

PhD thesis abstract:

It has been proposed in the literature that intransitive verbs can be divided into two subclasses: unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs, hence “split intransitivity” (Perlmutter 1978; Burzio 1986). Most studies of second language (L2) acquisition of split intransitivity have centered on either English or Romance languages as the target language and few on East Asian languages like Chinese. To fill this gap, this thesis reports on an empirical study investigating English-speaking learners’ mental representations of split intransitivity in their L2 Chinese. The study involves 52 English-speaking learners of Chinese and 19 native Chinese speakers serving as controls. A sentence-acceptability judgment task (AJ), using a five-point scale, was administered to subjects at different Chinese proficiency levels.

The results indicate that the subtle distinction between the unaccusative verb and the unergative verb is acquired very late in L2 Chinese. Only English near-native speakers of Chinese are sensitive to this distinction, who can properly represent the lexical-semantic differences between unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs in their L2 syntax of Chinese. Persistent L1 influence is argued to be responsible for their late acquisition. It is also found that like the native Chinese grammar, L2 Chinese grammars accept the *NP-V* unaccusative construction, which contrasts strikingly with the widely-reported finding that L2 learners avoid using this construction with unaccusative verbs in their L2 English. We will account for this contrast in terms of the availability of morphology in the target language. Additionally, optionality is observed in endstate grammars regarding non-target passivization of unaccusative verbs of change of state, which, we will argue, is different from overpassivization as widely reported in L2 English, where learners incorrectly use passive morphology to mark NP-movement in the unaccusative construction. The passivization errors found in our study are considered as resulting from treating change-of-state verbs in Chinese as causative due to L1 transfer. Remarkably, our investigation suggests that there exists a directional difference between L2 Chinese and L2 English with respect to avoidance phenomenon as well as overpassivization. Furthermore, our investigation has provided empirical evidence for the validity and applicability of the hierarchy of split intransitivity proposed in a series of studies by Sorace (e.g. 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 2000a, 2004). On the basis of Sorace’s ideas, we have attempted to establish a hierarchy of split intransitivity in Chinese existential constructions, namely the *Aspect Marker Selection Hierarchy*. Our data show that native speakers of Chinese are sensitive to the gradience of aspect marker selection in Chinese existential constructions. Meanwhile, English near-native speakers of Chinese behave similarly in terms of the gradient effect across different subtypes of unaccusative verbs.