What are unaccusative verbs?

First of all, they are intransitive; that means:
(a) they don’t take direct objects
(b) they take only one "argument" NP (i.e. a subject)

Moreover, unaccusatives are verbs in which the subject is not a causal AGENT of the action expressed by the verb, but rather a THEME or PATIENT

Brett as AGENT: Brett as THEME or PATIENT:

Brett left. Brett arrived.
jumped. fell.
gave up/quit. died.
screamed. blushed.
hid. disappeared.

These are called "unergatives" These are called "unaccusatives"

[Sorry, I didn’t make up these terms; they are unfortunate, but have stuck]

Many unaccusatives have transitive counterparts:

Transitive form: The heat melted the ice cream.
Unaccusative form: The ice cream melted.

Transitive form: The rowdy children broke the vase.
Unaccusative form: The vase broke.

Note that the OBJECT of the transitive form is the SUBJECT of the unaccusative form

(this is where the name comes from: many languages have a special objective case for direct objects referred to as the "accusative" case)

Verbs like ‘melt’ and ‘break’ are referred to as "paired" or "alternating" unaccusatives (this will get a little more complicated in Italian....)

There are different tests for unaccusative verbs in different languages In English, one of the most reliable tests is:

Agentive -er suffixation

transitive and unergative verbs can be made into agent nouns with -er unaccusative verbs cannot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitive</th>
<th>Unergative</th>
<th>Unaccusative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hitter</td>
<td>jumper</td>
<td>*faller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>killer</td>
<td>quitter</td>
<td>*dier</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In some languages, unaccusatives take special auxiliary verbs in the perfect tenses. This used to be the case in English as well.

Christmas: "Joy to the world, the Lord ___ ___."
Easter: "He ___ risen!"

N.B. These are not passives; 'rise' cannot be transitive -- the transitive form of the verb is 'raise'. So 'rise' can never take a direct object that could passivize.

Ryan raised a question.
A question was raised (by Ryan).

*The yeast rose the dough.
The bread rose.
*The bread was risen.

Italian is the one Romance language where unaccusatives take special auxiliaries in the perfect tenses across the board, 100% of the time. Thus this is a completely reliable test for unaccusatives in Italian.

1) selection of auxiliary 'essere', 'be', in "passato prossimo" past tense

Mario e’/ha arrivato/caduto/morto/arrossito/sparito
is/has arrived/fallen/died/blushed/disappeared
‘Mario has arrived/fallen/died/blushed/disappeared.’

Passive verbs and reflexive verbs ALSO take 'essere' as auxiliary in the "passato prossimo" past tense in Italian

Maria e’ stata vista.
is been(fem.) seen(fem.)
‘Maria has been seen.’

Mario si e’ rasato.
self is shaven(masc.)
‘Mario shaved.’

This means that WHENEVER THE SUBJECT IS A THEME IN ITALIAN, THE AUXILIARY WILL ALWAYS BE ‘essere’ IN THE PASSATO PROSSIMO PAST TENSE

(How consistent of those Italians....)
(They make good clothes, too.)

This is also true of unaccusative-unergative pairs in Italian (you were warned)

Unaccusative reading: Luigi e’ corso alla stazione
(change of location) is run to=the station
‘Luigi ran to the station’

Unergative reading: Luigi ha corso velocemente
(motion) has run speedily
‘Luigi ran fast’
In general, auxiliary selection in French is not so consistent as Italian. Compare (6) with (9) and (10) on pp. 78-80.

**NOTE**: In French, while some unaccusative verbs take ‘être’, ‘be’, as auxiliary in the passe’ compose past tense, most take ‘avoir’, ‘have’; in Old French as in English, however, more of the unaccusative verbs took ‘être’ in the passe’ compose.

Unaccusative verbs pattern with transitive verbs in Italian and French in the following ways:

2) ‘ne’-cliticization

**Transitive**:

Mario ha letto molte lettere. Mario ne ha letto molte
Mario has read many letters of=them has read many
‘Mario read a lot of letters.’ ‘Mario has read a lot of them.’

**Unaccusative**:

Sono arrivate molte lettere. Ne sono arrivate molte.
are arrived many letters of=them are arrived many
‘A lot of letters arrived.’ ‘A lot of them arrived.’

**Unergative**:

Hanno lavorato molte persone. *Ne hanno lavorato molte.
have worked many persons of=them have worked many
‘A lot of people worked.’ ‘A lot of them worked.’

Once again, the postverbal noun phrase has to be a THEME.

**NOTE**: In French, unaccusative verbs do not exhibit the same consistency with the French equivalent ‘en’.

3) Transitive and unaccusative participles can be used as adjectives in both French and Italian. Unergative participles cannot.

Il programma trasmesso ieri era interessante
L’émission diffusée hier était intéressante
‘The program broadcast yesterday was interesting’

Lo studente arrivato ieri è americano
L’étudiant arrive hier est américain
‘The student arrived yesterday is American’

* L’amico lavorato stamattina...
* L’ami travaille ce matin.....

‘The friend worked this morning...’
Here is a further curious fact about unaccusative auxiliary selection in Italian which we won’t worry about for now (but may later):

4) auxiliary usage in restructuring constructions with and without "clitic climbing"

a) ‘dovere’, ‘have to’, takes ‘avere’, ‘have’, as its auxiliary in the passato prossimo past tense

Maria ha dovuto.
   has had=to
   ‘Maria had to.’

b) in "restructuring" constructions, in which an unaccusative verb is embedded under another verb, the superordinate verb may optionally take the ‘essere’ auxiliary typical of unaccusative verbs in the passato prossimo past tense, EVEN IF the superordinate verb itself ordinarily requires an ‘avere’ auxiliary in the passato prossimo; note that this also triggers gender agreement on the superordinate past participle

Maria ha dovuto / e’ dovuta andare a casa
   has had=to  is had=to go  to house
   ‘Maria had to go home.’

c) a "clitic" element (a pro-form such as a pronoun) may attach to the embedded unaccusative verb; the superordinate verb may still optionally take the ‘essere’ auxiliary in the passato prossimo

Maria ha dovuto / e’ dovuta andarcì.
   has had=to  is had=to go+there
   ‘Maria had to go there.’

d) the clitic may also attach to the superordinate verb phrase, called "clitic climbing"; if it does, then the superordinate verb must obligatorily take ‘essere’ in the passato prossimo

Maria ci ha dovuto / e’ dovuta andare.
   there  has had=to  is had=to go
   ‘Maria had to go there.’

NOTE: While French does not allow restructuring, clitic climbing, or auxiliary changes when unaccusative verbs are embedded under other verbs, it did so up to the 17th century

Sorace’s semantic hierarchy of unaccusative interpretations (see Table 1 on p. 82)

N.B. this is never taught in school! -- you can’t learn it there

Hypothesis:
"The experiment reported here was motivated by the prediction that, despite the superficial similarities between French and Italian auxiliaries, Italian learners of French and French learners of Italian would not face the same task in acquiring the auxiliary system of the foreign language: given that the French system is considerably less consistent than the Italian system, the task of the Italian learners would be more demanding than the task of the French learners; moreover, the French learners would not tend to carry over their native system into Italian, whereas the Italian learners would tend to carry over their native system into French." (pp. 83-84)

Methods:

Subjects: 20 advanced French speakers of Italian as a foreign language
           19 advanced Italian speakers of French as a foreign language

           aged 19-40
           exposed to foreign language after the age of 15
           formal instruction: 4-10 years
           most had spent extended periods of time in the other country
           3 Italians and 2 French married to native speakers
           most lived and in Italy
           all but 3 not attending foreign language classes at time of testing

Task:    Magnitude estimation of acceptability

Design and Materials: 58 sentences exemplifying six categories of unpaired, non-reflexive unaccusatives

           "The change of condition category was divided into verbs that select the same auxiliary in Italian and French, and verbs that select different auxiliaries."
           (p. 85)

           each category represented by two or three verbs
           29 sentences with correct auxiliary and 29 with incorrect auxiliary

Results:

Both language groups accept sentences with the correct auxiliary (Figure 1)

Rejection of incorrect auxiliary choices:

   both language groups do well with verbs that select the same auxiliary in both languages (Figure 2)

   they show exact opposite trends with verbs that require different auxiliaries in the two languages (Figure 3)

   in particular, incorrect Italian auxiliaries (‘avere’ instead of ‘essere’) are rated lower by French speakers with core meanings than with peripheral meanings of unaccusative verbs
and incorrect French auxiliaries (‘etre’ instead of ‘avoir’) are rated lower by Italian speakers with peripheral meanings than with core meanings of unaccusative verbs (significant differences only between change of condition and unergative alternant categories)

This means: French speakers treat Italian unaccusative verbs canonically, according to the 100% reliable system found in Italian, ["ALL THEME SUBJECTS TAKE ‘BE’ AS THE PERFECT AUXILIARY"] (but not in French), modified by the semantic hierarchy

Italian speakers treat French unaccusative verbs canonically according to the 100% reliable system found in Italian, ["ALL THEME SUBJECTS TAKE ‘BE’ AS THE PERFECT AUXILIARY"], modified by the semantic hierarchy

SO: Italians are applying negative transfer of the Italian system to French unaccusatives, treating them as if they were Italian unaccusatives, but modified by the semantic hierarchy

But French are NOT applying negative transfer of the French system to Italian unaccusatives; instead, they ALSO apply the Italian system in cases where the languages differ in auxiliary selection, and they are therefore less sure of the correct form, but they also do so according to the semantic hierarchy

Conclusions:

1) the notion of unaccusativity is psychologically real

"Language learners, irrespective of the extent to which their native language conforms to the canonical implementation of unaccusativity, tend -- at least temporarily -- to override the second language input, if the input is inconsistent with the canonical implementation."

So again:

French seem to notice the preponderance of ‘essere’ as the auxiliary for unaccusatives in Italian, and apply it according to the canonical configuration ("use ‘be’ as the perfect auxiliary for theme subjects")

Italians seem to IGNORE the preponderance of ‘avoir’ as the auxiliary for unaccusatives in French, and apply the canonical configuration found in Italian instead ("use ‘be’ as the perfect auxiliary for theme subjects")

**BOTH FALL BACK ON THE CANONICAL CONFIGURATION, REGARDLESS OF INPUT**

So it must be universal somehow, because it’s certainly not taught

Who even knows what an unaccusative verb is?

2) there is a hierarchy of unaccusativity that determines the relative
markedness and prototypicality of different unaccusative verbs

So again:

Both the French and the Italians apply the canonical configuration through the filter of the semantic hierarchy
So the semantic hierarchy of unaccusativity must be psychologically real as well
This seems bizarre, since unaccusativity is hardly a household word
And who worries about what category an unaccusative verb belongs to?
So it's another universal?
But is it an innate universal?