

This paper is a cross-linguistic study of animacy effects with instigator arguments, i.e. inanimate elements that instigate an event affecting another participant. Such effects have often been described in terms of hierarchies, eg. with inanimate instigators having a higher chance of ergative marking in split ergative and optional ergative systems (Silverstein 1976, McGregor 2006), or a higher chance of passive encoding in languages with voice options. In this study, we take a slightly different perspective, and we argue that apparent animacy effects are not always due to animacy as such, but to some other semantic parameter that is indirectly related to it, like special types of instigation or affectedness. We show that differences in semantic motivation correlate with different morphosyntactic configurations, and that they have theoretical consequences for the constructional status of instigator arguments. The analysis is based on a cross-linguistic sample of 52 languages, combined with a sample of 40 Australian languages, for which animacy effects are reasonably well-described.

Specifically, we argue that what has been described as animacy effects can be subdivided into three distinct categories. First, there are genuine animacy effects, which are directly related to the animate-inanimate contrast. This is the case, for instance, with the obligatory use of ergative marking for inanimates in optional systems (McGregor 2006), or the use of an alternative case for inanimates, eg. the instrumental instead of the expected ergative in the Jingulu structure in (1). For the second and third type, by contrast, the effect cannot be directly related to animacy. In these cases, animacy is merely a typical instantiation of a more general semantic parameter that relates to unusual instigation or unusual affectedness, respectively. The first category can be exemplified with Yidiny, where reduced verbal transitivity is associated with unusual instigation of the action. This covers not just inanimate instigators (as in 2), but also unintentional animate instigators, and further excludes both intentional animates and inanimate forces capable of spontaneous action (like lightning or sun, see Van Valin & Wilkins 1996). The second category is exemplified with the Umpithamu construction in (3), where the use of the genitive encodes that the object is “overcome” by the action rather than simply affected. This construction is typically associated with inanimate instigators, whose actions tend to overcome people, but can further also be used with animate ones.

These distinctions are not just semantically important, but they also correlate with morphosyntactic differences, and are therefore constructionally relevant. Morphosyntactically, the first type is different from the other two, in that genuine animacy effects are usually restricted to the local marking of the instigator argument, while the effects of the other two types also spread over different parts of the construction, affecting not just the instigator, but also transitivity marking of the verb, or marking of the affected participant. Theoretically, therefore, we will also argue that different roles should be assigned to inanimate instigators in the three types, with the genuine animacy type being closer to the agent prototype and the other two closer to more peripheral roles.

Examples

JINGULU (Pensalfini 2003:189)

- (1) *Darrangku-warndi maya-ngarna-nu.*
tree-INST hit-3sgS1sgO-did
'I ran into a tree [literally: "The tree hit me"]'

YIDINY (Dixon 1977:324)

- (2) *ɲaɲaɲ ɖina banga:ldu gunda:ɖiɲu*
I-O foot-ABS axe-ERG cut-ITR-PAST
'The axe cut my foot'

UMPITHAMU (Verstraete & De Cock 2008:228)

- (3) *yuma-mpal anthi-ku=uurrangana*
fire-ERG burn-POT=2PL.GEN
'The fire is going to burn you'

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