Do L2 Learners Distinguish Unergatives from Unaccusatives? Evidence from Resultative Constructions

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Abstract

The present study investigates whether Hindi L2 learners of English distinguish between the two subclasses of intransitive verbs, unergative and unaccusative verbs. The study makes use of the English resultative phrase as the syntactic diagnostic to study this distinction. L2 learners are found to be sensitive to the occurrence of resultative phrases with different verb classes (i.e., unaccusative, unergative, transitive, and unergative + object) in spite of the absence of similar constructions in Hindi (L1). Intermediate and advanced L2 learners were examined for their ability to accept and reject sentences with resultative phrases across four verb types, and results showed that linguistic distance between L1 and L2 did not block the acquisition of abstract syntactic knowledge but shaped its developmental trajectory. Learners acquired constraints on resultatives with time, supporting the view that interlanguage grammars are guided by universal principles, with refinement driven by input and increased proficiency.

Keywords

L2 acquisition, unaccusative-unergative distinction, resultative phrases, linguistic distance, full access to UG

Introduction

Argument structure, a central topic in syntax and semantics, categorises intransitive verbs into *unergative verbs* and *unaccusative verbs*. This distinction is robust in language but rarely found in any explicit or

implicit references in language textbooks. Nevertheless, children are sensitive to the difference: a mystery that is further explored in the paper.

The intransitive sentences (1a-b) have a determiner phrase (NP—*the boy, the ball*) and a verb phrase (VP *ran, rolled*): they have a similar word order, NP VP. They both take one argument.

(1) a. The boy ran. *unergative*
b. The ball rolled. *unaccusative*

However, the argument (NP) of (1a) is interpreted as an AGENT, and the argument of (1b) as a THEME. In spite of the similar surface representation, the interpretations vary because of the difference in the underlying representation. The canonical position of the AGENT and THEME is the subject and object positions; in sentences (1a,b), both are in subject positions. In syntactic analyses, the THEME in (1b), the internal argument is generated at the object position (*He rolled the ball*) and later moves to the subject position in the sentence (Perlmutter, 1978; Burzio, 1986): the representation is indicated in (2b), whereas the AGENT in (1a), the external argument is generated in the subject position.

(2) a. [[$_{NP}$ The boy] [$_{VP}$ ran]] *unergative*
b. [[$_{NP}$ The ball] [$_{VP}$ rolled _____]] *unaccusative*

The internal argument, *the ball* (1b, 2b), moves to the subject position since English does not allow finite clauses to be subjectless. In effect, the unaccusative subject is in fact the transitive object (3a,b), and the unergative subject is a regular transitive subject.

The unaccusative verbs can be of an alternating type (3a,b) or a non-alternating type (4a,b).

(3) a. The ball rolled.
b. He rolled the ball.

(4) a. The bird disappeared.
b. *The boy disappeared the bird.

Verbs like *disappear, come, go, arrive, occur, happen,* etc., do not have a corresponding transitive form : in this study, we look at only the alternating unaccusatives.

The unaccusative-unergative constructions (1a-b) are on the surface similar, but syntactically different: underlyingly, the argument of an unergative verb occurs preverbally (NP VP) while the argument of an

unaccusative verb occurs postverbally (VP NP), which for syntactic reasons is realised as NP VP. The word order distinction is thus obscured in surface representation.

Hindi, like most Indo-Aryan languages, is a head-final language, i.e., the head occurs *after* the complement NP V. Compare English *ate apples* with Hindi *seb khaa-yaa* 'apple eat-past'). The distinction between unergative and unaccusative constructions is thus not evident to a language learner since the surface word orders are similar; in both the argument (NP AGENT in unergatives (3a), and the NP THEME in unaccusatives (3b) precede the verb, both in surface and underlying representations.

(3) a. *laDkaa* *hans-aa*. *unergative*
boy.NOM laugh.PST.3MS[1]
'The boy laughed.'
b. *gilaas TooT-aa*[2]. *unaccusative*
glass.NOM break-PST.3MS
'The glass broke.'

Neither Hindi nor English gives any overt cue to the learners that the two verbs are different. The question is whether learners are sensitive to this distinction in the absence of such supportive cues. The primary aim of this study is to demonstrate that L2 learners of English are sensitive to the structural unergative–unaccusative distinction from relatively early stages of acquisition. Since neither language encodes this distinction through transparent word order differences, it constitutes a case of significant linguistic distance, where surface input alone provides insufficient evidence for acquiring the underlying contrast.

Linguistic Distance and L2 Acquisition

The acquisition of abstract syntactic distinctions in a second language is particularly significant when such distinctions are not transparently represented in the input, or explicitly taught, or available in the learners' L1. Lydia White's (2025) notion of linguistic distance provides a useful explanatory framework.

White (2025) argues that differences between a learner's first language (L1) and the target language (L2) may influence the **rate and route** of acquisition, but do not fundamentally constrain the ultimate attainment of grammatical knowledge. Even when the L1 does not overtly encode distinctions such as unergative versus unaccusative

verb classes, learners are still able to acquire these properties because second language grammars ***are*** constrained by Universal Grammar (UG). Linguistic distance, therefore, **does not prevent** the development of abstract syntactic representations; rather, it may result in temporary, **intermediate, non-target-like stages** in interlanguage.

Evidence from child language acquisition research suggests that learners may initially misanalyse unaccusative verbs like *fall* as unergative verbs like *run*, since the A chains in their grammar have not matured (Borer & Wexler, 1987), which stops them from raising the internal argument to the subject position. The idea behind the maturational hypothesis is that children do not learn all parts of language at the same time because their brains mature gradually, even though language ability is innate. What maturational of linguistic principles requires is exposure to language input and biological readiness. However, White (2025) argued against such maturational accounts, since adult second language learners are capable of acquiring abstract grammatical properties that are not present in their first language and are not clearly available in the input**.** White, therefore, argues that apparent difficulties in second language acquisition should not be attributed to biological maturation alone.

Spontaneous production data from young children show early cross-linguistic use of unaccusatives (Lorusso et al., 2005; Pierce, 1989). Any delay in learning, therefore, can be attributed to a combination of factors such as linguistic distance between the L1 and L2, and limitations in the input, lack of overt cues, which, with increasing exposure and grammatical restructuring, help learners gradually converge on the target-like representation. Further evidence of the gradual development of grammatical knowledge comes from initial overpassivisation of unaccusative errors like *The accident was happened* (Zobl, 1989; Hirakawa, 2003, 2013; Oshita, 2000), which disappear in advanced learners: such overpassivisation is a truly temporary phase.

The Resultative Construction Test

Crosslinguistically, many syntactic tests have been used to show the distinction between unaccusative and unergative constructions; however, the most robust test in English is the resultative construction test. Park and Lakshmanan (2007) used the resultative construction test to show that Korean learners of English are able to accept resultative

phrases with unaccusatives and reject them with the unergatives, which further illustrates the robustness of the test.

A resultative phrase in a sentence is a phrase that denotes the result of an action on the object (Goldberg & Jackendoff, 2004; Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995), as indicated in (4) d): (4a-b) are adjectival resultatives and (4c-d) prepositional resultatives.

(4) a. John painted the car yellow.
b. He hammered the metal flat.
d. They dragged the box into the tent.
e. The child pushed the toy under the bed.

Whether a phrase is resultative or not can be discerned by a simple rule—the more you do the action denoted by the verb (here, *paint*, *hammer, drag, push*), the more the change of state or location, i.e., the car becoming yellow, the metal becoming flat, the box being in the tent. If such direct proportionality holds between the action denoted by the verb and the result of the object, the phrase is a resultative phrase.

In English, such resultatives are felicitous with transitive (5a) and alternating unaccusative constructions (5b) but infelicitous with unergatives (5c), unless the latter is coerced into a transitive construction (5d).

(5) a. Jack painted the car *yellow*.
b. The river froze *solid*.
c. *Dora shouted *hoarse*.
d. Dora shouted himself *hoarse.*
(Levin & Rappaport-Hovav, 1995, 35, 39)

Although unergative verbs are generally incompatible with resultative constructions, they become acceptable in the presence of a fake reflexive (5d). What in fact decides this felicity is the presence or absence of a direct object. (5a) has an overt object (e.g. *the car*), (5b) a underlying object which has moved to the subject position (2b), (5c) has no overt or an underling object, (5d) is an overt object (e.g., himself): Resultative felicity is thus dependent on a Direct Object Restriction (DOR) (Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995).[3] Thus, resultative constructions provide a reliable diagnostic for the unergative-unaccusative distinction.

The Study

The concept of resultatives, their compatibility with different verb types, and the DOR are neither explicitly taught nor transparently available in the input, thus providing an ideal testing ground for examining whether L2 learners possess this abstract knowledge. Moreover, Hindi, which is the LI of the learners, does not show similar syntactic constructions.

(6) *us-ne* *gaaDi-ko peelaa rang di-yaa*
He-ERG car-DAT yellow colour give-PST.3MS
'Lit. He gave the car yellow colour'

In Hindi, however, the language typically does not allow bare adjectival resultatives in the same way as English. Instead, the result is expressed through a noun phrase 'yellow colour' combined with a light verb construction ('give colour/paint').

This raises the question of whether learners can acquire underlying grammatical distinctions despite the linguistic distance between their L1 (Hindi) and L2 (English). If learners rely solely on surface input or L1 transfer, sensitivity to the unergative–unaccusative distinction in resultative constructions would be unlikely. However, if Universal Grammar (UG) constrains L2 grammars, learners should demonstrate knowledge of these distinctions, even in the absence of explicit instruction. The present study specifically answers the following questions:

(i) Do L2 learners distinguish between unergative and unaccusative verbs in resultative constructions?

(ii) To what extent does linguistic distance affect their ability to acquire these constraints?

Participants

75 (41 male, 34 female) Hindi speakers of English residing in Hyderabad participated in the study. On the basis of an English language test, produced by the AIELTA team in 2022 (with grammar, vocabulary, reading and indirect writing), learners were grouped into two levels of proficiency: intermediate and advanced. 49 engineering graduates (31 male, 18 female) were selected from a cohort of 461 students on the basis of a language questionnaire; they were at intermediate proficiency. The advanced group comprised 26 learners (10 male and 16 female) who were pursuing doctoral research in English language teaching. The

subjects' ages ranged from 20 years to 37 years, with the average age being 30 years. The differences in group performance on the proficiency test are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: *Overall Performance on the English Proficiency Test*

Skill	*Group*	*Mean*	*Sd.*	*95%CT*	*t*	*P*	*Effect size*
Grammar	High	82.73	6.184	80.74–84.72	7.295	<0.00	2.25
	Inter	65.84	8.275	63.25–68.43		1	
Vacubulary	High	85.91	5.472	84.15–87.67	7.3416	<0.00	2.45
	Inter	68.92	7.354	56.55–71.29		1	
Reading	High	88.64	17.801	87.24–90.04	5.2858	<0.00	2.6
	Inter	72.76	6.415	70.70–74.32		1	
Writing	High	80.52	7.123	78.23–82.31	8.986	<0.00	2.1
	Inter	63.58	9.187	50.55–66.50		1	
Overall	High	84.45	5.682	82.59–86.31	7.32727	<0.00	2.4
	Inter	67.78	5.7831	55.27–70.29		1	

Significant differences were found in all subskills—grammar (t = 7.29), vocabulary (t = 7.34), reading (t = 5.28), and writing (t = 8.98)—as well as overall performance (t = 7.3727), at $p < .001$. Cohen's d values (2.10–2.60) indicated very large effect sizes, with minimal overlap in 95% confidence intervals. Reading showed the highest mean scores and lowest variability, while writing displayed the greatest variability, especially among intermediate learners, suggesting stronger receptive than productive skills.

Task and Materials

An acceptability judgment task on a 5-point scale based on Hirakawa's study (2003) was adapted and used. The first sentence provided the context, and the second contained a resultative phrase with one of the three types of verbs tested. The second part (shown in 7 in italics) was to be judged on a 5-point scale, -2 (completely impossible) to +2 (completely possible), with 0 (unable to decide). Negative scores (i.e., -2 and -1) represented rejection and positive scores (i.e., 2 and 1) represented acceptance.

Each verb type had 5 sentences with different verbs selected from Levin and Rappaport-Hovav (1995).: transitive verbs (*water, paint, hammer, shot, sweep),* unaccusative (*grow, burn, sink, freeze, break*), unergative verbs (*sing, laugh, dance, cough, grumble*) and unergative verbs with objects *(e.g. cry,*

bark, run, laugh, sleep). (7a-c) are grammatical and (7d) ungrammatical.

(7) a. Hasim did not cut his hair for six months. *His hair grew long*. unaccusative

b. Fred is not a trained gardener. *He watered the plants flat*. transitive

c. The baby did not sleep last night. *The dogs barked the baby awake*. unergative +object

d. Dora was at the party singing the whole night. **Dora sang hoarse*. unergative

20 target and 20 filler sentences[4] were used, and the test sentences were randomised. A consistency scoring was done to find out whether the learners' acceptance and rejection were systematic or random. Four or more accurate responses out of a total of 5 responses for each verb type was adopted as a criterion for consistency in accuracy (Hirakawa, 2003; Park & Lakshmanan, 2007).

Results and Discussion

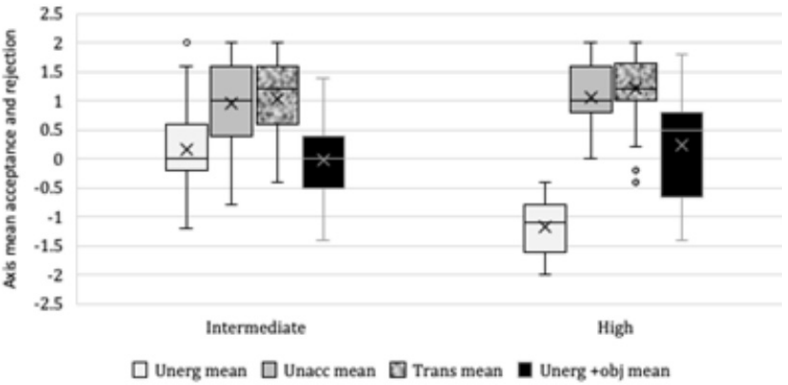
Knowledge of the Unaccusative-Unergative Distinction

Table 2: *Mean Acceptance and Rejection Scores in the Accessibility Judgment Task*

	Intermediate				*Advanced*			
	Unace	***Unerg***	***Trans***	***Uinerg+ obj***	***Unace***	***Unerg***	***Trans***	***Unerg+ obj***
Menu	0.963	0.151	1.037	–0.020	1.046	–1.162	1.208	0.238
Standard Deviation	0.723	0.647	0.601	0.685	0.431	0.438	0.613	0.582
Kurtosis	–0.461	0.410	–-0.722	–0.193	–0.295	–0.749	1.340	–0.352
Skewness	–0.645	0.560	–0.328	0.259	–0.070	–0.265	–1.176	–0.294

The data shows moderate variability, with more consistent dispersion in the Intermediate group and lower variability in the Advanced group. Skewness is generally minimal, though the Intermediate group shows mild negative skew, and one Advanced condition shows stronger skew (–1.176). Kurtosis values suggest near-normal distributions, with one peaked Advanced condition (1.340). A boxplot in Figure 1 shows acceptance and rejection of resultatives across verb types.

Figure 1: *Box Plot of Acceptance Levels for Resultative Phrases with Different Verb Types*



Proficiency, Sentence Types and Interaction Effects

Given the ordinal data, Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to examine proficiency effects and sentence type, respectively, while ANOVA-style F-statistics were used to study the interaction of proficiency and sentence types.

Proficiency differences: Strongest proficiency differences were found for unergative sentences ($U = 112$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.62$), with advanced learners outperforming intermediate learners, moderate differences for unergative + object sentences ($U = 402$, $p = .031$, $r = 0.29$), and no significant differences for unaccusative or transitive sentences. Table 3 shows that the impact of proficiency varies substantially across sentence types.

Table 3: *Proficiency Differences in the Mann-Whitney U Test*

Sentence Type	*U*	*p-value*	*Effect (r)*	*Interpretation*
Unaccusative	601	.42	0.09	ns
Unergative	112	< .001	0.62	Large
Transitive	548	.18	0.16	ns
Uncrgative + Object	402	.031	0.29	Medium

Sentence type differences: Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a significant effect of sentence type in both groups: intermediate $H(3) = 42.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$, and advanced $H(3) = 58.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$. Post-hoc

Dunn's tests showed most pairwise differences were significant ($p < .01$), with unergative constructions differing notably from unaccusative and transitive types. These findings indicate systematic variation in performance across sentence types, with a larger effect in the advanced group. Advanced learners typically have a more stable grammatical system, and they are more sensitive to structural differences between sentence types. In intermediate groups, performance may be influenced by general processing limitations or inconsistent strategies, producing more uniform (but noisier) results across constructions. In advanced learners, performance becomes more systematic, and differences reflect true structural difficulty.

Interaction effects: A factorial analysis (Table 4) examined proficiency and sentence type effects on performance. Although the data were ordinal and initially analysed using non-parametric tests, ANOVA-style F-statistics were calculated descriptively. There was a main effect of proficiency, $F(1, 292) = 18.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, a main effect for sentence type, $F(3, 292) = 52.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .42$, and also a significant interaction effect, $F(3, 292) = 21.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$, indicating that sentence-type performance varied by proficiency.

Table 4: *Interaction Effects: Proficiency and Sentence Type*

Source	*df*	*Sum of Squares (SS)*	*Mean Square (MS)*	*F*	*p-value*	η^2 *(effect sixe)*	*Magnitude*
Proficiency (Level)	1	37.4	37.4	18.72	< .001	0.20	Large
Sentence Type	3	105.0	35.0	52.61	< .001	0.42	Very Large
Level × Sentence Type	3	42.6	14.2	21.35	< .001	0.24	Large
Error	292	583.0	2.0	–	–	–	–
Total	299	768.0	–	–	–	–	–

The results show that: (i) sentence type strongly influences performance, accounting for nearly half the variance ($\eta^2 = .42$), indicating learners' sensitivity to verb-class distinctions; (ii) proficiency has a modest effect, with overall group differences limited when verb types are collapsed; (iii) a significant interaction reveals that advanced learners distinguish verb classes more systematically than intermediate learners.

Level of Consistency in Their Judgment

Test of individual responses showed advanced learners were more consistent than intermediate learners on acceptance on transitive and unaccusative constructions. Consistency was poorest on the unergative + object condition. The proportion of the learners' consistently accurate responses (either +2 for correct acceptance and -2 for correct rejection) was calculated. Table 5 shows consistency in learners' judgments, and the number of consistent responses is indicated in parentheses.

Table 5: *Consistency of Acceptance/Rejection Response Across Sentence Type*

Group	*Unaccusative*	*Unergative*	*Transitive*	*Unergative+ object*
Intermediate	57.41% (28)	4.08% (2)	63.26% (31)	0
Advanced	76.92% (20)	15.38% (4)	84.61% (33)	3.84% (1)

(For unaccusative, transitive and unergative +object constructions, it is acceptance; for unergative, it is rejection.)

The unergative constructions showed low consistency across groups; only 4 out of 26 advanced learners consistently rejected unergative constructions, and only 1 accepted unergative+object for all 5 sentences, while no intermediate learner consistently accepted the latter. Marked constructions like unergatives with objects appeared to be challenging for both groups.

Some Pedagogical Implications

Findings of the present study illustrate the fact that learners at intermediate and advanced L2 proficiency levels are sensitive to the unaccusative-unergative distinction. The performance of Hindi learners of English mirrors prior findings (Balcom, 1997; Ju, 2000; Hirakawa, 2003; Park & Lakshmanan, 2007). This supports the view that second language grammars are constrained by Universal Grammar (UG), and UG allows learners to acquire abstract grammatical properties not directly available from input or transferable from L1. Linguistic distance thus influences the developmental trajectory but does not block acquisition (White, 2025).

Hindi does not allow such resultative constructions. The absence of an equivalent structure in Hindi did not necessarily prevent learners from accessing or interpreting the relevant representation in the second

language. LI-L2 Differences may have created an initial learning difficulty, but did not preclude learners from developing knowledge of L2-specific structures. Learners could go beyond transfer from the L1 and acquire grammatical properties that reflect the target-language system rather than the structure of Hindi. Discussion of pedagogical implications with regard to a marked construction like a resultative phrase is pertinent here.

Resultative constructions, like *He hammered the metal flat* or *They wiped the table clean*, are difficult for English learners because they involve two ideas in one sentence: an action (*hammer, wipe*) and its result (*flat, clean*) on the direct object (*the metal, the table*): it is like two clauses shoved into one, making the construction syntactically complex. Even though second language learners may not use them in speech, their comprehension of such constructions cannot be faulted.

The study showed that marked constructions pose a challenge in second language learning since they are less frequent, more complex, or more restricted across languages compared to an unmarked one. Unmarked structures are learned earlier and more easily, but marked structures are acquired later, and learning shows greater variability, and their learning is heavily dependent on exposure, instruction and noticing (Markedness Differential Hypothesis by Eckman, 1985). Resultatives are generally marked constructions, and their felicity with unergatives in the presence of objects is rarer. Sensitivity to marked constructions develops more slowly, with focused input frequency and instruction, which helps in refining grammatical knowledge.

One of Hirakawa's (2013) suggestions is to teach a three-way distinction (transitive, unergative and unaccusative) showing learners that the former two have AGENT as subjects, and the latter THEME or PATIENT as subject. Going the semantic way would thus help learners see the difference. Also, unaccusatives would require more focused teaching, since they have been shown to be more difficult. There is a need for negative evidence and corrective feedback to learn such lexical restrictions. Learners must encounter ungrammatical examples to avoid overgeneralization (e.g. *laugh someone tired*, *arrive the station early*), as rejecting ungrammatical sentences is as crucial as accepting grammatical ones (White, 2003; Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013). Learners, therefore, need to gradually be trained to refine their sensitivity to these constructions

with activities like sorting verbs by type[5] (Pinker, 1989), judging whether sentences are correct, and comparing examples can help.

Teaching such marked constructions would require careful instructional support. Learners may benefit from explicit exposure to these structures through examples presented in meaningful contexts so that they can observe how the constructions function in actual language use. It would also be helpful to provide a semantic explanation, clarifying that the object in these constructions typically intensifies, specifies, or elaborates the action expressed by the verb. Finally, using corpus-based examples from authentic language sources can help learners see how these constructions occur naturally in real discourse and understand the contexts in which they are most likely to be used.

Notes

1. The following abbreviations are used: NOM-nominative case, DAT-dative case, ERG-ergative case, PST—past tense, 3-third person, M-masculine, S-singular (see also (6)).
2. In English, *break* in the transitive and unaccusative forms are morphophonologically similar, in Hindi, there are morpheme *-aa*, or suppletion which mark the difference (e.g., *gira* 'fall.pst' ~ *gir-aa-yaa* 'drop. pst'; *TooTaa* 'break.pst ~ *tooDaa* 'cause to break.pst').
3. Resultative phrases cannot be associated with either the subject of an unergative verb as in (e.g. **He drank the juice refreshed*, to mean 'He drank the juice until he felt refreshed') nor the subject of a transitive verb (e.g. **She watched TV tired* to mean 'She watched TV until she got tired.').
4. The filler sentences were: (a)The passengers were waiting to hear the announcement. When did the train arrive? (b) Rex heard there was an accident. *When did happen the accident?
5. Refer to Geeslin and Long (2014) w*hich r*eviews pedagogical approaches using timelines and visual schematics to teach event structure and argument mapping.

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Appendix

Target sentences used for the acceptability judgment task.

Transitive (*water, paint, hammer, shot, sweep*)

a. Fred is not a trained gardener. *He watered the plants flat.*
b. Yellow is Mary's favourite colour. *She painted her car yellow.*
c. The blacksmith waited for the rod to become hot. *He then hammered the metal flat.*
d. The hunter found the tiger lying under a tree. *He shot the tiger dead.*
e. Ravi was a good worker. *He swept the floor clean.*

Unaccusative (*grow, burn, sink, freeze break)*

a. Hasim did not cut his hair for 6 months. *His hair grew long.*
b. Meera put the bread in the toaster and forgot about it. *The bread burned black.*
c. The ship was shot by an underwater missile. *The ship sank deep in the water.*
d. The temperature went down to minus 7 degrees this year. *Even the pond froze solid.*
e. Bill hit against the vase near the door. *The vase broke to pieces.*

Unergatives (*sing, laugh, dance, cough, grumble*)

a. Dora was at the party singing whole night. *Dora sang hoarse.*
b. The standup comedian performed for hours. *The audience laughed sick.*
c. John has to participate in the annual Dance show. *He danced tired.*
d. Maya had a bad throat infection. *She coughed sick.*
e. The gardener was tired of cleaning the park. *He grumbled calm.*

JNERGATIVES (TRANSITIVE: *cry, bark, run, laugh, sleep*)

a. Susie's dog died. *The little girl cried her eyes out.*
b. The baby didn't sleep last night. *The dogs barked the baby awake.*
c. The joggers were practicing every day for a month. *They ran their Nikes threadbare.*
d. Bill was a poor actor. *His friends laughed Bill off the stage.*
e. Kareena Kapoor was tired. *She slept her wrinkles away.*