
This study explores the learnability problems involved in the acquisition of English intransitive verbs by Chinese L2 learners. Specifically, the study investigates whether L2 learners distinguish between the two sub-classes of English intransitive verbs: the unaccusative verb and the unergative verb. Moreover, the study tried to research whether the same learners could differentiate the alternating unaccusative verb and the non-alternating one. The experimental study lends a support for the claim that L2 learners are sensitive to the abstract properties of argument structure when they construct their L2 grammars.

I. Introduction

Perlmutter (1978) first proposed the Unaccusative Hypothesis to claim that intransitive verbs are composed of two subclasses: the unaccusative verb and the unergative verb, each associated with a different underlying configuration; the unergative verb has an external argument but no internal argument; in contrast, the unaccusative verb has an internal argument but no external argument. He proposed that the unaccusativity-unergativity distinction can be explained semantically,
stating that “Initial unaccusativity vs. unergativity is predictable from the semantics of the clause.” The main semantic property of unaccusative verb is unwilled and unvolitional, while that of unergative verb is willed and volitional. The unaccusative verb consists of two sub-types: alternating and non-alternating verbs. The alternating unaccusative (e.g. break, burn, melt) has a transitive/causative counterpart, but non-alternating unaccusative (e.g. arrive, fall, happen) does not. The essential problem for language learners is to how properties of argument structure are realized morphosyntactically in the particular language they are learning.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether Chinese L2 learners of English distinguish the two subclasses of intransitive verbs: the unaccusative verb and the unergative verb. The present study expands on the scope of the previous research of the syntax-semantics correspondence by examining the knowledge of English unaccusative verbs by adult L2 learners and aims to test whether Chinese L2 learners show sensitivity to the unaccusative-unergative distinction in English.

II. Syntactic Structures of Intransitive Verbs

1. Syntactic Structures of Intransitive Verbs of English

The unaccusative verb has its only argument in the object (complement) position of VP and no subject. The unergative verb has one argument in subject position and no object. The unaccusative verb and the unergative verb are the same in the sense that they both have only one argument. If it appears in the subject position, the verb is called unergative. If it occurs in the object position, the verb is called unaccusative (or ergative in the sense of Burzio 1986). The distinction of the two types of intransitive verbs is based on the semantics of the verbs. Such a structural distinction between the unergative verb and the unaccusative verb provides an explanation for the contrasts represented by the two kinds of intransitive verbs. The structure for each case is illustrated in (1); x=external argument, y=internal argument.