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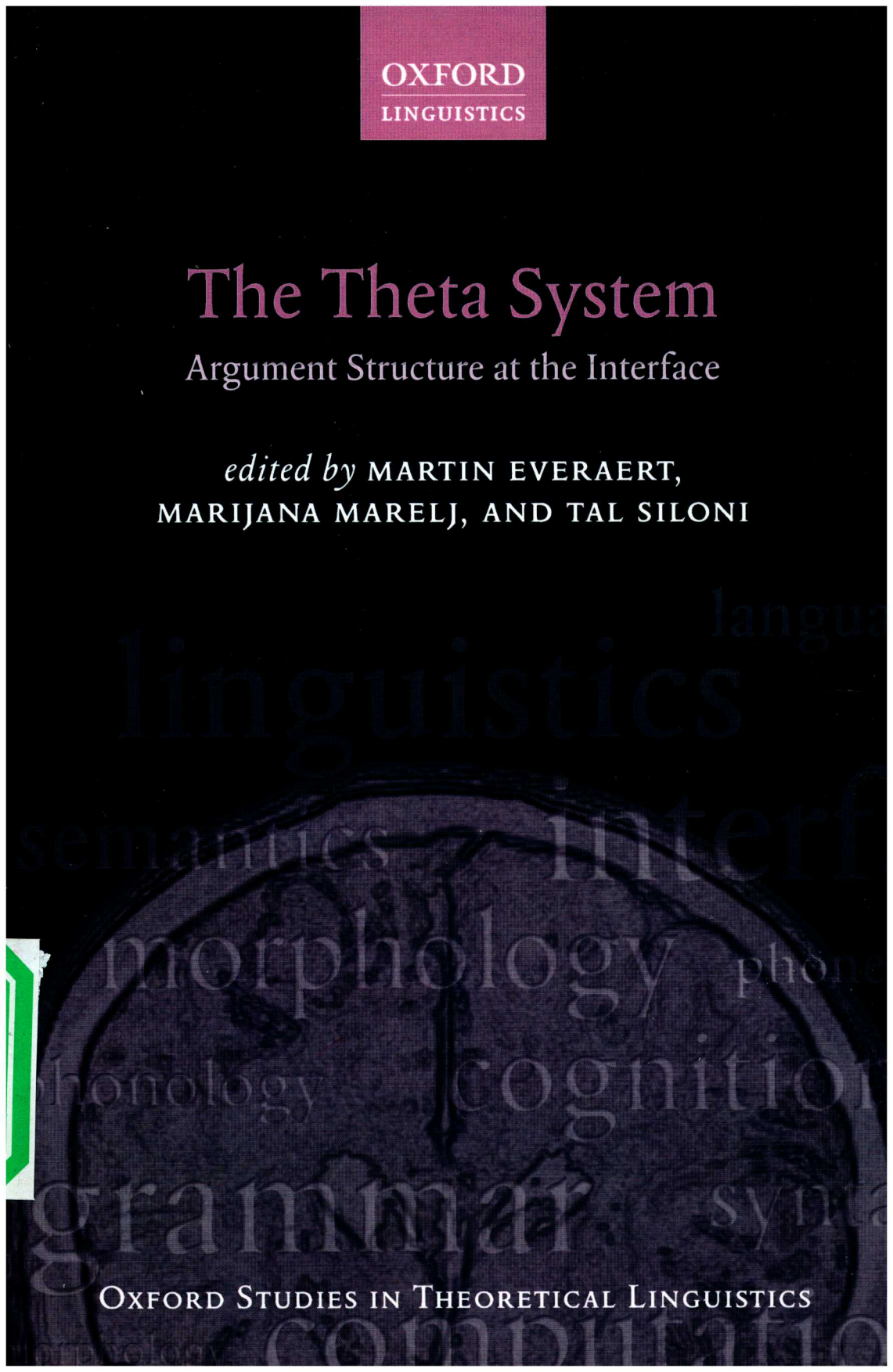
The Theta System

Argument Structure at the Interface

edited by MARTIN EVERAERT,
MARIJANA MARELJ, AND TAL SILONI



OXFORD STUDIES IN THEORETICAL LINGUISTICS

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General Preface

The theoretical focus of this series is on the interfaces between subcomponents of the human grammatical system and the closely related area of the interfaces between the different subdisciplines of linguistics. The notion of 'interface' has become central in grammatical theory (for instance, in Chomsky's recent Minimalist Programme) and in linguistic practice: work on the interfaces between syntax and semantics, syntax and morphology, phonology and phonetics, etc. has led to a deeper understanding of particular linguistic phenomena and of the architecture of the linguistic component of the mind/brain.

The series covers interfaces between core components of grammar, including syntax/morphology, syntax/semantics, syntax/phonology, syntax/pragmatics, morphology/phonology, phonology/phonetics, phonetics/speech processing, semantics/pragmatics, intonation/discourse structure, as well as issues in the way that the systems of grammar involving these interface areas are acquired and deployed in use (including language acquisition, language dysfunction, and language processing). It demonstrates, we hope, that proper understandings of particular linguistic phenomena, languages, language groups, or interlanguage variations all require reference to interfaces.

The series is open to work by linguists of all theoretical persuasions and schools of thought. A main requirement is that authors should write so as to be understood by colleagues in related subfields of linguistics and by scholars in cognate disciplines.

In the current volume the editors bring together international scholars to consider how lexical semantics relates to syntactic structure. All of them use the Theta System developed by Tanya Reinhart as a springboard for their investigations. The chapters present how the system works, and examine, extend, and critique its core theoretical commitments and its application to novel empirical domains. As a whole the volume is an in-depth exploration of the fecundity of this approach to the lexicon–syntax interface.

David Adger
Hagit Borer

List of Contributors

PETER ACKEMA is Reader in Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. His work is mainly on topics relating to the syntax–morphology interface, including argument structure. He has published two books (*Issues in Morphosyntax*, 1999 and, with Ad Neeleman, *Beyond Morphology*), as well as articles in a diverse range of journals.

HAGIT BORER is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Southern California. Her research interests span comparative syntax, the morphosyntax–semantics interface, and syntactic acquisition. In recent years, she has been developing a model in which syntactic information and operations previously assumed to be linked to lexical entries are replaced by syntactico-semantic functional structure. Some results of that research were published in 2005 as two related books (*Structuring Sense*, vol. 1: In Name Only; *Structuring Sense*, vol. 2: *The Normal Course of Events*). The publication of a third book, *Taking Form*, exploring the syntactic properties of complex words, is anticipated in 2012.

JOÃO COSTA is a professor at the Linguistics Department at FCSH—Universidade Nova de Lisboa. He received his PhD in 1998 from Leiden University. His main research interests include syntax and language acquisition.

ALEXIS DIMITRIADIS obtained his PhD in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a senior research associate at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS. His interests include the semantics and typology of reciprocals, anaphoric and pronominal reference, Greek linguistics, and information technology.

JULIE FADLON, a PhD student, teaches generative linguistics at Tel Aviv University. Her fields of interest include syntax, the lexicon–syntax interface, and psycholinguistics.

NAAMA FRIEDMANN is a Professor at the Language and Brain Lab, Tel Aviv University. She received her PhD in 1997 from Tel Aviv University. Her main research interests include aphasia, developmental language impairments, dyslexia and dysgraphia, and language acquisition.

MARTIN HAIDEN is Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Tours and member of the UMR INSERM U930 'Imagerie et cerveau'. His research focuses on interfaces in grammatical theory, in particular lexicon–syntax and syntax–phonology, and on language acquisition. His publications include *Theta Theory* (2005).

BETH LEVIN is the William H. Bonsall Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University. After receiving her PhD from MIT in 1983, she had major responsibility for the MIT Lexicon Project (1983–1987) and taught at Northwestern University (1987–1999). She is the author of *English Verb Classes and Alternations: a Preliminary Investigation* (1993) and the co-author with Malka Rappaport Hovav of *Argument Realization* (2005) and *Unaccusativity: At the Syntax–Lexical Semantics Interface* (1995).

MARIJANA MARELJ is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Utrecht University. She completed her PhD (cum laude) at Utrecht University, under the joint supervision of Tanya Reinhart and Eric Reuland. Her research interests include the architecture of grammar, syntactic theory, and interfaces (lexicon–syntax and syntax–semantics).

AYA MELTZER-ASSCHER is a post-doctoral fellow in the Aphasia and Neurolinguistics Research Laboratory at Northwestern University. She received a PhD in Linguistics from Tel Aviv University in 2011. Her major areas of interest are the lexicon–syntax interface, the syntax of adjectives, and the neural correlates of verb and sentence processing, particularly the processing of argument structure.

AD NEELEMAN is Professor of Linguistics at University College London. He completed his PhD at Utrecht University, where Tanya Reinhart was one of his tutors. He has published on various aspects of syntactic theory and its interactions with syntax-external systems, including morphology and information structure.

HANS VAN DE KOOT is Senior Lecturer at University College London. He completed his PhD at Utrecht University. He has published on a variety of topics in syntax, including theta theory, discourse-related word order variation, and computational properties of the human language faculty.

JOSEPH POTASHNIK is a PhD student of linguistics at Tel Aviv University. He is a senior software engineer and worked in pioneering high-tech companies. He has a BSc in computer sciences and physics, and an MA degree in linguistics (summa cum laude), from Tel Aviv University.

GYÖRGY RÁKOSI is a Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Debrecen in Hungary. He defended his PhD thesis, 'Dative experiencer predicates in Hungarian', in 2006 at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics. He has an interest in argument structure and related phenomena.

MALKA RAPPAPORT HOVAV is Professor of Linguistics and Head of the School of Language Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She received her PhD from MIT in 1984, was later associated with the MIT Lexicon Project, and taught at

Bar Ilan University (1984–99). She is co-author with Beth Levin of *Argument Realization* (2005) and *Unaccusativity: At the Syntax–Lexical Semantics Interface* (1995) and the co-editor with Edit Doron and Ivy Sichel of *Syntax, Lexical Semantics, and Event Structure* (2010).

Edwin Williams received his PhD in linguistics at MIT in 1974. He has since taught at the University of Massachusetts and at Princeton University. His research is primarily in syntax.

Abbreviations

1	first person
1S	class 1 (animate singular) subject agreement
3	third person
A	argument
A/ADJ	adjective
ABL	ablative
ACC	accusative
ADV	adverb
AFF	affix
AG	agentive
Agr	agreement
AP	adjective phrase
APPL	applicative
AS-Nominals	Argument Structure Nominals
ASP	aspect
BNC	British National Corpus
BY	*by*-phrase
C	complementizer
C	cause change
CAUS	causative
CauseP	Cause Phrase
CCF	crucial contributing factor
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
COND	conditional
CP	Complementizer Phrase
CS	Computational System
CSH	Conceptual Structure Hypothesis
DAT	dative
DIST	distal
DP	Determiner Phrase

E	event
ECM	Exceptional Case Marking
EIC	emission verbs involving cause
En-search	encyclopedic search
EP	Experiencer Phrase
EPP	Extended Projection Principle
Ev	event variable
F/FEM	feminine
F, F_1, F_2	functional nodes
FOC	focus
FSP	First Sister Principle
FUT	future
FV	final vowel
GABLE	graded accessibility by lexical encoding
Gen	generic
GEN	genitive
GF-changing processes	grammatical function changing processes
HMC	Head Movement Constraint
HPSG	Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar
I/Infl	inflection
ILL	illative
INF	infinitive
Init	initiator
InitP	Initiator (i.e. causing) Projection
IP	inflectional phrase
LAA	Local Accountability Assignment
Lex	lexicon
LF	logical form
LFG	Lexical Functional Grammar
LHM	Long Head Movement
LN	lexis-nexis
LocP	Locative Phrase
LSR	lexical semantic representation

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M	mental state
M/MAS	masculine
MS	morphosyntactic expression
N	noun
NACT	non-active
NOM	nominative
NP	Noun Phrase
NYT	*The New York Times*
O/Obj	object
O-Agr	object agreement
OBUSS	one big undifferentiated syntactical system
P	preposition
P	phrasal parameter
PART	partitive
PAST	past tense
PL	plural
PM	participial marker
POS	possessive
PP	Prepositional Phrase
PRES	present tense
ProcP	Process Phrase
Red	reduced
ResP	Result Phrase
R-Nominals	referential nominals
RootP	Root Phrase
R-role	referential role
S/Subj	subject
S-Agr	subject agreement
SD	structural description
SG	singular
SP	Stative Phrase
SV	subject–verb order
Syn	syntax

T	tense
ToBy	Theory of Body Mechanism
ToMM	Theory of Mind Mechanism
TOP	topic
*to*P	infinitival *to* Phrase
TP	Tense Phrase
TRANS	transitive
UAH	Universal Alignment Hypothesis
UG	Universal Grammar
Unacc	unaccusative
V	verb
v	'little v'
VoiceP	Voice Phrase
VP	Verb Phrase
*v*P	'little v' Phrase
VS	verb–subject order
WS	working structure
XP	X (variable) Phrase

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1

The Theta System: an Introduction

MARTIN EVERAERT, MARIJANA MARELJ,
AND TAL SILONI

1.1 Background

The lexicalization of concepts and the way aspects of meaning interact with syntactic structures have been at the core of theoretical linguistics since its beginning. Three major topics have been the focus of an ongoing investigation: (a) the type of information relevant for determining argument structure, (b) the way these pieces of information are encoded so that they are usable by the computational system and by the inference system, and (c) the mapping from lexico-semantic information onto syntactic structure.

Ever since Gruber (1965) and Fillmore (1968), thematic (θ) roles have been playing a central role in the transmission of lexical information crucial for syntactic structure and its interpretation. Thematic roles (Agent, Theme, Experiencer, and the like) represent the relation between arguments of a verb (or other part of speech) and the eventuality it denotes. They have been said to define the role participants play in the eventuality and determine the order in which these participants are merged.

However, the exact semantic content of θ-roles and their inventory have been left essentially unsettled. With a few exceptions (e.g. Williams 1981, Levin and Rappaport 1986), θ-roles have been generally mentioned as informal labels providing a convenient classification (e.g. Grimshaw 1990). As time went by with no real progress in these respects, scholars started raising serious doubts about the definability of θ-roles and the empirical adequacy of their classification. As observed by Dowty (1991)

Marijana Marelj's work was supported by a grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which we hereby gratefully acknowledge. We are grateful to the participants in this volume for their contribution as well as for their help in the process of reviewing. We are also indebted to our external reviewers: Sharon Armon-Lotem, Sergey Avrutin, Michal Ben Shachar, Eugenia Birger, Chris Collins, Marcel den Dikken, Teresa Guasti, Julia Horvath, Roni Katzir, Christopher Piñón, Omer Preminger, Elizabeth Ritter, Galit Sasson, and Ivy Sichel. Finally, we would like to thank the editors at Oxford University Press for their patience and assistance in the course of the preparation of the manuscript.

among others, the assumed θ-role classification seemed unable to capture relevant empirical generalizations across θ-roles; it did not give rise to natural role classes.

Moreover, the rules specifying the linking of θ-roles to syntactic positions were in a similarly unsatisfactory state. Since Jackendoff's seminal work (1972), there has been a strong belief that linking between semantic and syntactic categories is predictable. Not all linking, however, turned out to be as straightforward as the linking between Agents and Subjects. The initial solution offered by the literature was linking hierarchies (see e.g. Jackendoff 1972; Pinker 1984; Grimshaw 1990; Kiparsky 1987; Bresnan and Kanerva 1989), where the mismatch is typically resolved by assuming the existence either of a canonical or of a non-canonical linking hierarchy. Such analyses proved not without problems in the domain of acquisition (see Pinker 1984, 1989; Bowerman 1990). Instances of varying mapping of Experiencers and Instruments also remained difficult to capture. It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that by the beginning of the 1990s the achievements of theta theory were considered inadequate (Jackendoff 1987; Rappaport and Levin 1988; Dowty 1991). This led among other things to recurring attempts to eliminate the traditional θ-roles, deriving them by means of syntactic functional categories or syntactic feature-sets. This, in turn, has placed the controversy regarding the division of labour between the lexicon and the syntax in the limelight of linguistic theory.

Reinhart's Theta System takes a different perspective—and to our mind a substantial step forward—concerning the investigation of these intriguing issues. The framework has undergone several developments in Reinhart's texts and presentations on the topic (1991; 1996; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2005; 2006). Reinhart (forthcoming, b) is a posthumous publication, which introduces and presents the Theta System in the most exhaustive way. The present introduction offers a short tour into the Theta System, aiming to help the reader to evaluate the merits of the Theta System project with respect to some of the core issues at the relevant interfaces, and to be able to understand the papers in the volume from a wider perspective on the system. Importantly, the papers, although relevant to the system and to each other, are autonomous units that do not assume preliminary knowledge of the Theta System.

The next section presents the workings and the underpinning of the Theta System. Section 3 gives a brief overview of the contributions in this volume.

1.2 The Theta System

1.2.1 *The transitive–unaccusative alternation: puzzles*

Reinhart's initial empirical domain of interest (see Reinhart 1991; 1996; 2000) is the transitive–unaccusative alternation (also referred to as the causative–anticausative alternation). In the quest for the definition of the set undergoing the alternation, she examines three possibilities: (i) an aspectual definition of the set of unaccusative alternatives, (ii) a thematic definition of the set of unaccusative alternatives, and (iii) a thematic definition of the set of transitives undergoing the alternation.

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