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**Acquisition of English Intransitive Verbs by Urdu Speakers**

**Abdul Qadir Khan & Sumaira Sarfraz**

# Acquisition of English Intransitive Verbs by Urdu Speakers

Abdul Qadir Khan & Sumaira Sarfraz

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## Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the distinction made in the use of English intransitive verbs by Urdu speakers. It, further, explores the effect of task variation on the acquisition of intransitive verbs and focuses on whether the distinction in two types of intransitive verbs is systematic or not. Written essays and a Grammatical Judgment Task (GJT) of thirty graduate level students have been analyzed for various occurrences and misuses of English unaccusative and unergative verbs. The study has shown that Urdu speakers make a clear distinction between two types of English intransitive verbs and use more frequently passive morphology with unaccusative verbs than unergative verbs. The study has further indicated that task variation influences the learners performance and that learners do not randomly use passive morphology rather they make a grammar that seems to allow 'be+en' with the verbs where subjects have semantic properties of an object.

## 1. Introduction

The unaccusative hypothesis presented by Permuter (1978) claims that intransitive verbs fall into two subclasses- unergative verbs and unaccusative verbs.

- A. The light spread
- B. The man shouted.

The above mentioned verbs, in example A and B, appear to fall into two classes by virtue of their meaning. With verbs like spread (arrive, fall, die) the subject is not so much the cause of the action as the entity affected by it. With verbs like shout (swim, dance, sparkle), the subject might said to be the cause of the action, either through intention (e.g. The man shouted) or through its inherit properties (e.g. The diamond sparks). There is nothing in the forms of intransitives in English to distinguish these two classes but there are syntactic contexts where only one class and not the other can occur. Only the spread type verbs are possible in "there" constructions

- a. Last week there arrived a book that would be perfect for the course.
- b. \*Last week there shouted a man who found the lecture bore

Spread type verbs are called unaccusatives, meaning that their subjects have the typical properties of the objects in transitive construction (are affected by the action). Objects always take the accusative case, but the subjects with spread-type verbs are always nominative, hence “Unaccusative”. The subjects of shout-type verbs are like the subjects of transitive constructions; these verbs are called “Unergatives”.

Lot of work has been done on the topic of unaccusative and unergative verbs like Burzio (1986), Rizzi (1981), Permuter and Postal (1984) Grewendrof (1989), Levin and Rappaport (1995). Their findings have been applied to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research by several researchers like Zobl (1989) and Yip (1995) but not as much work has been devoted to SLA research than has been devoted to theoretical aspects.

The previous research in this area has focused on the acquisition of English unaccusatives by learners from different L1 backgrounds such as Chinese, (Balcom, 1997; Yip, 1995), Japanese (Hirakawa, 2003, 1995; Oshita, 2000, 1997), Italian (Oshita, 1997), Spanish (Oshita, 1997). There has not been any known research conducted on the L2 acquisition of English unaccusative and unergative verbs by native speakers of Urdu. This paper investigates how Urdu learners of English distinguish between the two subclasses of intransitive verbs and also looks into the effect of task variation on the performance of the learners.

## 2. Research Questions

- Do Urdu speakers draw a distinction in the use of English intransitive verbs?
- Is there any significant effect of task variation on the performance of the L2 learners in the acquisition of English intransitive verbs?
- Whether the distinction in the use of intransitive verbs is systematic or not?

## 3. Literature Review:

The idea of interlanguage is founded upon the assumption that an L2 learner, at any particular moment in his learning sequence, is using a language system which is neither the L1 nor the L2. It is a third language, with its own grammar, lexicon and so on. The rules used by the learner are to be found in neither his own mother tongue nor in the target Language, thus, Nemser cites Serbo-Croatian learners of English who will produce “what does Pat doing now?” although his construction belongs neither in English nor in Serbo-Croat. Applied linguists such as Nemser, Pitt Corder and Selinker, suggest that we need to understand the learner’s language as a system in its own right. This is both possible and interesting because learners tend to go through a series of interlanguage in systematic and predicable ways.

Richards (1983) analyzed data from various preceding studies (French 1949, Duskova 1969, Arabski 1968, Estacia 1964, Richards 1968, Bhaskar 1962, Grelier & Aguas 1964) dealing with the error analysis for learners of English as a second language from different native language backgrounds. He sorted out the errors that were common to the different L1s including Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish and major Indian and West African languages. His crosslinguistic sample data showed the following type of common error:

- 1 \*The sentence is occurs.....
2. \*He was died last year
3. \*It was happened yesterday.

He argued that these non-targets like forms are caused by the learners' interpretation of was as a past tense marker and analogously is as a present tense marker.

Zobal (1989) observed in a sample of L2 written English from 114 L2 speakers (90 Japanese, 10 Arabic, 10 Spanish, 1 Chinese, 1 Turkish, 1 Thai and 1 Indonesian) that one fifth of the unaccusative verbs were marked with the passive morphology which is impossible in NS English. By contrast only one sixteenth of unergatives and transitive verbs were marked with the passive morphology. His data showed that learners over generalize passivization to ergative verbs and that they sometime map the deep structure of the ergative verbs directly onto the surface structure. These errors not only the unaccusative hypothesis's analysis but they also support the claim that the principles of the universal grammar play a role in second language acquisition and in the formation of learners' interlanguage grammar.

Sorace (1993) investigated the linguistic competence of "near native speakers) of Italian with English and French L1. She gave a grammatical judgment task to three groups English, French L1 speakers of Italian and a control group of native speakers. Her data showed that not only were the native speakers different from the Italian control group, but there was also a significant regular dissimilarity between the French and English learners. Sorace pointed out that this result was predictable because the French auxiliary system is only partially similar to the Italian in that only a core group of ergative verbs take auxiliary be, whereas in Italian all ergatives select be. In English unaccusativity is only semantic. Therefore, the English learners' competence was incomplete where the French learners' competence is divergent.

Putzer (1994) conducted error analysis on a large sample of data from advanced Italian learners of German. He found that the frequency of the incorrect case assignment (nominative/accusative) was much higher in passive sentences than in active sentences. He also noticed that in those active constructions where the learners commit errors in fact occur the subject usually bore the thematic role of theme. From this he concluded that it must be the noncorrespondance of these particular active sentences and the passive with

the canonical alignment subject-agent, object-theme that induced learners to commit errors.

Yip (1994) investigated the effect of consciousness raising on the acquisition of ergative verbs. Her subjects were ten students with various native languages (1 Spanish, 2 Korean, 1 Hebrew, 2 Chinese, 2 Indonesian, 1 German and 1 Greek), Enrolled in an advanced ESL class. Yip used a grammatical judgment task as pre-test, then the students were taught in the class and two weeks later another grammatical judgment task was administered as post-test. The subjects scored better in post-test. She conceded that because of the small range of her experiment “the results are at best suggestive” (Yip 1994:136).

Balcom (1997) conducted a grammatical judgment task (GJT) with 38 L1 Chinese speakers of high intermediate proficiency in L2 English. She found that passive morphology was accepted significantly more often with unaccusative verbs than with unergatives.

Hirakawa (1995) investigated the acquisition of English unaccusative constructions by native speakers of Japanese. Her data contained the results of a production task and a grammaticality judgment task administered on 22 Japanese intermediate learners of English and a control group of 14 native speakers. The overall results of the grammatical judgment task showed that the learners’ intuitions were less accurate but not deviant from those of native speakers. In general his findings do not suggest that learners overgeneralise passive to unaccusative verbs. Hirakawa attributed those errors to incomplete lexical knowledge and L1 transfer.

Oshita (1995) studied a large number of data taken from the Longman learner corpus, which contains written English produced by learners from different L1 backgrounds. He limited his research to Spanish, Italian, Korean and Japanese as L1s. On the basis of this data Oshita criticised the existing explanations for the passivised unaccusatives. Oshita’s study showed that Japanese and Korean learners used passive morphology even more frequently than Italian and Spanish speakers in whose languages transferable structures do exist.

The whole above discussion can be summarized as:

- that unaccusative hypothesis is true
- that L2 learners face difficulty in learning English Unaccusative verbs.

What is needed to shed more light on unaccusative verbs by drawing data from learners with several L1 backgrounds and at several stages of competence and with different task. The focus of the present study is how Urdu Speakers treat English unaccusative and unergative verbs. It also focuses on the effect of task variation on the performance of the learners.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Participants

Thirty Urdu speakers participated in this study. These participants were pursuing their graduate studies at different colleges in Lahore. These participants remained with the researcher for six months at Links Academy during the fall semester of 2008 when the study was conducted. The participants' ages ranged 18 years to 28 years. The students had eight years formal education of English at school and college level. They attended English class two hours a day in Academy.

### 4.2. Instruments and Procedure

The instruments used for the study were of two types:

- Samples of English essays written by Urdu speakers
- Grammatical Judgment Task

#### 4.2.1. Samples of English essays written by Urdu speakers

Participants were to write essays of about 250 words on different course related topics in routine. Each participant wrote twenty essays and out of these twenty essays, two essays of each participant were randomly selected for analysis. The time duration for each essay was forty minutes. Participants were aware that these essays will be graded but they were quite unaware of my specific intention of investigating unaccusative and unergative verbs constructions.

#### 4.2.2. Grammatical Judgment Task (GJT)

Two types of verbs were included in the grammaticality judgment task: unergative and ergative. Each verb type was represented by five verbs as shown below

Verbs used in Grammaticality Judgment Task

Unergative	shout, laugh, sing, dance, swim
Accusative	arrive, died, taste, disappear, open

Table 1

A total of twenty sentences were included in the questionnaire and was administered. Time for this test was thirty minutes. The type of sentences used are illustrated below:

1. My mother was died when I was a child.
2. This soap tasted good after the cook added some salt.

Participants were asked to mark sentences as grammatical, ungrammatical or not sure and to correct those they considered ungrammatical. This GJT type question was adapted from Balcom (1997) but the sentences used in this activity were different from those used by Balcom. Ten sentences given in the activity were those which were also found in the written material of the participants. For each correct construction the sentence was marked as 1 otherwise zero.

## 5. Results

The table below (Table 1) shows the occurrences of grammatical and ungrammatical use of unaccusative and unergative verbs in the students' written composition

### 5.1. Results of Written Composition

The results of the written composition are presented in Table 2

	Total Occurrences	Grammatical	%	Ungrammatical	%
Unaccusative	71	14	20	57	80
Unergative	57	53	93	4	7

Table 2

The above results show that students used 71 unaccusative verbs in the text, out of 71 with 57(80 %) passive morphology was used and only 14(20 %) were used grammatically with out any passive marker. One interesting point that was that passive marker was used only with past indefinite tense. The students used "They were died" but with present indefinite they used the correct form as "They die". They did not use passive marker with perfect or continuous tense. While in case of unergative sentences most of the verbs were used with out passive morphology. Few exceptions were there when the participants used passive morphology with unergative verbs. There were total 57 occurrences found in the written texts. 53 (93% times these were used correctly and only 4(7%) times unergatives were used incorrectly and were marked with passive morphology.

## 5.2. Results of Grammatical Judgment Task

The table below (Table 3) shows the occurrences of grammatical and ungrammatical use of unaccusative and unergative verbs in Grammatical Judgment Task

	Total Occurrences	Grammatical	%	Ungrammatical	%	Not Sure	%
Unaccusative	30x10=300	96	32	198	66	6	2
Unergative	30x10=300	276	92	24	8	-	-

Table 3

The above results show that total number of occurrences of unaccusative verbs was 300. 96 occurrences (32%) of these verbs were used correctly while 198 (66%) occurrences of passive markers (was/were) were used with unaccusative verbs. Only 6 (2%) occurrences of these verbs were marked as not sure. While in case of unergative verbs, out of total 300 occurrences, 276 occurrences (92%) of these verbs were correct and only 24 (8%) passive markers were used with unergative verbs. This shows that participants used passive markers (was/were) more frequently with unaccusative verbs than the unergative verbs and also that students committed same errors both in written text and grammatical judgment task. Results did not show the interference of the mother tongue.

## 5.3. Combined Results of both the Written Composition and GJT

Table 4 below presents the combined results of both the tests

	Total Occurrences	Grammatical	%	Ungrammatical	%	Not Sure	%
Unaccusative	71+300=371	14+96=110	29	57+198=255	69	6	2
Unergative	57+300=357	53+276=329	92	4+24=28	8	-	-

Table 4

The above results (Table 4) show that total numbers of occurrences of unaccusative verbs in both tasks were 371.110. Occurrences (29 %) of these verbs were correct while 255 (69%) occurrences of passive markers (was/were) was used with unaccusative verbs. Only 6 (2%) occurrences of these verbs were marked as not sure. While in the case of unergative verbs, out of total 357 occurrences in both the tasks, 329 occurrences (92%) of

these verbs were correct and only 24 (8%) occurrences of passive markers were used with unergative verbs.

#### 5.4. Findings from the Results

- Urdu speakers make a distinction in two kinds of English intransitive verbs; unaccusative and unergative verbs.
- They use passive morphology with unaccusative verbs more frequently than with unergative verbs.
- Task variations affect the performance of the learners, here the awareness of the task increases the performances
- Learners make a systematic divergence from the target grammar
- Influence of mother tongue was not found

#### 6. Discussions and Conclusion

The results have shown that L1 Urdu speakers clearly draw a distinction between two types of intransitive verbs. Results in table 4 suggest that the learners used passive morphology with 67 % of the sentences with unaccusative verbs. They used passive morphology with the unaccusative verbs like, 'He was died'. It is also found that this passive morphology was used with past Indefinite and not with other aspects of present past and future. The learners used unaccusative verbs correctly without any passive morphology with other aspects as one example was, 'He had died". On the other hand, as the table 4 shows that 92 % of the unergative sentences were used correctly in both the activities. Just 8% sentences were used incorrectly. This study supports Unaccusative hypothesis (Permuter 1978) that claims that L2 learners distinguish between two types of intransitive verbs.

Task variation effect was clearly found on the performance of the learners. Table 2 above shows that in written essay out of 71 occurrences of unaccusative verbs, 57 times (80%) the learners used incorrectly and only 20 % correctly. It means 57 times out of 71 the learners used passive morphology with unaccusative verbs. On the other hand, the learners did well in Grammatical Judgment Task; the learners used 66 % passive morphology with the unaccusative verbs while with unergative verbs it was only 8 percent. The use of passive morphology with unaccusative verbs on both the tasks shows difference.

This difference is 14 %. It means the learners used passive morphology 14 times more in essay writing activity. This suggests that when the learners were free to use any construction in their writing they made more errors and used passive morphology with

unaccusative verbs. On the other hand when they were given an activity that focused on a single type of material, they got more time to focus on this particular construction and performed better than on essay writing. They were very much conscious and had the opportunity to even compare these constructions to reach at a final conclusion. In spite of this better performance, it is found that the errors students made in their essays also committed in grammatical judgment task with few exceptions.

This all shows that the learners do not use passive morphology randomly rather they use it systematically. In both the activities the Urdu speakers have used passive markers more frequently with unaccusative verbs. It is pertinent to note that the English language instructors have not given the instructions with regard to such constructions to the Urdu speakers. These constructions are not even found in their books which leads to other question that how do they make the wrong constructions?

Even learners with different L1 backgrounds and different geographical areas as the studies of (Chinese, (Balcom, 1997; Yip.1995), Japanese (Hirakawa, 2003, 1995; Oshita, 2000.1997), Italian (Oshita, 1997), Spanish (Oshita, 1997) use the same structure in dealing with unaccusative verbs. This indicates that the grammar allows be+en structure in the context where verbs' subjects have the semantic properties of an object. It further shows that the Interlanguage has a grammar that is different from the grammar of the speakers of the target language.

These results have clearly suggested that Urdu speakers can draw a distinction between two types of intransitive verbs in English and use passive markers more frequently with unaccusative verbs than unergative verbs. They can also construct a grammar which is not entirely determined by the input they get from English, which allows be+en in contexts of verbs whose subjects have the semantic properties of objects. This implies that it is a systematic divergence from the grammar of native speakers of English. It also shows that the L2 learners during their learning process develop a grammar that is different from their native language and target language grammars. The study further supports unaccusative hypothesis and also the concept of interlanguage.

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Abdul Qadir Khan  
Ph.D. Student  
Department of English  
School of Social Sciences and Humanities  
University of Management and Technology, Lahore  
Pakistan  
[qadirabbasi@yahoo.com](mailto:qadirabbasi@yahoo.com)

Sumaira Sarfraz  
Ph.D. Student  
Department of English  
School of Social Sciences and Humanities  
University of Management and Technology, Lahore  
Pakistan  
[sumaira.sarfraz@nu.edu.pk](mailto:sumaira.sarfraz@nu.edu.pk)