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Reexamining the Unaccusative Hypothesis: a Visual World Paradigm study

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Abstract: The Unaccusative Hypothesis (UH) predicts that the subject of an unaccusative is mentally reactivated in the object position. Previous psycholinguistic studies have reported evidence of reactivation (Friedmann et al 2008, Koring et al 2012). However, these studies did not equate the unaccusative and unergative stimuli, resulting in confounds which jeopardize their conclusions. We reexamined UH with two Visual World Paradigm experiments carefully controlled for the potential confounds in the previous studies. On each trial, participants (n=40; n=52) saw 4 black-and-white drawings and heard a sentence. In the test condition, but not the control condition, one image was semantically related to subject of the sentence. We measured the proportion of looks to the target image at three time regions after the verb onset and found a robust match-effect (p 's<.05) but no differences between the unaccusative and unergative conditions. We will discuss the consequences of our findings for syntactic theory.