

## The Comparative Fallacy in Studies of the L2 Acquisition of Unaccusative Verbs

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Much research has been done in the past half-dozen years on the acquisition of unaccusative verbs by learners of a second language. While these studies are concerned with the acquisition of a target language (TL) system, too much emphasis on the deviation of the learner's interlanguage (IL) system from the TL system may lead the researcher to commit a *comparative fallacy* (Bley-Vroman, 1983). Bley-Vroman was concerned that drawing conclusions about an L2 learner's acquisition of TL forms based only on comparison of the learner's IL forms with the corresponding TL forms may obscure systematicity within the IL. This paper will examine three studies to provide insight into the role the comparative fallacy plays in research into the L2 acquisition of unaccusative verbs. It will be seen that attending to the possibility of committing a comparative fallacy may lead researchers to consider features of an IL that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Sorace and Shomura (2001) investigate the acquisition of unaccusativity in L2 Japanese by L1 English speakers. They do this by assessing the use of intransitives by learners of Japanese and the use of intransitives by native Japanese speakers with reference to the same yardstick – the *split intransitivity hierarchy*. This proposed universal hierarchy places crosslinguistically unaccusative verbs on one end, and invariably unergative verbs on the other. Languages differ in the point along the hierarchy that separates unaccusatives from unergatives, and these two categories of intransitive verbs are distinguished in each language by differences in syntactic behavior. Sorace and Shomura argue that the difficulty in acquiring the split between unaccusatives and unergatives results from the problem of systematically linking “a multicategorical lexical-semantic level to a necessarily binary syntactic level...” (p. 249). In this study, syntactic unaccusativity diagnostics are used to compare the acceptance of TL forms by L2 learners with their acceptance by native speakers.

Sorace and Shomura repeatedly draw a distinction between the judgments of the learners of Japanese and those of the native speakers. For example, they claim that “native Japanese subjects make finer distinctions among verb types” (p. 267), but they do not attempt to describe the distinctions made by the learners. Later, Sorace and Shomura state that “learners do not exhibit the same gradience in their judgments as the native speakers, but they seem to develop in the direction of the native pattern” (p. 270). Once again, the researchers' emphasis is on the differences between the systems of learners and those of native speakers. The gradience displayed by the L2 learners is not examined for the purpose of discovering systematicity within the IL. There are no attempts to explain how L2 learners perceive intransitive verbs in the TL without reference to the use of the same verbs by native speakers.

In a sense, any comparative fallacy in this paper is indirect, since the judgments of the subjects are not only compared to one another, but also to a hypothetical universal intransitivity hierarchy. However, this leads to a potential muddling of two issues: (a) whether the split intransitivity hierarchy is valid as a language universal, and (b) whether L2 learners are

proficient in recognizing the differences between the syntactic expression of unaccusative and unergative verbs in a specific target language.

A different approach to the study of the L2 acquisition of unaccusativity was taken by Ju (2001). Ju gave L2 learners and a control group of native speakers a forced-choice task to study the error of *overpassivization* (the ungrammatical use of unaccusative verbs in passive structures). Like Sorace and Shomura, Ju uses native-speaker judgments to determine how IL forms deviate from TL forms. However, Ju backs away from the comparative fallacy when she acknowledges that errors “do not simply stem from a lack of L2 structural knowledge” (p. 87). Furthermore, learners with different L1 backgrounds make similar errors; for instance, these learners may passivize unaccusatives or reject grammatical unaccusative constructions, regardless of the grammaticality of the corresponding forms their L1s. Such observations shift the focus of these IL phenomena from a comparison with L1 forms to the IL as a system in its own right.

Ju contends that the similarities in the ILs of learners from different L1 backgrounds support a universal hypothesis for the transitivity of unaccusatives by learners, regardless of their L1. Although Ju uses a control group to “provide nativelike uses of the verbs so that the learners’ judgments could be scored in terms of deviation from these uses” (p. 94), she uses this data to support her argument for systems that are found neither in L1s nor L2s, but are restricted to ILs. This approach seems to be a more appropriate use of comparison between a learner’s IL forms and a native-speaker’s L1 forms, and reduces the effect of the comparative fallacy.

A third study involving the acquisition of unaccusativity (Oshita, 2001) is an extension of Oshita’s work in the development of the *Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis*. Oshita’s objective is to “account for a variety of seemingly unrelated target and nontarget syntactic phenomena observed with intransitive verbs within interlanguage grammars” (p. 281). In the first stage of the three-stage process for the acquisition of unaccusativity in a TL, there is, according to Oshita, a *Single-Argument Linking Rule*. This rule causes learners to treat all intransitive verbs as unergatives. This is not a problem when the verb is indeed unergative, but the rule leads to non-native-like forms when the verb is unaccusative. As this rule is not found in any L1, it is strictly an IL rule. In the second stage, the learner becomes aware of the intransitivity split, and produces forms that deviate from those found in the L1, such as the passivization of unaccusatives, reluctance to accept NP-V word order, and the production of (*it*)V-NP structures. In the third stage of the process, learners “achieve a native grammar” (p. 289). This may be Oshita’s biggest weakness in relation to the comparative fallacy. Researchers have found that one of the hallmarks of the acquisition of unaccusativity in an L2 is the persistence of errors, even among advanced learners. Oshita’s claim of convergence of an L2 learner’s IL with the TL lets the learner off easy, and thus the Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis fails to examine the ways in which the IL of even a near-native speaker might systematically differ from the target language.

The work of Ju and Oshita seems to rely less on comparison with a TL than the work of Sorace and Shomura. Whereas deviations from the TL are a focus of Sorace and Shomura (along with confirmation of the split intransitivity hierarchy), the other studies are able to see evidence of systematicity within the ILs of the L2 learners. These IL systems were uncovered through examination of the ILs, and their existence is independent of deviations from TL (or L1) forms. Future studies in second language acquisition will go far in revealing the processes involved if

researchers will be mindful of the danger of examining data only through the lens of the target language.

## REFERENCES

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