

## Discourse and unaccusativity: Quantitative effects of a structural phenomenon

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**Introduction.** This paper brings together syntactic analysis with corpus results to argue that a subset of unaccusative VPs—those that denote simple motion (e.g., *arrive*, *come in*) share syntactic structure with existential BE sentences in English, and that other unaccusative VPs (roughly, those that denote changes-of-state) do not share the relevant structure. In this way our analysis follows theoretical work that argues for more than one type of unaccusative VP (Kural 1996; Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 2004; Deal 2009, *inter alia*). We provide experimental support for our analysis in the form of a corpus experiment that tests the hypothesis that in all-new sentences, only the relevant subset of unaccusative VPs serve the same discourse function as existential BE sentences. **Indefinite subjects of unaccusative sentences.** Although English allows indefinite subjects, they occur with vanishing frequency (Prince, 1981). One explanation for this might be a general processing preference such that old entities occur before new entities; indeed, English usage generally conforms to given-new ordering. But we show that among intransitive sentences, violations of given-new ordering occur with a coherent subset of predicates: unaccusatives that denote directed motion (unacc-simple motion). We argue that these VPs share structure and meaning with existential BE sentences, and that unacc-simple motion VPs have the discourse effect of establishing new discourse referents (dRefs) by the same means as existential BE sentences (McNally, 1997). These properties are illustrated in the made-up contrasts shown in (1), where # shows degraded felicity in dRef establishment.

- (1) Context: “We were sitting around the bar last night ... ”
- |                                                                          |                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. There was <u>a fancy lady</u> next to me. <b>She</b> ordered a drink. | existential BE        |
| b. <u>A fancy lady</u> waltzed in. <b>She</b> sat down next to me.       | unacc-simple          |
| c. <u>A fancy lady</u> sneezed. # <b>She</b> sat down next to me.        | motion unergative     |
| d. <u>A glass</u> broke. # <b>It</b> went into many pieces.              | unacc-change of state |

**Syntactic analysis and corpus results.** We present data from the Switchboard Corpus (Godfrey et al., 1992) that support the dRef-introducing properties illustrated in (1): the ratio of unaccusative (86%) to unergative (14%) VPs with discourse-new subjects is significantly different ( $p < .001$ ) from the ratio of unaccusative to unergative sentences with subjects of any discourse status: in other words, given the frequency of unaccusatives in the corpus with subjects of any information status, the higher frequency of unaccusatives with discourse-new subjects is not the result of chance. Our syntactic analysis extends McCloskey’s (2014) analysis of Irish existentials such that unacc-simple motion VPs and VPs with “unergative” roots that establish dRefs (e.g., *a lady walked in*) have an existential predication involving contextually determined location as part of their structure and meaning (Francez, 2007). In these VPs, an activity-denoting little-*v* selects for a SC whose specifier is a PathP. We suggest that an integrated approach to argument structure is important in the current theoretical landscape, where what constrains acceptability is not the Theta Criterion but syntactic structures and available interpretations (Marantz, 2013).