

## MASTER'S THESIS

### An analysis of the acquisition of the English unaccusatives by secondary students in Hong Kong

So, Wing Yee

*Date of Award:*  
2004

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

**An Analysis of the Acquisition of the  
English Unaccusatives by Secondary  
Students in Hong Kong**

**SO Wing Yee**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master philosophy**

**Principal Supervisor: Dr. YANG Suying**

**HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY**

**December 2004**

## Abstract

The study seeks to illuminate the complexities of second-language (L2) learning by focusing upon the acquisition of English unaccusative verbs. Unaccusatives have the argument structure across languages: \_\_\_[vp V NP] (i.e., [\_\_\_ [vp arrive John]]). The English unaccusativity or ergativity is one of the most difficult areas of English grammar for Chinese speakers to acquire. Very often, Chinese learners even advanced learners overextend passivization to this class of verbs. For example, they produce sentences like *\*The problem was existed*. The major aim of this project is to investigate the acquisition of English unaccusativity by Chinese speakers from the perspective of the current Interlanguage theory, Universal Grammar (UG) theory and Learnability theory. The 130 subjects for the study consist of four groups of Chinese learners of English who are secondary students in Hong Kong and one group of native English speakers who are used as the control group. The four groups of Chinese learners represent four proficiency groups — late beginning, lower immediate, higher intermediate and advanced level. By examining production data (essays) and judgment data, the findings from the two sets of data supplement each other to ensure a comprehensive picture of the developmental patterns in Hong Kong students' acquisition of English unaccusative verbs. This current research may have significant implications for learnability problems which may provide valuable insights into the development of pedagogy in second language teaching.

# Table of Contents

Declaration .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgement .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of tables .....	vi
List of figures .....	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction	
1.1 Background of Research .....	1
1.1.1 IL Theory.....	1
1.2 Factors that Play Roles in the Development of IL.....	4
1.2.1 LI Transfer.....	4
1.2.2 Universal Factors.....	6
1.3 Learning Difficulties at the Syntax-Semantics Interface.....	8
1.4 Methodology.....	13
Chapter 2 Literature Review	
2.1 Early Theories on the Mapping of Semantics and Syntax.....	19
2.2 Linking Problems.....	28
2.3 Unaccusative Verbs.....	35
2.3.1 Thematics Roles and Syntactic Position.....	35
2.3.2 Evidence of the Unaccusative and Unergative Distinction.....	38
2.3.2.1. Auxiliary Selection.....	38
2.3.2.2 Surface Unaccusative Objects in Some Languages.....	41
2.3.2.3 Alternative Verbs.....	43
2.3.3 Why is Movement Necessary .....	46
2.3.4 What Determines Unaccusativity .....	48
2.3.5 Special Features of Unaccusative Verbs in Chinese .....	55
2.4 Acquisition of Unaccusative Verb .....	64

Chapter 3	Findings	
3.1	Findings of the Test Data .....	74
3.2	Findings of the Production Data .....	78
3.3	Summary of the Findings .....	92
Chapter 4	Discussion	
4.1	General Pattern of Four Types of Verbs .....	94
4.2	The Use of Transitive and Intransitive Forms of Alternating Unaccusatives.....	114
4.3	The Use of ‘be’ as a Tense Marker or a Passive Marker in the ‘be+v’ Pattern....	117
4.4	The Contrast of Using ‘be’ as Intended Tense Marker and Voice Marker .....	120
4.5	The Four Types of Verbs and Learnability .....	122
4.6	Developmental Tendencies .....	126
Chapter 5		Conclusion
5.1	Limitations .....	129
5.2	Pedagogical Suggestions .....	131
Appendix I	.....	134
Appendix II	.....	137
Bibliography	.....	139
Curriculum Vitae	.....	146