On the universality of animacy and agentivity effects: Cross-linguistic evidence from experiencer verbs

either oral or poster

It has been shown for many languages that object constituents that bear the semantic role of experiencer exhibit a number of semanto-syntactic features that are subject-like or at least non-object-like (see e.g. Aikhenvald et al. (eds.) 2001, Belletti & Rizzi 1988, Bhaskararao & Subbarao (eds.) 2004, Landau (to appear)). The special behavior of object experiencers may be traced back to functional properties such as animacy/topicality of the experiencer and stativity of the situation. The fact that preferences related to such semantic properties may be independent from syntax (e.g., the universal preference for animates to occur early in the utterance) does not imply that they will have exactly the same impact across languages, since their realization is mediated by a language-specific syntactic structure.

The empirical question of this paper is to what extent language-independent semantic factors such as animacy and agentivity interact with the grammatical properties of the language. In order to gain insights in this question, we examine two types of languages: A. German and Greek that provide independent evidence that experiencer objects of transitive verbs display non-object-like properties (based on restrictions in passivization and unmarkedness of object preposing). B. Turkish, Chinese, and Yucatec Maya that – following the same criteria – do not show any peculiar properties of transitive object experiencers, hence transitive object-experiencer verbs are canonical transitive verbs in this language type (Verhoeven 2008). The question is whether the impact of animacy and agentivity is identical in these language types or whether it interacts with the typological difference with respect to the structural status of experiencer objects.

A production experiment has been carried our with 16 native speakers of each of these languages (based on a previous study reported in Ferreira 1994). Native speakers were presented with a verb stem and two nouns and asked to construct a sentence. The factors manipulated included verb group (canonical transitive verbs, e.g., *hit*; transitive experiencer subject verbs, e.g. *love*; [±agentive] experiencer object verbs, e.g., *amuse*; and non-agentive experiencer-object verbs, e.g., *concern*) and animacy of the stimulus/patient (animate; inanimate). In the obtained data, the speaker selected spontaneously the word order (subject-object; object-subject) as well as the voice (active; passive/deagentive) of the verb. The preferences in their choices are interpreted as evidence for the (relative) markedness of the possible orders and voices depending on the verb group.

A part of the empirical findings involve preferences that are identical to all languages: All languages showed *animacy-first effects*: with experiencer object verbs, speakers produced a proportion of sentences in which the experiencer is either the preposed object of an active verb, or the preposed subject of a deagentive or passivized verb. Moreover, the data of all languages showed an *agentive-first effect*: the percentage of canonical active transitive structures was higher with animate possibly agentive stimulus participants.

However, the languages split into two groups as regards the effect size: while in German/Greek the number of constructions deviating from the canonical transitive structure (regarding subject choice and word order) was relatively high (average 43.4% with animate stimulus, average 78.8% with inanimate stimulus), it was much lower in Chinese, Turkish, and Yucatec Maya (average 5.2% with animate stimulus, average 20.1% with inanimate stimulus). The empirical findings support the view that particular properties of transitive experiencer object verbs do not equally hold for every language, and moreover that the effect of universal factors such as animacy and agentivity depends on language-specific typological properties.

Work cited: Aikhenvald et al. (eds.) 2001 *Non-canonical Marking of Subjects and Objects*. Bhaskararao & Subbarao (eds.) 2004, *Non-nominative subjects*. Ferreira 1994, Choice of Passive Voice is Affected by Verb Type and Animacy. *JML* 33:715-736; Landau (to appear), *The locative syntax of experiencers*. Verhoeven 2008, (Non-)canonical marking of experiencer objects. *Stuf* 61.1, 81-92.