

Thematic prominence and animacy asymmetries. Evidence from a cross-linguistic production study



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Abstract

The article reports the results of a cross-linguistic production study the main goal of which was to identify the impact of animacy and thematic asymmetries on linear order and subject choice. The experimental study was carried out on a sample of heterogeneous languages, namely German, Greek, Turkish, and Chinese, which allows us to draw generalizations about several typological variables. In order to investigate the impact of different configurations of animacy and thematic role properties, argument realization was tested with three classes of experiencer verbs: (a) experiencer-subject verbs, (b) \pm agentive experiencer-object verbs, and (c) non-agentive experiencer-object verbs. The experimental findings show that animate-first effects occur across languages, an expected result under the view that these effects come from asymmetries in the mental representation of the referents which are independent from particular grammatical properties. Experiencer-first effects depend on the (non-)agentivity of particular verb classes in the lexicon, and as such are language-specific. Indeed it turns out that the experiencer-first effects we observe in languages such as Greek and German are not replicated for Turkish and Chinese. These results mirror the (non-)canonicity of experiencer-objects in the languages investigated. © 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Argument realization; Psych-verb; Experiencer; Word order; Syntactic function; Animacy

1. Introduction

The impact of functional and semantic factors such as animacy and thematic role on the form of utterance has been the subject of several research paradigms. Cross-linguistic studies such as Aissen (1999), Bresnan et al. (2001), Comrie (1981), Dahl and Fraurud (1996), Siewierska (1993), and Silverstein (1976) have shown the influence of animacy on the selection of syntactic function or word order to the effect that highly animate entities tend to occur in higher syntactic functions or in an early position in the clause. In the same vein, psycholinguistic studies such as Branigan and Feleki (1999), Feleki (1996), Prat-Sala and Branigan (2000), Prat-Sala et al. (2000), among others, have demonstrated the impact of animacy on word order in language production which is instantiated as an animate-first effect. Beyond changes of word order, animate-first effects are also observed in the occurrence of passive clauses, which offer an alternative strategy to affect the linearization of propositional content. For instance, it has been observed in several languages that a

Abbreviations: ABL, ablative; ACC, accusative; ADVR, adverbializer; AOR, aorist; ATTR, attributor; AUX, auxiliary; CAUS, causative; CL, classifier; CRS, currently relevant state; DAT, dative; DEF, definite; EXP, experiential aspect; F, feminine; GEN, genitive; INDEF, indefinite; LOC, locative; M, masculine; MEDP, mediopassive; N, neuter; NOM, nominative; NPST, nonpast; PASS, passive; PFV, perfective; PL, plural; PST, past; PTCP, participle; SG, singular.

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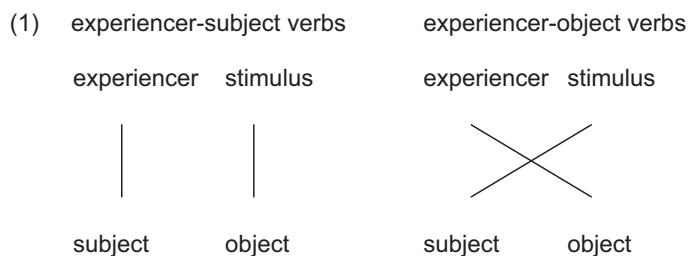
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higher animate is realized as the subject of a passivized verb, hence surfacing in an earlier position in the clause (see Bock and Warren, 1985; Bock et al., 1992; Van Nice and Dietrich, 2003; Prat-Sala, 1997). The question is whether the effects on the choice of subject are reducible to the animate-first principle or whether they are manifestations of a partly independent animate-high (i.e., higher animate in a higher syntactic function) principle (see Branigan et al., 2008).

Animacy effects (animate-first, animate-high) relate to *inherent properties* of the participants of an event. As an ontological category animacy is deeply enrooted in human cognition and manifests itself in the general principle that humans tend to give priority to animate entities in diverse respects (Dahl, 2008). Given this fundamental significance, animacy is essentially reflected in the grammar of languages, but also in language use and language processing. With respect to language processing animacy has been identified with high conceptual accessibility of referents which is at the basis of animacy effects in language production (Bock and Warren, 1985).

Similar effects come from the *relational properties* of participants, i.e., their involvement in the event in terms of thematic roles. Theories of thematic role hierarchies argue that thematic roles are harmonically mapped on hierarchical structure, such that higher thematic roles are mapped onto higher syntactic functions (see Bresnan, 2001; Dik, 1978; Grimshaw, 1990; Jackendoff, 1987; Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997; Van Valin and Wilkins, 1996; Primus, 1999 among others; see Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 2005 for a discussion of role hierarchies). The thematic role scale has also been suggested to influence argument linearization shown in several theoretical studies (e.g. Grimshaw, 1990; Haider, 1993; Uszkoreit, 1986) as well as in psycho- and neurolinguistic research (Bornkessel et al., 2005; Scheepers, 1997; Scheepers et al., 2000, among others). The assumption that the agent is at the top of the thematic role hierarchy implies both a preference for encoding agents in the highest syntactic function, i.e., as the subject, and a preference for having agents surface early in the linearization; for the same reasons discussed with respect to animacy effects, these two observations are not independent from each other.

A critical area for the study of the interaction between inherent properties (prominence in the animacy hierarchy) and relational properties (prominence in the thematic hierarchy) is the domain of experiencer verbs. The experiencer role refers to a participant that undergoes an event affecting consciousness, i.e., an event of emotion, cognition, volition, perception, or bodily sensation. Since consciousness is a prerequisite for being an experiencer, the experiencer is by definition animate. The experiencer role differs from the agent role in that it does not have control over the event. Next to the experiencer role transitive experiencer verbs license a stimulus argument. The stimulus is a rather heterogeneous role comprising the cause of an experiential situation or the target of a perceptual experience and can be either animate or inanimate. Experiencer verbs come with two argument structures: there are experiencer-subject verbs and experiencer-object verbs; see (1). Transitive experiencer-subject verbs such as *love*, *hate*, *admire*, etc. select an experiencer subject and a stimulus object. Transitive experiencer-object verbs such as *annoy*, *concern*, *frighten*, etc. select an experiencer object and a stimulus subject.



Experiencer verbs differ from canonical transitive verbs in their argument properties as well as in their semantics.¹ Experiencer-subject verbs are by definition non-agentive, since the experiencer does not exercise control over the event. Experiencer-object verbs can be either agentive or non-agentive: the verb is agentive if the stimulus has control over the event, and this configuration is only possible with animate stimuli. The experiencer argument of non-agentive experiencer-object verbs shows some properties that relate to prominence in the thematic role hierarchy. There is a rich paradigm of syntactic studies providing evidence that these arguments have several subject-like properties (see Belletti and Rizzi, 1988 as well as further references in section 2). Experimental studies show that experiencers tend to be realized early in the clause or in a higher syntactic function. For instance, Ferreira (1994) shows that the experiencer in English tends to be realized in a high syntactic function. Other studies (e.g. for German, see Bornkessel, 2002; Haupt et al., 2008; Scheepers, 1997; Scheepers et al., 2000) report prominence effects of non-subject experiencers² related to word order. These effects

¹ Canonical transitive verbs are agentive verbs taking an agent subject (external argument) and a patient direct object (internal argument).

² We refer here to so-called *downgraded experiencers* in the sense of Bickel (2004), which include experiencer arguments that are coded by structural means normally used for objects, e.g., dative, accusative case, and adpositional coding.

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