

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Learning the Unaccusative-unergative Distinction from the Input: A Corpus Study

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zf479j3>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

Authors

Wang, Ziqi

Li, Siying

Publication Date

2026

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Learning the Unaccusative-unergative Distinction from the Input: A Corpus Study

Ziqi Wang (7520230081@bit.edu.cn)

School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, 5 Zhongguancun South Street
Haidian District, Beijing 100081, China

Siying Li (ysl93045@163.com)

School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, 5 Zhongguancun South Street
Haidian District, Beijing 100081, China

The unaccusative-unergative distinction reflects complex verb knowledge on argument structure, which poses learnability challenges for child language acquisition. Drawing on two Mandarin corpora in CHILDES, this study investigated the distributional and semantic information in child-directed speech that might facilitate verb learning. Theoretical analysis leads to the prediction that the distributional cue of word order and the semantic cue of animacy are useful for acquiring the unaccusative-unergative distinction. Our findings confirm the presence of both cues in the input. The word-order contrast between the canonical order “NP V-*le*” and the inversed order “V-*le* NP”, as well as distinct animacy profiles of argument NPs associated with the two verb classes provide children with critical information to distinguish unaccusative verbs from unergative verbs. These results validate the theoretical accounts of unaccusativity in real-world input, laying a solid foundation for subsequent investigations into the effect of diverse input cues on verb learning.