BOOK REVIEWS


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This book is based on the author’s Ph.D. dissertation submitted to McGill University in June 2000. As a good dissertation often does, it presents a succinct introduction to the theoretical framework of the author’s research, a thoughtful review of the pertinent literature, the objectives, procedures and results of the original research and their analyses as well as possible directions for future investigation of related topics. The book exemplifies a set of high standards in its scope of investigated phenomena, careful design of experiments, and thorough analysis of obtained data. As such, I recommend it for anyone interested in theoretical argumentation, experimental data collection, and data analysis in L2 research on syntactic properties of verbs.

Chapter 1 introduces theoretical concepts and hypotheses such as thematic hierarchy, UTAH, levels of syntactic representation (D- vs. S-structures), NP movement and Case (and case) marking. The author demonstrates their relevance to the unaccusative hypothesis and elucidates why unaccusativity is such a fertile ground to investigate the role of Universal Grammar in L2 acquisition. Chapter 2 discusses syntactic phenomena in Italian and English as evidence for the unaccusative hypothesis. Chapter 3 reviews theoretical analyses of morphological, syntactic, and semantic phenomena in Japanese and concludes that both deep and surface unaccusativity must be recognized in this language. Furthermore, the author argues that unlike universally observed deep unaccusativity, surface unaccusativity is an exception in English but a rule in Japanese. Some of the linguistic phenomena presented in Chapters 2 and 3 are later used as experimental diagnostics for L2 unaccusativity. Chapter 4 reviews the relevant literature and concludes that to date deep unaccusativity has received little attention in L2 research and that surface unaccusativity must be studied in terms of potential L1 influence. These two issues constitute the author’s primary motivation for the experimental studies presented in the rest of the book.

Chapters 5 and 6 respectively present the author’s research on the L2 English of Japanese speakers (Studies I and II) and the L2 Japanese of English speakers (Studies III and IV). The first two studies tested one experimental group each whereas the other studies tested two. Most experiments consisted of a grammaticality judgment task on multiple sentence patterns or on multiple diagnostics for unaccusativity with or without accompanying pictures. Studies I and II also contained an elicited production task. The results represent a very large quantity of data on L2 learners’ implicit knowledge about the syntactic properties of verbs in the target language, much of which was obtained for the first time through an experiment and/or on linguistic phenomena previously
unutilized as experimental diagnostics. Since it is impossible to give an adequate summary in this limited space, I urge the reader to examine and appreciate the volume and complexity of the data with their own eyes.

In the theoretical literature, a typical argumentation for unaccusativity goes as follows. (i) A subject/object asymmetry is identified on the transitive verb with respect to some linguistic phenomenon (e.g., resultative construction). (ii) Using it as a diagnostic, the subject of some intransitive verbs is shown to behave like the transitive object whereas the subject of other intransitives behaves like the subject, evidence that strongly suggests the subject of the first group of intransitives is an internal argument. Additionally, the case for syntactic unaccusativity of this group of intransitives is significantly strengthened if their subject is shown to behave like the subject of passive sentences, evidence which indicates that both subjects are derivational in nature. In the presented studies, the author faithfully follows this argumentation, carefully avoiding potential pitfalls unique to L2 research. For instance, a linguistic phenomenon must be shown to be part of the subjects’ L2 competence before it can be used as a diagnostic. The author does this, by designing thoughtful experiments and assessing the subjects’ performance individually as well as by group. With such great precaution, when an expected unaccusative/unergative contrast emerges in obtained data, the finding is all the more compelling. For example, the widely assumed but previously untested deep unaccusativity in L2 receives convincing evidence from the grammaticality judgment tasks on the resultative constructions (Study I and III) and the takusan construction (Study III). Even when results do not show what is theoretically anticipated, the author’s meticulous analysis of individual subjects’ data often points to a potential problem in either a theoretical assumption or an experimental design as in the case of case marker drop (Study III) and the causative-passive and indirect passive constructions (Study IV).

The author’s assumption that “...surface unaccusativity is always observed in Japanese” (p. 71), however, is too rigid. First, it contradicts some examples in the book such as (11a) on p. 56, (22a) on p. 61, and (61) on p. 84 as well as the author’s own statement in Lines 15-17 on p. 220. Even the sentence *Yonaka-ni PRO arawareru no-wa kinsi-sare-te-iru (p. 72), presented as evidence for non movement of generic PRO in object position, does not suggest that no argument of an unaccusative can move (cf. Yaa, Kimi-ga yonaka-ni ti arawareru nante mezurasii ne). In fact, the argument of an unaccusative verb may move in Japanese but for reasons other than case. If so, what Japanese learners must figure out is when the argument is and is not in situ. In other words, the target grammar is more nuanced than assumed by the author. The English/Japanese contrast on surface unaccusativity, therefore, needs to be recast in a slightly different light and carefully investigated in the L2 English of Japanese speakers as well. More specifically, to fully understand the structural property of even a simple S-V sentence, we may need an approach that incorporates the VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis as in Miyamoto (1998).

Finally, the experimental materials, results and statistics presented in the extensive appendices are invaluable resources not only to understand each experiment fully but also to appreciate the great care taken in conducting thoughtful experimentation and analysis. Unfortunately, the book contains a few typological errors, most of which are
innocuous but some of which are more serious (e.g., the table of (61) on p. 84 and the confusion of more with less in Line 10 on p. 152).

In conclusion, Unaccusativity in Second Language Japanese and English is a welcome contribution to the field of L2 research. It has significantly broadened the scope of investigation on the non-native acquisition of verbs. The author has clearly demonstrated how well-designed experiments based on solid theoretical foundations can shed light on learners' robust intuition on subtle linguistic matters. Whatever is not dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner in this book is a challenge left to those who conduct future research in this area of inquiry. For them, this work undoubtedly will serve both as an essential reference and as a standard against which to measure their own work.

Reference

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