Why can I laugh a laugh but not joke a joke? Cognate Objects Unreliably Diagnose Unergativity Quinn Goddard (University of Calgary)

Some intransitive verbs are able to take a cognate object, that is, an object which is "zero-related" to the verb (Levin, 1993: 95). Representative examples are given in (1).

- (1) a. The croupier **smiled a cold polite smile** that had looked at thousands of boors and millions of fools. (*The Big Sleep*, Chandler, 1939)
 - b. She **sighed a sigh of ineffable satisfaction**, as if her cup of happiness were now full. (*Jane Eyre*, Brontë, 1847)
 - c. ...and he laughed a happy little laugh, full of such a childlike diabolism...

(Antic Hay, Huxley, 1923)

The cognate object construction is frequently used as a diagnostic of unergativity (Larson, 1988; Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995; Macfarland, 1995; Massam, 1990; Mittwoch, 1998; Sailer, 2010). The traditional thinking behind this diagnostic is that the object position of an unaccusative verb is occupied by a trace of the surface subject, rendering it unavailable for a cognate object, whereas an unergative verb, by virtue of having no object argument, allows other phrases in its object position (including cognate objects, the DP X's way, and fake reflexives). Kuno & Takami (2004) find fault with the cognate object diagnostic due to the fact that some unaccusative verbs (e.g. grow, drop, bounce, blow, fall) are able to take a cognate object. The present study identifies a second problem with this diagnostic: many unergative verbs (such as joke and lie) do not permit a cognate object, even when they pass other diagnostics of unergativity, such as the X's way test or the resultative construction with a fake reflexive (Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995).

- (2) a. ?? He joked a stupid joke. (3) a. ?? Ernest lied a sneaky lie. *Cognate Object*
 - b. He joked his way through the meeting.b. He lied his way through the interview. X's wayc. He joked himself out of a speeding ticket. c. He lied himself out of prison. Resultative

This paper reports on two studies that provide empirical evidence that the cognate object construction cannot reliably diagnose unergative verbs - a corpus study and an experiment.

The corpus study examined the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), selected for its vast store of literary works since literature is a fruitful source of cognate objects (Rodríguez Arrizabalaga, 2016). While cognate object constructions were plentiful, there were no examples of cognate objects constructions with unergative verbs like brag, exaggerate, fib, gag, gloat, jest, joke, lie, quip, sparkle, or flash. Taken together with my own judgement, the absence of any cognate object constructions with these verbs provides support for such constructions being, if not unacceptable, very marginal. However, there is something unique about the ungrammaticality of constructions like those in (2a) and (3a): anecdotally, their grammaticality rapidly improves over even a brief period of exposure. To quantify this phenomenon, I am in the process of conducting an online experiment with native speakers of English. There are two groups: Group 1 first reads a self-paced short story containing a variety of cognate object constructions (e.g. ill-formed unergative ?? joke a joke and unaccusative *arrive an arrival, as well as grammatical bark a bark), before performing a sentence judgement task with both novel and familiar cognate object constructions. Group 2 only completes the judgement task. If the results of this study align with anecdotal comments, I predict Group 1, by virtue of their previous exposure, to judge marginal unergative constructions like *joke a joke* to be more grammatical than Group 2 does. However, judgements of ungrammatical unaccusative and grammatical unergative constructions should not differ. In light of the empirical findings, I will explore some reasons why cognate objects do not robustly diagnose all unergative verbs, and how the cognate object's use as a literary or comedic tool (e.g. Dr. Seuss's Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!) undermines its status as a robust diagnostic.

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