP which is headed by the lexical verb. They extended this argument from the work of (Larson 1988, 1990 and Hale and Keyser 1991, 1993, 1994) in which they have differentiated between the two heads. The common characteristic property of intransitive verbs is that they do not have an overt complement. As part of their selectional and subcategorisation, they are usually described as mono-argument verbs or one-place predicate, (Felser and Wanner, 2001). Beginning from Perlmutter's seminal work (1978), the Unaccusativity Hypothesis (UH) has been widely acknowledged in many linguistic investigations. According to such hypothesis, intransitive verbs fall into two different categories with respect to their syntactic behavior, i.e. unaccusatives (fall, arrive, sleep) and unergatives (dance, run, sing). In (Adger 2002, Carnie 2013, and Radford 2009) the single argument of unaccusatives behaves like an underlying theme, while the single argument of unergatives behaves like an agent.

Unergative verbs are traditionally known as an agentive verb because its sole argument mostly receives agent theta-role. However, (UH) assumes that unergative verbs exhibit both properties of unaccusative and unergative verbs, and consequently posits that unergatives have two arguments: one of which projects the D-structure configuration which corresponds to unaccusatives and the other projects the unergative D-structure configuration. In relation, the semantic approach explicates one argument structure for unergatives; since unaccusative behavior is not connected to specific syntactic encoding, but rather it is variable and would be explained in terms of differences in the interaction of lexical semantic properties of the verbs with the semantics of the construction in which they occur. The agentive verbs are unergatives in relation to the number of syntactic diagnostics. They occur in the structure that typically selects unergative verb that does not subcategorise direct object. In some other languages, such as romance languages, in particular, Italian & Spanish, this group of verbs takes special auxiliary which distinguishes it from unaccusative verbs, Lavin & Rappaport (1995). Throughout the literature, many studies in the context of Arabic language focused on other varieties of Arabic, i.e. Standard Arabic (Fakih, 2011; Alotaiba, 2013) Egyptian Arabic (Soltan, 2010; Yassin, 2013), Moroccan Arabic (Harrel, 2004) Juba Arabic (Manfredi & Petrollino, 2013) and several other regional Arabic. Therefore, this particular paper employs the Minimalist Program (MP) in analyzing the syntax of unergative

verbs in Sudanese Arabic, one of the linguistic varieties of the huge Arabic language. The study explores the derivation of structures involve unergatives in terms of the syntactic operations and processes. In doing so, a group of 10 Sudanese Arabic speakers was given a questionnaire that contained a sample of sentences and was asked to make grammaticality judgments. This observational method is adapted from (Brown, 2009) whereby the data were collected via the open-response questions on the questionnaire. The importance of this observational method is that it gives the informants the option to provide a range of possible answers, which may reflect their own views on the formation of sentences in relation unergative verbs in Sudanese Arabic. Similarly, (Culicover, 1997; (Dikken, et al., 2007; Featherston, 2005).) state that the methodology that has proven most productive in the development of linguistic theory has been to closely examine selected sentences and phrases that native speakers of a language judge to be possible, impossible, and marginal. In the following, we explain the syntax on unergatives in Sudanese Arabic, and then we explain unergatives with the cognate object. And finally, we provide a conclusion to the overall paper.

### Unergatives in Sudanese Arabic

The term Sudanese Arabic is used throughout this paper to refer to the spoken variety of Classical Arabic which is uniquely adapted throughout Sudan. This variety of Arabic has to be separately identified and investigated; as the speakers of other Arabic varieties are not able to communicate effectively in Sudanese Arabic<sup>1</sup>. The commonly identified differences between Sudanese Arabic and other Arabic languages including Standard Arabic is that Sudanese Arabic has retained some archaic forms assumed to be derived from classic Saudi Arabic. In addition, Sudanese Arabic has been widely influenced by African languages which are spoken across the country<sup>2</sup>. As a result, Sudanese Arabic is a mixed of Classical Arabic and African languages. These linguistics variations represent the driving force for the current paper. In terms of morphology, the derivation of unergative verbs in Sudanese Arabic does not involve any morphological process; it rather involves syntactic and semantic processes. As shown in the following examples:

- (1) Ali **jaraa**  
Ali run.Past  
Ali run

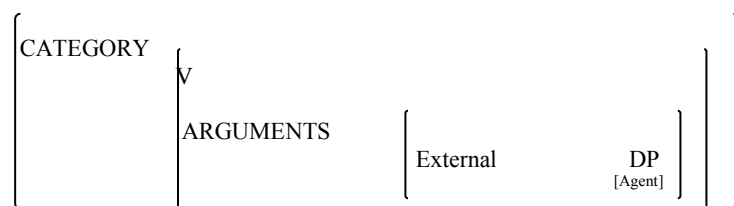
**Jaraa: V: <DP>**  
**<agent>**

- (2) Al-fanan-uun **ragas-uu**  
the-singer-Pl dance-Pl  
The singers danced

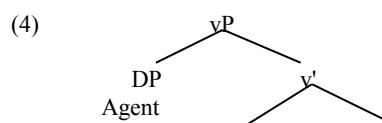
**Ragasuu: V: <DP>**  
**<agent>**

Recall that unergative verb assigns only one argument in terms of its selectional and subcategorisation property, and that this mono-argument usually receives an agent-like theta role and occupies the external argument position, hence [Spec, vP]. Therefore, we propose the feature specification of unergative verb as in the following schema:

### (3) Unergative verb



The schematic representation in (3) shows that unergative category of verbs assigns one obligatory external argument which receives an agent theta role. Structurally, this argument is dominated and projected initially from [Spec, vP]. Having said so, the structural derivation of unergative involves several syntactic processes; first, the lexical items are taken from the lexicon, the computational system then merges the lexical items together according to the grammar of Sudanese Arabic. Therefore, the VP shell of unergatives looks like as in the following:



<sup>1</sup> Despite the variations in the spoken Arabic across Arabic-speaking countries, they commonly use Modern Standard Arabic as their official language (education, media, government).

<sup>2</sup> According to the latest census in Sudan, about 134 languages are spoken in the country

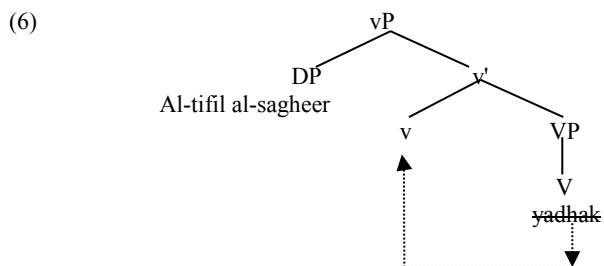
v VP

Following Chomsky (1995), a constituent structure is build up in a bottom-up style, via the successive application of Merge Operation; in which the theta-role assignment is the property of merge. Continuously, assuming the phase-base theory of Chomsky (1999 & 2005), in the first phase of unergative derivation, the verb appears in situ before moving and adjoining the light-causative v, and the agent occupies the [Spec, vP]. Consider the following example:

- (5) Al-tifil al-sagheer **yadhak**  
the-kid the-small smile.Pres  
The small kid smiles

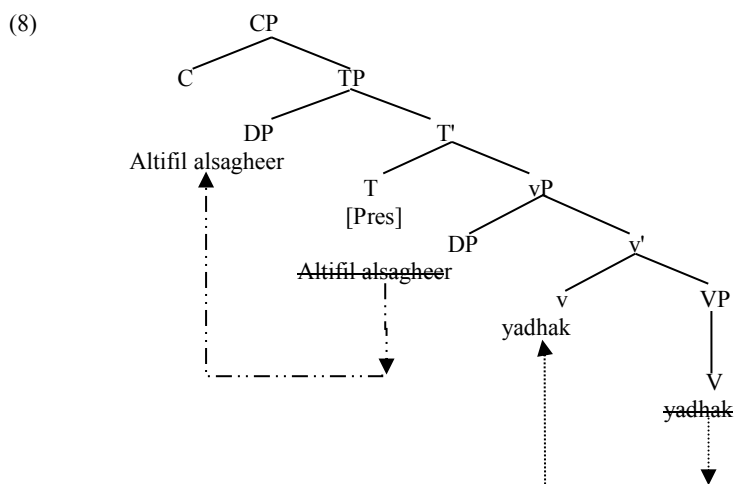
**Yadhak: V: <DP>**  
**<agent>**

Second, unergative verb merges with its external argument to form the complete vP shell. More precisely, the verb yadhak “to smile” merges with the complex of DP altifil alsagheer “the small kid” to form the vP altifil alsagheer yadhak “the small kid smiles”, whereby unergative verb which appears in situ moves to adjoin the small/light verb in v. this light verb is presumably strong affix, hence, triggering the verb to move from its situ position in the outer shell to the inner shell establishing the complete vP shell of unergative verb yadhak, as in the following:



- (7) a. **Unergative verb:** [<sub>vP</sub> DP [<sub>v</sub> VP]]  
b. **Unergative verb** [agent] [ Ø ]

The derivation continues toward establishing the second phase of unergative structure, which involves the movement of the external argument from the [Spec, vP] position to [Spec, TP]. This movement is motivated by Extended Projection Principle (EPP) features and to get its nominative Case. In addition, other features such as tense and agreement are checked in the domain of TP under Spec-head relation. The resulting TP then merges with the null declarative complementiser C to form CP, as in the following:



The overall derivation involves numerous syntactic processes and operations, in which the application of each process pushes the derivation one step forward until the derivation converges at the interpretation level, hence Logical Form (LF), as follows:

- Step 1: Numeration: selects [yadhak, al, tifil, sagheer]  
Step 2: merge al-tifil with al-sagheer to form DP.  
Step 3: merge the output of step 2 with yadhak to form vP, whereby the lexical verb moves from its situ position to higher position adjoining the light verb v.

- Step 4: merge the output of step 3 with the inflection T to form T'.  
 Step 5: move the DP leaving its trace behind, from [Spec, vP] to [Spec, TP] to form TP.  
 Step 6: merge the output of step 5 with the null complementiser C to form CP.

**Unergative verbs with cognate object**

Unergative verbs in Sudanese Arabic can occur in a specific construction; in which a non-subcategorised nominal phase can appear in the post-verbal position. This phenomenon makes unergative category different from unaccusatives as in many other languages, as in the following:

- (9) Fatima ragasat ragsa rasheega  
 Fatima dance.Past dancing merry  
 Fatima danced a merry dancing

ragasat: V: <DP1, DP2>  
 <agent, theme>

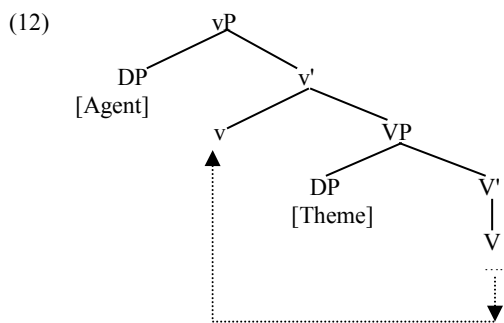
- (10) Humma namuu nouma ameega  
 they sleep.Past sleeping deep  
 They slept a deep sleeping

namuu: V: <DP1, DP2>  
 <agent, theme>

- (11) Huwa maat mouta shanee?a  
 he die.Past death tragic  
 He died a tragic death

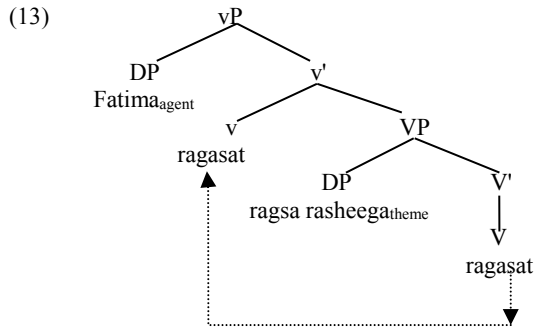
maat: V: <DP1, DP2>  
 <agent, theme>

The nominal phrases *ragsa rasheega* “merry dancing”, *nouma ameega* “deep sleeping” and *mouta shanee?a* “tragic death” have the grammatical functions as cognate objects to their verbs. These cognate objects are morphologically related to their verbs in terms of derivation. Given that, Hale and Keyser (1993, 1997, 1999) have maintained that the lexical representation of unergative verb involves a nominal complement that is incorporated into the verb at the syntactic level. Therefore, in the syntactic analysis of cognate object we assume that the cognate object behaves like the theme argument, although it is highly restricted by the thematic verb<sup>3</sup> – hence, it appears in the internal argument position in [Spec, VP] and end up behind the verb when it rises to the light verb position, as in the following:

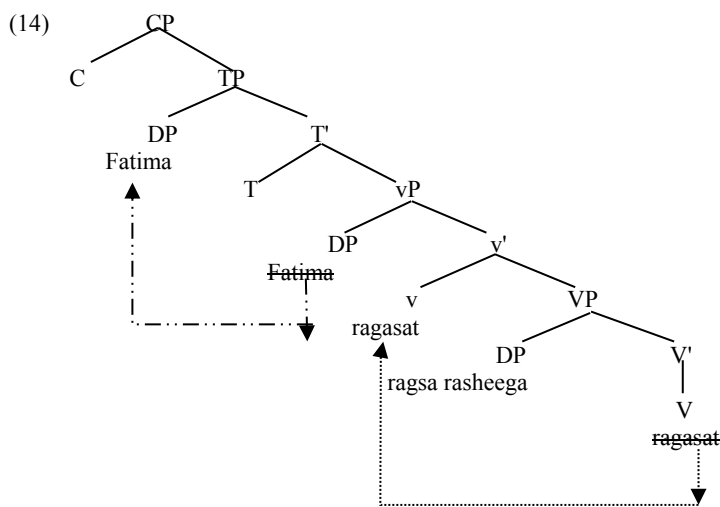


The assumption that cognate objects are theme-arguments is supported by semantic properties of cognate objects construction, in which the theme-complements have a significant role in construing the aspectual structure on the sentence, Verkuyl (1993) and Tenny (1994). Given the structure in (12), the example in (9) would have the structure as in the following, whereby the agent occupies [Spec, vP] position and the theme occupies [Spec, VP] position:

<sup>3</sup> We will not discuss the semantic restrictions between the verbs and their nominal complements, for example, whether someone can dance a merry dance, sleep a deep sleeping or can die a tragic death or not, because these restrictions are related to semantic or pragmatic.



The difference between a cognate object and a normal object is the constrained semantic relationship that holds between the cognate object and unergative verb. The structure in (13) then merges with T to form T', which in turn merges with the subject that originally raised from [Spec, vP] satisfying the universal principle of EPP to form TP, this TP then merges with null declarative complementiser to form CP, as in the following:



All unergative constructions in Sudanese Arabic, whether it is with or without nominal complement, cannot undergo passivation, the inability of unergative to undergo passive construction, seems to be common across many languages including English, consider the following Sudanese Arabic examples:

(15) \*rugisat ragsa rasheega  
dance.Past.Passive dancing merry  
A merry dancing was danced

(16) \*neema moun ameeg  
sleep.Past.Passive sleeping deep  
Deep sleeping was slept

However, this phenomenon is not a universal principle applicable to all languages, it is rather language-specific property; as in many other languages including romance languages, unergative construction can have a passive counterpart, under certain conditions.

### Conclusion

Summarizing, this has discussed the syntax of the unergative category of verbs in Sudanese Arabic. The overall analysis is guided by the theoretical framework of the minimalist program, Chomsky (1995 and consequent works in generative syntax). Unergative verbs in Sudanese Arabic take one obligatory external argument in its thematic grid. This external argument is structurally occupied [Spec, vP] position and receive an agent theta role from the verb. However, unergatives in Sudanese Arabic can optionally take a nominal complement. This nominal complement has the grammatical function as a cognate object and appears in [Spec, VP] receiving a theme theta-role from the verb. The cognate object is morphologically related to the core verb, hence stipulating semantic conditions to the verb. Overall, the analysis of unergative in Sudanese Arabic seems to be relevant to the analysis of unergatives in other languages. Although the analysis provided a syntactic description of unergatives in Sudanese Arabic, still the number of participants is the main limitation of this study, thus, further researchers may include more

participants perhaps news themes might emerge. Finally, the syntactic typology and semantic conditions cross-linguistically have to be accounted for language-specific property rather than a universal principle.

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