

Syntactic planning of English genitives in L1 and L2 production: The Animacy Rule Model[☆]



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Abstract

Choice of a syntactic frame in language production is predetermined by the relative conceptual accessibility of the participating referents, whereby animate entities precede inanimate ones. This pilot study is an initial investigation into the effects of conceptual accessibility on choice of English genitive construction in native and second language production. The sentence-recall experiment completed by native and non-native speakers of English finds evidence in favor of a single-stage model with direct conceptual-to-constituent structure mapping, devoid of grammatical functions. Implications for native and non-native models of speech production and the nature of conceptual accessibility in English genitives are discussed, whilst a large overlap between native and advanced non-native speakers is argued to be inconsistent with claims of the vulnerability of uninterpretable formal features that do not form part of the L1 grammar of late L2 acquirers (Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou, 2007).

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1. Introduction

There is considerable evidence that semantic features linked to the conceptual accessibility of a referent determine choice of syntactic structure when more than one option is available (Bock and Warren, 1985; Branigan and Feleki, 1999; Branigan et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 1993; Rosenbach, 2002, 2005, 2008). For instance, native speakers are more likely to recall active sentences like *the medicine helped the patient* in the passive form *the patient was helped by the medicine* since the (derived) subject *patient* is more conceptually accessible than the agent *medicine*. Conceptual accessibility is associated with discourse prominence as in topicality, semantic features like imageability, definiteness, and animacy, and syntactic-prosodic qualities like syntactic weight. Because such factors conspire in determining choice of a genitive 's or of construction in *the student's room* versus *the room of the student*, it is not clear whether their effects are hierarchically ordered. This study investigates the specific contribution of the concept 'animacy' as a conceptual accessibility effect on choice of genitive structure.

One strand of psycholinguistic research conducted on native speakers of English maintains the effects of conceptual accessibility are reconcilable with a hierarchical model composed of two levels of syntactic planning: the functional and positional level (Bock and Levelt, 1994; Ferreira and Engelhardt, 2006; Garrett, 1975; among others). In the build up to

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sentence production, the message determines the lemmas participating in the sentence and their semantic roles (e.g. theme, patient, agent), feeding them to the first functional level where grammatical functions (subject, object, etc.) are assigned. If an asymmetry in conceptual accessibility of the participating lemmas exists, the most 'accessible' lemma is accessed first and assigned the most prominent grammatical function (SUBJ before DO and so on). At the next positional level, the syntactic structure incorporating the two lemmas is determined by the predicate and the number of arguments it selects. To exemplify for English genitive *the student's room*, the concept 'Poss' activates an abstract lemma with two arguments assigned one of two semantic roles, possessor (Pr, the entity possessing) or possessum (Pm, the entity possessed).

Lexicon 1 → 'x Poss y'
 'x_{Pr}' 'student'
 'y_{Pm}' 'room'

At the functional level the two lemmas are co-indexed with their arguments and assigned a grammatical function:

'SUBJstudent_{Pr}' 'SUBJx_{Pr} Poss H y_{Pm}' 'Hroom_{Pm}'

However, the most conceptually accessible entity, 'student', is assigned the most prominent function SUBJ while 'room' is assigned a function associated to the phrasal head (H). Given the choice between two genitive constructions at the positional level, one where Poss is realized as 's and one as *of*, semantic roles and grammatical functions (Fs) must be pre-assigned in order to yield the intended output, *the student's room* (1a) or *the room of the student* (1b):

- (1) a. The student 's room (preferred)
 Def F1___Pr 's F2___Pm
 b. The room of the student (dispreferred)
 Def F2___Pm of Def F1___Pr

In light of the above, a major goal of this study is to determine in what ways animacy, grammatical functions, and linear order interact and determine choices in production made by native and non-native speakers of English. Unlike previous studies of conceptual accessibility which have, by and large, focused on alternation between structures possible at clause or sentence-level, our study is the first to look at a phrase-level phenomenon, namely choice of a pre versus post-nominal genitive structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, the conceptual accessibility of referents has been also characterized as an effect of semantic prominence on syntax (Aissen, 2002:1). In other words, conceptual accessibility concerns the effect of a grammar-external universal semantic feature on grammatical representations. An important claim in the L2 literature is that semantic features with syntactic consequences are fully accessible in L2 acquisition, in contrast to more purely grammar-internal syntactic features which have been shown to pose learnability problems to late L2 acquirers (Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou, 2007; Hawkins and Hattori, 2007). In particular, L2 formal features will not form part of non-native grammars if they are not instantiated in the L1 and have been acquired after a critical period. In the case of English genitives where non-properly-linguistic concepts such as animacy map onto syntax, native and advanced non-native speakers are expected to differ if the non-natives' L1 instantiates only one of the two syntactic options available in the target language.

By controlling for possible intervening variables, in this study we sought to test the plausibility of two models which differ in the way they account for conceptual accessibility effects on grammatical function and linear order. One associates conceptual accessibility with grammatical function assignment and two-levels of syntactic planning, the other with linear order and only one level of planning. To test these accounts, an experiment examining choice of English genitive structure in the presence of a distinction in terms of the animacy of participating referents was devised. Our study of genitives overcomes one notable limitation of the English active/passive constructions investigated in earlier psycholinguistic studies, namely that first position is almost always associated with the subject function, regardless of animacy effects. Because the subject function is already per se, the most prominent among functions, it becomes impossible to tell whether animacy interacts with subject, directly with linear order or constituent structure, or both. The first position of genitives frames, on the other hand, does not suffer from said limitation because two functions are possibly assigned.

By presenting evidence against the view grammatical functions are indispensable to the planning of speech (Bock and Levelt, 1994:949; Ferreira and Engelhardt, 2006; Garrett, 1975; Kempen and Hoenkamp, 1987; Levelt, 1989) we argue that, after controlling for other factors, the universal semantic feature 'animacy' plays a deterministic role in establishing linear order in genitives.

Another contribution of the study is with regard to non-native language production. In particular, we ask whether speakers of Chinese, a language that instantiates only one of the two syntactic structures possible in English, the

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