

DISCOURSE PRAGMATICS AND VERB TYPE: OVERPASSIVIZATION OF UNACCUSATIVE/UNERGATIVE VERBS IN L2

Reza G. Samar, (rgsamar@gmail.com) N. Karimi-Alvar
Tarbiat Modares University

A topic which has received much attention in recent discussions in SLA research is the development of knowledge by L2 speakers of the relationship between argument structure of verbs and its morphosyntactic realizations (Kondo 2005). This paper is an attempt to investigate this issue as applied to unaccusative and unergative verbs.

1. Introduction, Background and Purpose

Perlmutter's (1978) and Burzio's (1986, cited in Sorace & Shomura 2001) Untransitivity Theory argues that there are two major subclasses of intransitive verbs: unaccusatives and unergatives. Linguists have assigned verbs to either one of the classes based on varying principles of classification like semantic grounds (Dowty 1991, Seibert 1993), syntactic grounds (e.g. Baker 1988), and a hybrid approach of syntactic/semantic grounds (Levine and Rappaport Hovav 1995, Montrul 2001). As shown in one in the handout, the semantic approach to unergative/unaccusative distinction considers agentivity and telicity as determining factors for distinction. Unergative verbs usually involve an agent and are often described to be atelic i.e. without an inherent endpoint, e.g. jump, walk, run, laugh. In contrast, unaccusatives are nonagentive in that they do not have an agent in the sense of the doer of the action and are telic which means they do have an inherent endpoint (e.g. change, melt, freeze, emerge).

The syntactic approach states that "the principles of UG correlate thematic structures with syntactic structures in a uniform fashion" (Radford 1997:342). Based on this approach, Burzio (1986) argues that the thematic position of a subject may vary according to the nature of the verb.

With this background in mind, let us state and frame the problem the present study is going to tap into:

A topic which has received much attention in recent discussions in SLA research is the development of knowledge by L2 speakers of the relationship between argument structure of verbs and its morphosyntactic realizations (Kondo 2005). Some of this attention has been drawn towards one-argument unaccusative/unergative verbs like "Tom *vanished*" and "Tom *laughed*" respectively. The structure of both unaccusative/ unergative verbs, together with their arguments, surfaces as S-V in English. But they, according to some researchers (e.g. Kondo 2005, Hirakawa 2001), have distinct underlying representations. As seen in one in the handout, the single argument of an unaccusative verb bears the thematic role of Theme or Patient which is generated in an object position in argument structure which surfaces as subject in English. Therefore, "Tom vanished" has the deep structure of [\emptyset [VP vanished Tom]] and a surface structure of [Tom [VP vanished t]]. Whereas the single argument of an unergative verb bears an agent thematic role and is generated in the canonical position of subject causing the S-V structure to have the same deep and surface structures: [Tom[VP laughed]].

Thus, unaccusative verbs are similar to passive verbs in that the internal argument moves from an object position to a subject position in the syntax (Kondo 2005). However, unlike passive constructions which carry the morphological reflex of be+PP, there is no morphological reflex of this movement. Nevertheless, it has been found that speakers of some L1s learning English overgeneralize passive morphology to intransitive verbs and it is usually argued that they are more likely to do this with intransitive unaccusatives than with intransitive unergatives (Balcom 1997, Zobl 1989). This is an interesting observation in SLA, since if that is the case, which has been revealed by researchers focusing on learners of particular L1 backgrounds, learners produce something which do not usually encounter evidence for in the input. Our first concern in this study is to shed light on overpassivization of intransitive unaccusatives as compared to intransitive unergatives by L2 speakers who have Persian as their L1.

Besides this, some consideration has been given to what might trigger this process of overpassivization. Is it only a grammatical reflex of the syntactic movement of an argument structure object to a syntactic subject position or is it triggered pragmatically?

Ju (2000) argues that besides the syntactic properties of unaccusatives, discourse pragmatics plays a crucial role in the usage of unaccusatives by L2 learners. Ju points out that any event may be viewed from several perspectives, each with a different relative topicality of Agent and Patient and proposes that the possible existence of a pragmatically conceptualizable agent, offered by logical inference or discourse information, may play a very important role in the overpassivization of unaccusatives. Discourse information can influence the saliency of cause or causer of the event. If, for instance, a suspicious man was mentioned wandering around a car, a conceptualizable agent, responsible for the disappearance of the car, would be more readily available than if it was mentioned that the car was parked on a steep slope. To sum up, unaccusative verbs can have more or less available conceptualizable agents, depending on the saliency of the source of causation, which is influenced by the nature of the verb and the discourse context. In light of this, Ju hypothesizes that overpassivization of unaccusatives is more likely to occur if the discourse context offers an agent interpreted as an external cause of the event than when it was inferred from the discursal context that no external cause has been involved but that there is a cause involved which is internal to the event. This finding has, of course, been contested by some researchers e.g. Kondo (2005). Thus, in this regard, the second concern of the present study sets out to shed some light on this unclear situation.

The third concern or question of the study sets out to delve into the differences between the two major categories of unaccusatives, i.e. monadic unaccusatives defined as the intransitive unaccusative verbs without any transitive counterpart e.g. *disappear*, *emerge*, *vanish* and dyadic unaccusatives which are defined as the unaccusative verbs with transitive counterparts e.g. *change*, *collapse*, *dry*, see 2 in the handout. The rationale behind this question was to see whether there are actually two distinct categories of unaccusative verbs in terms of overpassivization or there is, as Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978) states, only one single unaccusative category irrespective of lexicosyntactic properties allowing or disallowing transitive counterparts.

Thus, against this background, the present study sets out to specifically deal with and seek answers to the following three questions,

shown in three in the hand out:

1. Do Persian L2 speakers of English overpassivize intransitive unaccusatives more than intransitive unergatives?
1. Does discourse pragmatics exert any effect upon the overpassivization of unaccusative verbs by L2 learners of English?
1. Is there any difference in the rate of overpassivization between monadic unaccusatives and dyadic unaccusatives?

2. Methodology:

The participants of the study were 70 intermediate students majoring in English language and literature at Azad University in Ilam, Iran. The age range of the participants was between 21 to 27. A TOEFL test of English as a foreign language was given to the participants and 30 came to be known as homogenous in terms of language proficiency. Another instrument used was a Forced-Choice Questionnaire. The questionnaire, adopted from Ju (2000) and used with a little modification, consisted of 46 paired sentences the first of which provided the subjects with a context which was related to the second sentence whereby the subjects were required to indicate its grammatical structure (i.e. active or passive), an example is shown in 5 in the handout. The questionnaire used only immobile inanimate objects as the subjects of the target sentences to exclude the role of animacy in choosing voice forms. Moreover, in order to mask the focus on unaccusatives, the questionnaire included some distracter sentences with transitive verbs.

We employed an ex post facto design and paired samples t-tests were run for the purpose of tapping into each of the hypotheses of the study. After giving the TOEFL test to the participants, and after ascertaining the normality of the distribution of the scores through KS (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) Test, 30 of them were chosen homogeneous in terms of language proficiency. They were, then, given the forced-choice questionnaire to answer. The questionnaires were collected and scored and the number of overpassivization errors was calculated. The results were, then, analyzed using paired-samples T-Tests on SPSS 9.0.

3. Results and Analysis of Data

To answer the first question, a paired-samples T-Test was run to compare the number of overpassivization errors in the unergative group of verbs and the number of overpassivization errors in the unaccusative group of verbs. The results of this computation are shown in table one.

Table1: Overpassivization errors: unergative vs. unaccusative verbs:

Paired Samples Statistics

Pair	Unaccusative	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	Unergative	6.7000	10	1.6364	.5175
	Unaccusative	3.2000	10	1.1353	.3590

Paired Samples Test

Pair	Unaccusative- Unergative	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	t Stat	df	Sig. (2-tailed)		
1	Unaccusative- Unergative	3500	21731	6872	19455	50545	5098	9	.001

As can be seen in the table, ($t = 5.09$; $df = 9$; $p < 0.05$), a significant difference was found between unaccusative and unergative groups of verbs in terms of the number of overpassivization errors made by the participants. Thus, Iranian L2 learners of English overpassivized unaccusative verbs far more than unergatives which is in line with the results of other studies which have investigated this aspect of overpassivization among speakers of English in varying L1 backgrounds (e.g., Balcom (1997), Zobl (1989), Kondo (2005) and Oshita (2002).

Next, we try to answer the second question related to the influence of Discourse pragmatics on overpassivization of unaccusative verbs. By discourse pragmatics, here, as in Ju (2000), it is meant the source of causation of the event, i.e. whether it is internally caused or if it is externally caused. In internally caused events, the discourse leads the reader to conclude that there is no apparent agent for the event while in externally caused events, the reader is led to the conclusion that there is a conceptualizable agent for the event. The assumption is that overpassivization occurs more when there is an agent conceptualized for the event. Therefore, the unaccusative verbs used in the sentences of the questionnaire were used in both contexts, externally caused and internally caused, but since the verbs were divided into two principal categories of dyadic and monadic unaccusative verbs, the effect of discourse pragmatics or the same source of causation was analyzed three times the results of each of these computations are shown in tables 2, 3, and 4.

Table 2: Overpassivization of Dyadic external and internal verb types:

Paired Samples Statistics

Pair 1	Dyadic External	6.0000	30	2.1972	.4011
	Dyadic Internal	4.8000	30	2.4830	.4533

PairedSamplesTest

		95% Confidence Interval							
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pair 1	Dyadic External - Dyadic Internal	1.2000	2.3883	4.8000	3.1533	2.0847	2.7740	.29	.010

As shown in table 2, ($t = 2.77$; $df = 29$; $p < 0.05$), there is a significance difference between dyadic unaccusative verbs used in externally caused events and those in internally caused events.

Table 3: *Overpassivization of Monadic external and internal verb types:*

Paired Samples Statistics

Pair 1	Monadic Ext.	2.2333	30	1.2229	.2233
	Monadic Int.	1.8667	30	1.2243	.2235

PairedSamplesTest

		95% Confidence Interval							
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pair 1	Monadic Ext - Monadic Int	.3667	1.3257	2.4000	-.1284	.8617	1.5150	.29	.141

But, in contrast to the dyadic group of unaccusative verbs, the results reported in table 3, ($t = 1.51$; $df = 29$; $p > 0.05$), did not confirm any significant difference between the means of the overpassivization errors in the category of unaccusative verbs used in externally caused events and those used in internally caused events which supports the modifying nature of the effect of monadic type on overpassivization of verbs by L2 learners of English.

For the third time, the comparison was done between the means of the overpassivization errors for the verbs used in externally caused events and those in internally caused events in total, the results are reported in table 4:

Table 4: *Overpassivization of verbs used in externally vs. internally caused events: total:*

Paired Samples Statistics

Pair 1	External	4.1167	60	2.5913	.3345
	Internal	3.3333	60	2.4402	.3150

Paired Samples Test

Pa	Extend- Internal						3113	59	.008
		7833	19438	2517	95% Confidence				
					2798	12869			
1									

Much like the comparison in dyadic group of verbs and in contrast to the monadic group of unaccusative verbs, the comparison of the overpassivization of the verbs used in externally caused events and those used in internally caused events did indicate a significant difference ($t = 3.11$; $df = 59$; $p < 0.05$).

The hypothesis of the study concerning the third question was that:

- *There is no significant difference in terms of overpassivization errors between the two categories of unaccusative verbs i.e. monadic and dyadic.*

As stated earlier, monadic unaccusatives are the intransitive unaccusative verbs without any transitive counterpart e.g. *disappear, emerge, vanish*; and dyadic unaccusatives are defined as the unaccusative verbs with transitive counterparts e.g. *change, collapse, dry*. The means of the overpassivization errors in these two types of verbs were compared and the results are reported in table 5.

Table 5: Overpassivization of verbs used in Dyadic vs. Monadic unaccusatives:

Paired Samples Statistics

Pair					
1	Dyadic	6.6625	60	3.9883	.5149
	Monadic	5.4000	60	2.4020	.3101

Paired Samples Test

Pa	Dyadic- Monadic						2.308	59	.025
		1.262	4.2370	.5470	95% Confidence				
					.1680	2.3570			
1									

Here, too, the results of the paired-samples T-Test, ($t = 2.30$; $df = 59$; $p > 0.05$) indicated a significance difference between dyadic and monadic types of unaccusative verbs which provides counterevidence as to Perlmutter's (1978) Unaccusative Hypothesis which states that there is one single category of unaccusatives irrespective of lexicosyntactic properties allowing or disallowing transitive counterparts.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that Iranian L2 speakers of English allow overpassivization with intransitive unaccusatives significantly more than with intransitive unergatives indicates support for the claim that L2 speakers are sensitive to the abstract properties of argument structure when they construct their interlanguage grammars (Kondo 2005). Indeed, they intuitively know that the subjects of the unergative verbs originate in the specifier of VP whereas those of unaccusative verbs are base generated in the canonical object position. Moreover, there seems to be an L1 effect on allowing overpassivization significantly more with intransitive unaccusatives than with intransitive unergatives. Upon translation of most of the unaccusative verbs, the Persian verb "shod" meaning the same as the passive morphology of "was/were" or meaning "become/get" accompanies their meaning and the learners by mistake consider this to be indicative of the passive construction. (Examples like *appear* meaning "napadid shodan" in Persian, *emerge* meaning "peyda shodan" are illustrative of this point). In addition, the results of the study lend support to Montrul's (1999) claim that unergative verbs are internally caused because some property inherent to the argument of the verb (like volition) is considered to be responsible for the event so that there is a lower likelihood of overpassivization with unergatives vis-à-vis the unaccusative category.

The second question tapped into the effect of discourse information or the internal vs. external source of causation on overpassivization of unaccusative verbs, which, overall, supported the claim that L2 speakers overpassivize unaccusative verbs more in externally caused contexts. It is argued that in externally caused contexts, the learners recognize conceptualizable agents provided through the

discourse information which affects their judgment regarding voice choice. The reason seems to be that conceptualizable agents emphasize the patientlike nature of the subjects of the unaccusative verbs and cause the learners to assume that the verb can bear a *by*-phrase. The results of the mean comparisons of the dyadic vs. monadic categories of verbs indicated a significant difference between the two categories regarding overpassivization with dyadic verbs, allowing more passivization errors than monadic verbs. These findings provide counterevidence to the claim that L2 learners treat all the unaccusative verbs as belonging to one category which does not differentiate those with transitive counterparts and those without transitive counterparts. Oshita (2001), for example, is specific in not distinguishing monadic unaccusatives from dyadic ones and much along the same line, Perlmutter's (1978) Unaccusativity Hypothesis states that there is only one single unaccusative category irrespective of lexicosyntactic properties allowing or disallowing transitive counterparts. But these findings are contested by the findings of this study.

From the results of the study, it can also be said that L2 learners of English are sensitive to the abstract properties of argument structure which does not stem either from their L1 knowledge or the L2 input. Thus it could be said that the results gotten from this study support the claim that "default linguistic mechanisms (from UG) play a role at the argument structure level" (Montrul 2000:231).

References

- Baker, M. 1988. *Incorporation: A theory of grammatical function changing*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Balcom, P. 1997. Why is this happened? Passive morphology and unaccusativity. *Second Language Research*, 13: 1-9
- Dowty, D. 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. *Language*, 67: 547-619
- Hirakawa, M. 2001. L2 acquisition of Japanese unaccusative verbs, *Studies in second language acquisition*, 23, 2: 221-245.
- Ju, M. K. 2000. Overpassivization errors by second language learners: The effects of conceptualizable agents in discourse. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 22,1: 85-111.
- Kondo, T. 2005. Overpassivization in second language acquisition. *IRAL* 43: 129-161
- Levin, B. & Rappaport Hovav, M. 1995. *Unaccusativity: At the syntax-lexical semantics interface*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Montrul, S. 1999. Causative errors with unaccusative verbs in L2 Spanish. *Second language research*, 15: 191-219
- Montrul, S. 2001. Introduction. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 23, 2: 145-151.
- Montrul, S. 2004. Psycholinguistic evidence for split intransitivity in Spanish second language acquisition. *Applied psycholinguistics*, 25,2: 239-267.
- Oshita, H. 2002. Uneasiness with the easiest: on the subject-verb order in L2 English. *Second language* 1: 45-61
- Perlmutter, D. 1978. *Impersonal passives and the unaccusative hypothesis*. BLS No.4, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley Linguistics Society.
- Radford, A. 1997. *Syntactic theory and the structure of English: A minimalist approach*, Cambridge University Press.
- Seibert, A. 1993. Intransitive constructions in German and the ergative hypothesis. *Working papers in linguistics*, University of Trondheim.
- Sorace, A. 1993. Incomplete vs. divergent representations of unaccusativity in native and non-native Italian grammars of Italian. *Second language research*, 9: 22-47.
- Sorace, A. & Shomura, Y. 2001. Lexical constraints on the acquisition of split intransitivity: Evidence from L2 Japanese. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 23,2: 247-278.
- Yuan, B. 1999. Acquiring the unaccusative/unergative distinction in a second language: Evidence from English-speaking learners of Chinese. *Linguistics*, 37: 275-296
- Zobl, H. 1989. Canonical structures and ergativity. in S. M. Gass & J. Schachter (Eds.), *Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 203-221.