1. Main claim In this talk, I examine two types of empirical data taken to support the unergative misanalysis of unaccusative verbs in L1 acquisition. I show that the arguments based on the data are theoretically and empirically inadequate; furthermore, I show that upon a careful examination the findings are more naturally accounted for adopting the opposing view.

2. Background Apart from being interesting in its own right, understanding the syntactic analysis young children assign to SV sentences with unaccusative verbs (e.g. *The bottle broke*) is essential in order to gain insight into the acquisition of similar constructions like the verbal passive (e.g. *The tiger was chased by the cheetah*). This is so because both sentence types share some of their properties; for example, in both the subject is derived by A-movement (e.g., Burzio (1986)). The observed delay in the acquisition of (some types of) the verbal passive (Maratsos et al. (1985), inter alia) is attributed in Borer & Wexler (1987) to the lack of A-movement in children’s grammar. However, unaccusatives, in contrast with verbal passives, are known to be produced as early as in the 2nd year (Pierce (1989)). To reconcile this discrepancy, it has been suggested in Borer & Wexler (1987) that children under the age of 5 may initially assign an unergative analysis to unaccusative verbs (i.e. the representation in (1b), rather than the one in (1a); henceforth the ‘Unergative Misanalysis Hypothesis’).

3. Empirical evidence

3.1 Russian Genitive of Negation An NP in Russian can bear Genitive case if it is located in a negated clause and it is a base-generated internal argument. Thus, direct objects and subjects of unaccusatives can be marked with Genitive, in contrast with subjects of unergatives; it is assumed in Babyonyshev et al. (2001) that Genitive marking encodes non-specificity, while non-Genitive marking (i.e. Accusative or Nominative) encodes specificity. Crucially, Babyonyshev et al. show that post-verbal Genitive subjects of unaccusatives contain a covert A-chain in their representation, turning their acquisition into an interesting research topic in the present context. The experimental data are as follows: 30 children aged 3;0-6;0 correctly marked with Genitive 73% of non-specific direct objects and 0% of subjects of unergatives, and yet they correctly marked only 47% (on average) of non-specific subjects of unaccusatives. The findings are interpreted to support the Unergative Misanalysis Hypothesis, as Nominative subjects of unaccusatives are taken to reflect the lack of A-Chain in the child’s representation. I show that this conclusion is untenable, as post-verbal Nominative subjects of unaccusatives contain an A-Chain as well; therefore, it is impossible to learn about the syntactic analysis the child assigns to unaccusative verbs from the morphological case s/he assigns to their subjects. Furthermore, it has been independently observed in Babyonyshev (1996) that non-Genitive (i.e. Accusative) direct objects can hardly be interpreted as non-specific, in contrast with non-Genitive (i.e. Nominative) subjects of unaccusatives, which are ambiguous between the two readings. In my view, therefore, the higher percentage of non-Genitive (i.e. Nominative) responses with non-specific unaccusative subjects, compared with the percentage of non-Genitive (i.e. Accusative) responses with non-specific direct objects is not surprising: while the non-specific interpretation is incompatible with the Accusative marking, it is compatible with the Nominative marking in the adult grammar.

3.2 Japanese Nominative case drop According to Machida et al. (2004), colloquial Japanese allows omission of the Accusative case marker when the NP is structurally adjacent to the verb; this contrasts with the Nominative case marker, which is assumed to be obligatory. Based on spontaneous production data of one child aged
Machida et al. recognize three stages in the development: in the 1st (1;11-2;1), Nominative case is always omitted; in the 2nd (2;2-3;0), Nominative is omitted much more frequently with unaccusatives than with unergatives or transitives; in the 3rd (3;1-3;7), Nominative is no longer omitted. The lack of Nominative case omission in the 3rd stage is taken to reflect the unergative misanalysis of unaccusative verbs in the child’s grammar. I believe that such interpretation of the findings is implausible, as the 2nd stage can only be accounted for assuming the two are distinguished (as acknowledged by Machida et al.). In addition, I show that the authors’ analysis of the 2nd stage is theoretically and empirically implausible. In my view, there are two alternative ways to account for the findings: either (i) the 2nd stage does not constitute a deviation from the adult grammar, or (ii) if it does, perhaps the child overgeneralizes Nominative case omission with transitive verbs; the choice is crucially dependent on one’s analysis of Nominative case drop in the adult Japanese. While both (i) and (ii) are at odds with the way case drop in Japanese was presented in Machida et al., there are researchers who take Nominative case drop to be grammatical with unaccusative subjects (e.g., Kageyama (1993), (i)), and there are researchers who take Nominative case drop to be possible with direct objects of a small class of transitive verbs like iru ‘to need’, hosii ‘to want’, wakaru ‘to understand’ (e.g., Dubinsky (1992), (ii)). The analysis of the 3rd stage is crucially dependent on whether Nominative case drop is judged to be possible or not in the adult grammar. Clearly, more acquisition data are required to be able to reach any solid conclusion.

4. Conclusion Given the inadequacy of the discussed types of evidence to support the unergative derivation of unaccusative constructions, children’s difficulty(ies) with the verbal passive cannot be attributed to their inability to perform A-movement at the relevant developmental stage. Furthermore, since both in the Russian and the Japanese data children treat subjects of unaccusatives on a par with direct objects, it is evident that they not only distinguish the two verb types, but assign an unaccusative analysis to unaccusative verbs.

(1) a. \[TP \[NP The bottle.\] \[VP t1 fell t1.\]] \hspace{1cm} (Unaccusative – adult – analysis)
b. \[TP \[NP The bottle.\] \[VP t1 fell\]] \hspace{1cm} (Unergative misanalysis)

References