

DERIVED AND UNDERIVED UNACCUSATIVES IN SLAVIC

Grote Taal dag 2026, January 27, 2026

1 INTRODUCTION: SLAVIC MEETS DEGREE ACHIEVEMENTS

Slavic degree achievements are often discussed through the prism of **thematic vowel contrast**: See Medová 2013, Caha, De Clercq and Vanden Wyngaerd 2023 for Czech, Jabłońska 2007 for Polish, Arsenijević and Milosavljević 2021, Milosavljević and Arsenijević 2022, Kovačević, Milosavljević and Simonović 2024 for Serbo-Croatian (SC), Simonović and Mišmaš 2022 for Slovenian, Vyshnevskaya 2025 for Ukrainian, among others

- | | | | |
|-----|----|--|-----------------------------|
| (1) | a. | zjasnět ‘to become clear’/zjasnit ‘to make clear’ | Czech, Caha et al. 2023 |
| | b. | głupieć ‘to get stupid’/głupić ‘to make stupid’ | Polish, Jabłońska 2007:109 |
| | c. | veselity ‘to become merrier’/veselyty ‘to make merrier’ | Ukr., Vyshnevskaya 2025:174 |
| | d. | otupeti ‘to become blunt, numb’/otupiti ‘to make blunt’ | Serbo-Croatian |
| | e. | planeti ‘to become drunk, intoxicated’, p’laniti ‘to intoxicate’ | Russian |
| | f. | rumeneti ‘to become yellow’/rumeniti ‘to make yellow’ | Slovenian, Marvin 2002:100 |

In all deadjectival verb pairs in (1):

- *e*-verbs are intransitive (and unaccusative)
- *i*-verbs are transitive

Question: what is the derivational relation (if any), between *e*- and *i*-verbs?

Proposal (cf. Alexiadou 2010 for Greek, Labelle and Doron 2010 for French): **minimally two underlying structures for deadjectival degree achievements**:

- transformatives: **inchoatives** (*e*-verbs) and mutatives (imperfective *nu*-verbs)
Not all *e*- and *nu*-verbs are degree achievements! But others do not concern us here
- causatives (unmarked) and **decausatives** (*se*-marked intransitives): *i*-verbs
Again, *i*-verbs are not limited to deadjectival degree achievements

Hence we will provide evidence that deadjectival degree achievements need not be limited to only one structure

The structure of the talk:

- why deadjectival *i*-verbs are not derived from their intransitive *e*-counterparts
- how *se*-marked intransitive counterparts of deadjectival *i*-verbs are different
- why deadjectival *e*-verbs are not derived from their *i*-counterparts
- the role of *v* in *e*- and *i*-verbs

Takeaway messages:

- new evidence for two different structures that unaccusatives might have
- the semantics of deadjectival change of state

2 WHY *I*-VERBS ARE NOT CAUSATIVES OF *E*-VERBS

Starting point: *i*-verbs do not have the semantics of causativized *e*-verbs (cf. Dyachkov 2021, 2023 for Russian):

- | | | | |
|-----|----|---|----------------|
| (2) | a. | crveneti ‘to become red(der), blush’, crveniti ‘to color red’ | Serbo-Croatian |
| | b. | crneti ‘to become tanned’, crniti ‘to color black’ | |
| | c. | beleti ‘to turn white(r); be white’, beliti ‘to whitewash, color white’ | Russian |
| | d. | tolsteti ‘to become fat(ter)’, tolstiti ‘to make look fat(ter)’ | |

Different processes can be evoked by *e*- and *i*-verbs:

- (3) a. Ora je crnila obrve. Serbo-Croatian
 Ora be.3SG black-TH_I.PTCP.FSG eyebrows
 ‘Ora was blackening her eyebrows.’
 b. Ora je crnela (od sunca).
 Ora be.3SG black-TH_E.PTCP.FSG from sun
 ‘Ora was becoming tanned.’
 c. *Sunce je crnilo Oru.
 sun be.3SG black-TH_I.PTCP.NSG Ora.ACC
- (4) a. Ot tainstvennogo lekarstva on molodel/pomolodel/*omolodel. Russian
 from mysterious medicine he Ø/PO-/O-young.TH_E.PAST.MSG
 ‘He was becoming/became young(er) from the mysterious drug.’
 b. Tainstvennoe lekarstvo molodilo/omolodilo/*pomolodilo ego.
 mysterious medicine Ø/PO-/O-young.TH_E.PAST.MSG him
 ‘The mysterious drug rejuvenated him.’
 c. Korotkaja strižka molodila/*omolodila/*pomolodila ego.
 short haircut Ø/PO-/O-young.TH_E.PAST.FSG him
 ‘Short hair was making him look younger.’

The **default perfectivizing prefixes** differ for *e*- and *i*-verbs (for Russian cf. Dyachkov 2021, 2023)

In Russian, where *e*-verbs form a productive class:

- the preferred prefixes for deadjectival *e*-verbs (maximally 170 in Zaliznjak) are *po*- (77), *o*-/*ob*- (64), *za*- (51) (with ca. 20 intersections for any two)
- for their *i*-counterparts (63, manual compilation): *ob*- (24), *po*- (9–11), *za*- (4–5)

In Serbo-Croatian the contrast between change-of-state *e*- and *i*-verbs is being lost, come to our second talk today to know how and why!

But for color verbs it still exists, and in these *e*/*i*-pairs, for *i*-verbs the most common prefix is *na*-, while for *e*-verbs it is *po*-:

- (5) a. Ora je nacrnila obrve. Serbo-Croatian
 Ora be.3SG NA.black-TH_I.PTCP.FSG eyebrows
 ‘Ora (has) blackened her eyebrows.’
 b. Ora je pocrnela (od sunca).
 Ora be.3SG PO.black-TH_E.PTCP.FSG from sun
 ‘Ora got tanned.’

If *i*-verbs are causatives of *e*-verbs, this variation in prefix choice is unexpected

Finally, **most *e*-verbs have no corresponding *i*-verbs** (cf. Dyachkov 2018:107–108, 2023):

- (6) a. (po/ob)liseti ‘to become bald(er)’_{PFV/IPFV}, *lisiti Russian
 b. zaxireti/xireti ‘to grow sickly, wither’_{PFV/IPFV}, *xiriti
 c. ržaveti ‘to turn rusty(r)’, *ržaviti

Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1994: “The proposed analysis of externally caused verbs predicts that there should be no externally caused verbs without a transitive variant” (p.95)

Not all *i*-verbs have *e*-variants either, but this is not unexpected:

- (7) a. *bodriti* ‘to invigorate, encourage’ (from *bodrij* ‘cheerful, brisk’), **bodreti*
 b. *uglubiti* ‘to make deeper’_{PFV} (from *glubokij* ‘deep’), **glubeti*/**uglubet*

But transitive deadjectival *i*-verbs with the semantics of degree achievements may have (non-passive, non-reflexive) *se*-marked unaccusative counterparts

3 MORPHOLOGICALLY MARKED ANTICAUSATIVES (I.E., DECAUSATIVES)

Most deadjectival *i*-causatives have **explicitly marked unaccusative counterparts**, which are productive and transparent:

- (8) a. Tristram je osušio cveće. Serbo-Croatian
 Tristram AUX dry.PFV.PTCP.MSG flowers.COLL.NSG
 ‘Tristram dried up the flowers.’
 b. Cveće se osušilo.
 flower.COLL.NSG SE dry.PFV.PTCP.NSG
 ‘The flowers dried up’
- (9) a. Incident uglubil raskol između stranami. Russian
 incident deepen.PFV.PAST.MSG rift.ACC between countries
 ‘The incident deepened the rift between the countries.’
 b. Ètot raskol uglubils’ja blagodar’ja novomu incidentu.
 this rift.NOM deepen.PFV.PAST.FSG.SE thanks.to new incident
 ‘This rift deepened because of the new incident.’

The *se*-morph also marks middles, passives, reflexives, impersonals, essives, etc.

Cf. Embick 1998, for Greek: non-active morphology marks the suppression of the external argument

Hence in Slavic there are two **morphologically distinct** ways of deriving deadjectival degree achievements:

There’s also *nu*-verbs, aka mutatives, but these are unproductive throughout Slavic and mostly non-deadjectival

- *e*-verbs, aka inchoatives
- *i*-verbs, causatives and decausatives

Unlike in Greek, in Slavic inchoatives and causatives have different derivational suffixes

And there can be triplets, obviously with nuances in interpretation:

Apparently, as in Greek (Alexiadou 2010:185, fn.187)

- (10) a. Nož je o-tup-e-o od upotrebe. Serbo-Croatian, inchoative
 knife is PFX-blunt-TH_E-PAST.MSG from use
 ‘The knife got blunt from use.’
 b. Nož se o-tup-i-o od upotrebe. decausative
 knife SE PFX-blunt-TH_I-PTCP.MSG from use
 ‘The knife got blunt from use.’

- c. O-tup-e-l-a sam od bola. inchoative
 PFX-blunt-TH_E-PTCP-FSG am from pain
 ‘I became numb from pain.’
- d. *O-tup-i-l-a sam (*se) od bola. decausative
 PFX-blunt-TH_I-PTCP-FSG am SE from pain
- (11) a. Vygljanulo solnce, i vse vokrug poveselelo. Russian, inchoative
 look.out.PFV.PAST.NSG sun and all around grow.merrier.PFV.PAST.NSG
 ‘The sun came out, and everything around become merrier.’
- b. Postskriptum menja poveselil. causative
 postscriptum me.ACC amuse.PFV.PAST.MSG
 ‘The postscriptum amused me.’
- c. My vse umrem, počemu by ne poveselit’sja? decausative
 we all die.PFV.PRES.PL why PRT NEG amuse.PFV.INF.SE
 ‘We will all die, why not amuse ourselves (=have fun)?’

Not every deadjectival *i*-causative gives rise to a decausative, but when they do, the semantic link is transparent

4 WHY *E*-VERBS ARE NOT DECAUSATIVES OF *I*-VERBS

Possibility: there is more than one type of decausativization, with *se*-marking and with the *e*-theme suffix

Problem: the lack of semantic transparency for *e*-verbs in contrast to decausatives

Furthermore, the unaccusativity of *e*-verbs and decausatives is not identical

Evidence: Serbo-Croatian prenominal past participles

Hoekstra 1984, Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1995, Aljović 2000, Marelj 2004, a.o.: prenominal past participles as an unaccusativity diagnostic:

- (12) a. the sleeping cat/*the slept cat (unergative)
 b. the falling guests/the fallen guests (unaccusative)
 c. broken window, written book, eaten meal, etc. (transitive)

The prenominal past participle can only track the internal argument:

- unergative: only the present participle can be used as a prenominal modifier
- unaccusative: past participles can be used prenominally
- transitive: past participles can be used prenominally

Serbo-Croatian: different past-participle forms for transitives and unaccusatives:

- unaccusatives: *l*-participles
- transitives: *n*-participles
- unergatives: no past participle

Hence Serbo-Croatian tests not only for the status of the argument (internal vs. external), but also for the syntactic structure it is a part of:

- *l*-participles are for the internal arguments of one-place verbs
- *n*-participles are for the internal argument of transitive verbs

- (13) a. pristig-l-i gosti (unaccusative) Aljović 2000:5
 arrive-PTCP-MPL guests
 ‘arrived guests’
- b. *skoč-i-l-i/*skoč-en-i dječaci (unergative) Aljović 2000:5
 jump-TH_I-PTCP-MPL boys
- c. razbij-en-i/*razbi-l-i prozor (transitive)
 break-PTCP-MSG window
 ‘broken window’

Only the *l*-participle is grammatical with the deadjectival *e*-verbs:

- (14) a. po-rumen-e-l-i/*porumenj-e-n-i obrazi
 PO-blush-TH_E-PTCP-MPL cheeks
 ‘cheeks that have blushed’
- b. po-žut-e-l-o/*požuće-n-o lišće
 PO-yellow-TH_E-PTCP-MPL leaves.COLL
 ‘leaves that have yellowed’
- c. o-tup-e-l-i/*otuplj-e-n-i čovek
 O-blunt-TH_E-PTCP-MPL person
 ‘numbed person’

This implies that deadjectival *e*-verbs are one-place unaccusatives in Serbo-Croatian

On the other hand, deadjectival *i*-verbs allow only for *n*-participles to be used prenominaly:

- (15) a. na-rumenj-en-i/*na-rumen-i-l-i obrazi
 NA-blush.TH_I-PTCP-MPL cheeks
 ‘cheeks that had been rouged’
- b. o-tupl-j-en-i/(o-tup-e-l-i)/*o-tup-i-l-i nož
 O-blunt-TH_I-PTCP-MPL/(O-blunt-TH_E-PTCP-MPL)/O-blunt-TH_I-PTCP-MPL knife
 ‘blunt/dulled knife’

No comparable argument can be constructed for Russian because it has active past participles, which always track the nominative subject

Other syntactic unaccusativity tests do not distinguish derived and underived unaccusatives

5 DATA SUMMARY

Slavic provides evidence for two types of unaccusatives:

- derived from their transitive counterparts (decausatives)
- not derived from transitives (inchoative *e*-verbs)

The fact that the two types take different prefixes strongly suggests **different event types**

Inchoatives and causatives derived from the same stem are not derivationally linked, in clear contrast with causatives and decausatives

Hence, **some unaccusatives are not derived from underlying transitives** (contra Chierchia 2004)

So Chierchia's observation that in some dialects/languages *die* and *grow* are SE-marked does not mean that they always are decausative

Our observations join the growing body of literature suggesting that anticausatives come in more than one variety, with decausatives explicitly marked

French (Labelle and Doron 2010):

- middle (SE-marked) unaccusatives are decausative
- active (unmarked) unaccusatives have a different (position of) *v*

Greek (Alexiadou 2010):

- middle (non-active) unaccusatives are decausative
- active (unmarked) unaccusatives lack Voice

Composition vs. decomposition: what does *v* combine with?

6 TWO VIEWS ON DEADJECTIVAL DEGREE ACHIEVEMENTS

How does an adjective become a verb?

- standard view: combine an adjectival stem with a verbalizer
- modern decompositional views: verbalizers combine with complex structures

What is the internal argument of an unaccusative (the undergoer) an argument of?

Two levels of differentiation: the structure of the VP and the presence of VoiceP

Pylkkänen 2002, 2008: the “Voice bundling” hypothesis: *v* and Voice may form or not form a single node (across languages)

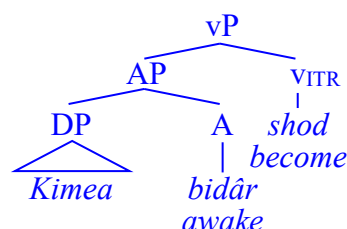
Harley 2008, 2012, 2017 vs. Alexiadou, Anagnostopoulou and Schäfer 2006, Alexiadou 2010: does *v* combine with a \sqrt{P} or a \sqrt{V}

6.1 The small-clause structure

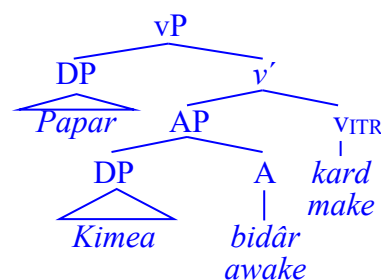
Underlying small-clause structure (Harley 2008, 2012, 2017, not focusing on anticausatives, but distinguishing languages with and without “Voice bundling”)

(16) Persian (Folli, Harley and Karimi 2005): *v* and Voice bundled, light verb constructions

a. Kimea woke up.



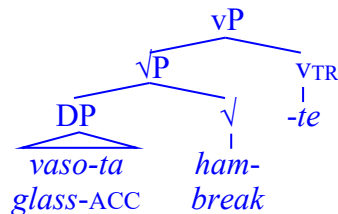
b. Papar woke up Kimea.



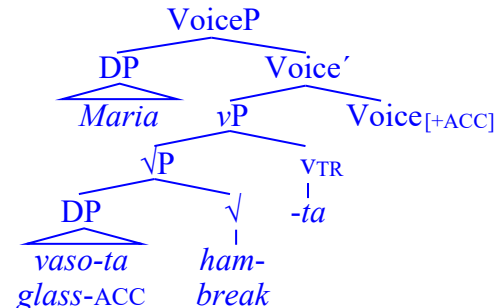
The same functional head both verbalizes and expresses Voice (active, passive, etc.)
 Persian uses light-verb constructions, varying for different lexical roots

(17) Hiaki (Harley 2008, 2012, 2017): v and Voice expressed by different morphemes:

(18) a. The glass broke.

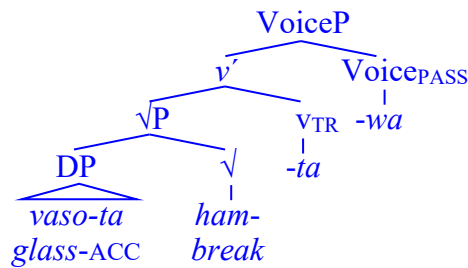


b. Maria broke the glass.



Non-active morphology is separated from the transitive v , as seen in the passive:

(18) c. The glass was broken.



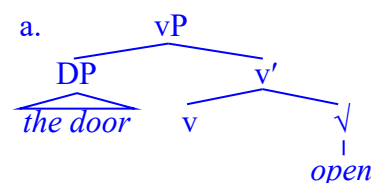
Two separate hypotheses, one explicit (Voice- v bundling), the other implicit (the small-clause structure as a sister to v)

The two structures, with and without Voice, can be present in the same language

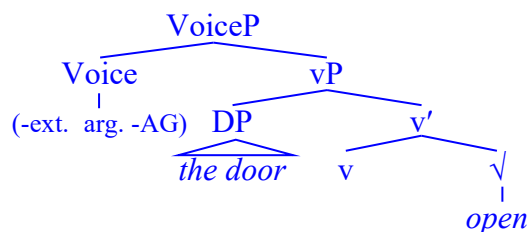
6.2 Direct composition

Direct composition (Alexiadou 2010:183, two types of unaccusatives, her “anticausatives”):

(19) a.



b.



The semantic import of v in these structures is not specified

v is identified with CAUSE in Alexiadou et al. 2006:201, but there the resultant state is taken to be that denoted by the verbal root in combination with its theme argument, which implies the SC structure in (18)

Voice as the source of the external argument or of its absence:

- Voice: the causer (agent or event) is introduced as an external argument
- lack of Voice: no causer or an internal causer

Evidence (same as here): unaccusatives with Voice (her type II anticausatives) have non-active morphology (coincidental with reflexive or passive)

Two separate hypotheses, one explicit (Voice as the source of the external argument), the other implicit (the root as a sister to v)

Does it matter if the sister to v is a head (\sqrt{A}) or a phrase ($\sqrt{P/AP}$)?

6.3 Process vs. result orientation

Two types of anticausatives in French: middle anticausatives (with *se*) and active anticausatives (without *se*) correlating with the presence of a transitive counterpart:

- (20) a. La branche s'est cassée.
 the branch SE.is broken
 'The branch broke.'
- b. La branche a cassé.
 the branch has broken
 'The branch broke.'
- c. Le vent a cassé la branche.
 the wind has broken the branch
 'The wind broke the branch.'

Sources: Zribi-Hertz 1987, Labelle 1992, Legendre and Smolensky 2009, Labelle and Doron 2010, among others

Semantic distinction (Labelle 1992, Legendre and Smolensky 2009):

- active anticausative: asserts the autonomy of the **process**
- middle anticausative: focuses on the attainment of a **result state**

Labelle and Doron 2010: all structures contain VoiceP, but the root can be merged either into V or into v (makes for very odd trees)

Our proposal: the semantic distinction between the two types of anticausatives translates into the difference between VP structures:

- (21) a.
- b.

(21a) is compatible only with the active Voice, (21b), with both active and non-active

To be continued!

7 REFERENCES

- Ackema, Peter, and Maaïke Schoorlemmer. 1995. Middles and nonmovement. *Linguistic Inquiry* 26(2), 173–197. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4178895>.
- Alexiadou, Artemis. 2010. On the morphosyntax of (anti)causative verbs. In *Lexical Semantics, Syntax, and Event Structure*, ed. by Malka Rappaport Hovav, Edit Doron and Ivy Sichel, 177–203. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199544325.003.0009>.
- Alexiadou, Artemis, Elena Anagnostopoulou, and Florian Schäfer. 2006. The properties of anticausatives crosslinguistically. In *Phases of Interpretation*, ed. by Mara Frascarelli, 187–212. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110197723.4.187>.

- Aljović, Nadira. 2000. Unaccusativity and aspect in SerBoCroatian. In *ConSOLE VIII Proceedings*, ed. by Christine Czinglar, Katharina Köhler, Erik Jan van der Torre and Malte Zimmermann, 1–15. Leiden: SOLE.
- Arsenijević, Boban, and Stefan Milosavljević. 2021. Serbo-Croatian theme vowels carry functional features. Paper presented at *Theme vowels in V(P) Structure and beyond*, University of Graz, April 22–23, 2021.
- Caha, Pavel, Karen De Clercq, and Guido Vanden Wyngaerd. 2023. Zero morphology and change-of-state verbs. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 42(1), 35–62. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfs-2022-2012>.
- Chierchia, Gennaro. 2004. A semantics for unaccusatives and its syntactic consequences. In *The Unaccusativity Puzzle*, ed. by Artemis Alexiadou, Elena Anagnostopoulou and Martin Everaert, 22–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dyachkov, Vadim. 2018. Типология деадъективных глаголов [Typology of deadjectival verbs]. Doctoral dissertation, Moscow State University.
- Dyachkov, Vadim. 2021. Theme vowels *e* and *i* in Russian: implementing the cartographic approach. *Balkanica et Slavia* 1(2), 181–204.
- Dyachkov, Vadim. 2023. The position of the theme vowels *e* and *i* in the functional spine of Russian verbs: evidence from denominal and deadjectival verbs. Paper presented at *SLE 2023*, Athens, August 29 – September 1, 2023.
- Embick, David. 1998. Voice systems and the syntax/morphology interface. In *Papers from the UPenn/MIT Roundtable on Argument Structure and Aspect*, ed. by Heidi Harley. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 32, 41–72. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MITWPL.
- Folli, Raffaella, Heidi Harley, and Simin Karimi. 2005. Determinants of event type in Persian complex predicates. *Lingua* 115(10), 1365–1401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2004.06.002>.
- Harley, Heidi. 2008. On the causative construction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Linguistics*, ed. by Shigeru Miyagawa, 20–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195307344.013.0002>.
- Harley, Heidi. 2012. Lexical decomposition in modern syntactic theory. In *The Oxford Handbook of Compositionality*, ed. by Wolfram Hinzen, Edouard Machery and Markus Werning, 328–350. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199541072.013.0015>.
- Harley, Heidi. 2017. The “bundling” hypothesis and the disparate functions of little *v*. In *The Verbal Domain*, ed. by Roberta D'Alessandro, Irene Franco and Angel J. Gallego, 3–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198767886.003.0001>.
- Hoekstra, Teun. 1984. *Transitivity; Grammatical Relations in Government-Binding Theory*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Jabłońska, Patrycja. 2007. Radical decomposition and argument structure. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tromsø.
- Kovačević, Predrag, Stefan Milosavljević, and Marko Simonović. 2024. Theme-vowel minimal pairs show argument structure alternations. *Journal of Linguistics*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226723000415>.
- Labelle, Marie. 1992. Change of state and valency. *Journal of Linguistics* 28(2), 375–414. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226700015267>.
- Labelle, Marie, and Edit Doron. 2010. Anticausative derivations (and other valency alternations) in French. 22(2), 303–316. <https://doi.org/10.1515/prbs.2010.011>.
- Legendre, Géraldine, and Paul Smolensky. 2009. French inchoatives and the Unaccusativity Hypothesis. In *Hypothesis A / Hypothesis B: Linguistic Explorations in Honor of David M. Perlmutter*, 229–246. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7670.003.0016>.
- Levin, Beth, and Malka Rappaport Hovav. 1994. A preliminary analysis of causative verbs in English. *Lingua* 92, 35–77. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841\(94\)90337-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841(94)90337-9).

- Marelj, Marijana. 2004. Middles and Argument Structure across Languages. Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University.
- Marvin, Tatjana. 2002. Topics in the stress and syntax of words. Doctoral dissertation, MIT.
- Medová, Lucie. 2013. Anticausatives and unaccusatives in Czech. In *Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics (FASL 20). The Second MIT Meeting (2011)*, ed. by Alexander Podobryaev, 184–199. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan Slavic Publications.
- Milosavljević, Stefan, and Boban Arsenijević. 2022. What differentiates Serbo-Croatian verbal theme vowels: content or markedness? *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 7(1), 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.8535>.
- Pylkkänen, Liina. 2002. Introducing arguments. Doctoral dissertation, MIT. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MITWPL.
- Pylkkänen, Liina. 2008. *Introducing Arguments*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Simonović, Marko, and Petra Mišmaš. 2022. Lowest theme vowels or highest roots? An ‘unaccusative’ theme-vowel class in Slovenian. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.5809>.
- Vyshnevskaya, Anastasiia. 2025. Comparative morphology across categories: Ukrainian adjectives, adverbs, and deadjectival verbs. Doctoral dissertation, KU Leuven. Amsterdam: LOT.
- Zribi-Hertz, Anne. 1987. La réflexivité ergative en français moderne. *Le français moderne* 55, 23–54.