Unaccusativity meets agentivity and transitivity

Germanic basic (change-of-)location verbs are unaccusative (Hoekstra & Mulder 1990, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995; see i.a. auxiliary selection in (1)); some can be lexically causativised, with apophony (2), but a large subset (incl. ‘fall’, ‘come’, ‘go’, ‘walk’, ‘stand’, i.a.) are usable without apophony in a way that is simultaneously non-causative, agentive and transitive, allowing passivisation (3b) yet preserving the hallmarks of unaccusativity (3a), to varying degrees (which will be shown to be sensitive to both telicity and prosody). This paper reconciles this close encounter of unaccusativity, agentivity and transitivity with the syntax of argument structure, and extends the proposal to experiencer constructions with (change-of-)location verbs, including those expressing possession, based on the verb ‘sit’. (The data below are from Dutch; the paper is empirically broader.)

(1) ze {zijn/*hebben} gevallen 'they have fallen'
    they are/have fallen
(2) het virus {*is/heeft} hen geveld 'the virus has felled them'
    the virus is/has them felled
(3) a. ze {zijn/*hebben} dit land aangevallen ze {zijn/*hebben} dit land binnengevallen
    they have attacked this country on.fallen they are/have this country inside.vallen
    ‘they have invaded this country’
    b. dit land werd (door hen) aangevallen dit land werd (door hen) binnengevallen
    this country got by them on.fallen this country got by them inside.fallen

Basic (change-of-)location verbs can serve as copular verbs (Hoekstra & Mulder 1990), relating the locative predicate to its subject (the Theme), as in (4). But the predication relation between the spatial PP and the Theme need not involve a verb: cf. with-absolutives (with him in the White House, we’re finished) and ‘Mad Magazine sentences’ (him in the White House?! no way!). A non-verbal locative predication structure with a Theme subject can be the complement of V: (5).

My proposal for the syntax of transitive/unaccusative hybrids of the type in (3) is that they unite key aspects of the two structures in (4b) and (5b) into a single monoclausal syntax, schematised in (6).

What (6) shares with (4b) is the fact that the basic locational or change-of-location verb is used as a relator of a predication relation; with (5b), (6) has in common the fact that the predication involving the Theme argument is established in the complement of V. In (7), we see the syntax in (6) in its full glory: RELATOR₂ is exponed as vallen ‘fall’ (as in (3)) or schieten ‘shoot’, both Ps are spelled out (as bij and in, resp.), and we see an overt inalienable possessum (headed by keelgat ‘throat hole’).

In the transitive/unaccusative hybrids in (3), the inalienably possessed noun phrase in the locative P’s complement is silent. Its External Possessor (DP₂, dit land in (3a)) is enveloped in a null-headed PP and gets dependent accusative case (Marantz 1991) in actives. The Theme (DP₁, ze ‘they’) is promoted to subject, as in unaccusatives in general, unhindered by the PP-enclosed External Possessor.

(4) a. he fell off the chair
    b. [rp₁ [dp₁ he] [r₁ RELATOR₋V(fall) [pp of the chair]]]
(5) a. she pulled him off the chair
    b. [rp₂ [dp₂ she] [r₁ RELATOR₋V(pull) [rp₁ [dp₁ him] [r₁ RELATOR₋=∅ [pp of the chair]]]]]
(6) [rp₂ [pp p dp₂] [r₁ RELATOR₋=V [rp₁ dp₁ [r₁ RELATOR₋=∅ [pp p loc dp₂ inalienable poss’um]]]]]
(7) die opmerking {is/*heeft} bij hem in het verkeerde keelgat gevallen/geschoten
    that remark is/has by him in the wrong throat.hole fallen/shot
    ‘that remark went down the wrong way for him, rubbed him the wrong way’
the syntax of unaccusativity and transitivity and their hallmarks (auxiliary selection, case, passive).

(10) a. het {is/*heeft} haar aan den lijve overkomen 'it happened to her (body)'
    the on.fall of/on DP₂ the in.fall of/at DP₂ the over.fall of/on DP₂

If passivisation involves a reversal of the primary predication relation between the predicate and its subject (Den Dikken 2006:§2.7.1; 2020), application of passivisation to (6) reverses the directionality of predication in RP₁, such that PP occupies SpecRP₁ and the Theme takes the complement position; RP₂ is left untouched. This produces (9) as the underlier for passive (3b). In (9), DP₁ is licensed in situ and does not move. The inalienable possessum does not move either: it, too, is licensed in place, by the locative P that selects it. If the preposition introducing the External Possessor is overt, (9) produces an impersonal passive; but in the absence of an overt P introducing the External Possessor in SpecRP₂, the External Possessor is promoted to structural subject, and thus controls φ-feature agreement with the finite auxiliary and gets structural nominative case, as in (3b).

(9) [RP₂ [pp P DP₂] [R REL₂=V [RP₁ [pp PLoc [dp INALIENABLE POSS*UM]] [R REL₁ DP₁]]]]

5 The near-minimal pair of experiencer constructions in (10) involves a complex change-of-location verb and a PP headed by aan containing an inalienable possessum (IAP) linked to the feminine pronoun. (10a) is a perfect specimen of (6). (10b) starts out from almost the same underlier, except for the fact that Pₛ, instead of introducing the External Possessor, is merged under RELATOR₂ and forms a complex head with the verb. In (10b) the External Possessor (DP₂) c-commands DP₁, and is raised to SpecTP; DP₁ stays put and gets dependent ACC case. With the positional verb ‘sit’, the structure for (10b) procures the syntax for the Indo-European verbs translating as ‘to possess’ (Dutch bezitten, German besitzen, Latin possēdēō): see (11a). In the absence of a positional verb, the PF-product of P+RELATOR₂ is ‘have’. The syntax of possessive ‘have’ in (11b) unites Benveniste’s adage (‘avoir = être+â’) with the idea that ‘have’ is a transitive copula (Hoekstra 1994, Myler 2016).

(10) a. het {is/*heeft} haar aan den lijve overkomen 'it happened to her (body)'
    it is/has her on the body over.come
    [RP₂ [pp Pₛ [dp₂ haar]] [R R₁=komen [RP₁ [dp₁ het]] [R R₁=over [pp aan [dp IAP=den lijve]]]]]

b. zij {is/heeft} het aan den lijve ondergaan 'she has experienced it (personally)'
    she is/has it on the body under.gone
    [RP₂ [dp₂ zij] [R Pₛ+R₂=gaan [RP₁ [dp₁ het]] [R R₁=onder [pp aan [dp IAP=den lijve]]]]]

(11) a. zij bezit een hoed 'she owns/possesses a hat'
    she BEs.its a hat
    [RP₂ [dp₂ zij] [R P=be+R₂=zitten [RP₁ [dp₁ een hoed]] [R R₁=∅ [pp Pₛ [dp IAP=∅]]]]]

b. zij heeft een hoed (op (het hoofd)) 'she has a hat (on (her head))'
    she has a hat on the head
    [RP₂ [dp₂ zij] [R P+R₂=hebben [RP₁ [dp₁ een hoed]] [R R₁=∅ [pp (op) [dp IAP=∅/het hoofd]]]]]

6 At the theoretical level, (6) shows that predication structures can be layered, confirms that simple verbs of (change-of-)location can be used as relators of predication relations, and elucidates the syntax of unaccusativity and transitivity and their hallmarks (auxiliary selection, case, passive).