

Animacy as a key to morphology in L2 German – Insights from Language Acquisition and Development

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Within Cognitive Grammar, animacy is one of the key features of transitive constructions. Transitivity implies that an animated agent is capable of modifying the state of an unanimated patient. From a prototypical point of view, semantic relations within transitive sentences automatically involve the juxtaposition of an animate and an inanimate semantic role (cf. Langacker 1991, 2000, Croft 1991). This juxtaposition is reflected in these roles' syntactic positions (agent first vs. patient final position). A typical transitive action schema initiated by the agent thus has the following episodic structure: [AGENT_[+ANIMATED] → ACTION → PATIENT_[-ANIMATED]]. Following Givón (1995), the constituents' positions in a canonical sentence like [NOUN_{AGENT} > VERB > NOUN_{AGENT}] reflect this semantic schema (iconicity).

Within language acquisition, the concept of transitivity is one of the first to be learned (cf. Mandler 1992, 2012) and mapped onto syntactic utterances (cf. Slobin 1995, Tomasello 1992, Hødeveg/de Hopp 2010). As soon as children are able to conceptualize the causal relation between animated and unanimated roles, they start to produce and understand according syntactic structures. For children learning a language like English it is 'enough' to map those animacy contrasts onto syntactic positions (and vice versa). When it comes to languages with a more complex nominal inflection system, morphological cues have to be added.

In German, a prototypical animated agent is marked with the masculine article *der* while the unanimated patient goes along with the oblique marker *den* (Bittner 2006). If it is true that children's first sentences are built upon animacy contrasts reflecting prototypical transitivity, they should also map the respective semantic roles onto particular morphological markers in a language like German (i.e. [*der* +N_[+ANIMATED]] vs. [*den* +N_[-ANIMATED]]). The primary hypothesis then is that prototypical animacy features of semantic roles and relations are crucial for the development of morphological knowledge in sentence production and processing.

This hypothesis was tested with an experimental design with 49 L2-learners of German (9;0). The design included object-topicalised NVN-sentences starting with the prototypical patient marker *den* as well as other oblique non-agentive articles (e.g. the dative-marked feminine form *der*). The participants had to choose the agent within those sentences. The results of my study clearly indicate that L2 learners strongly tend to choose animated *der*-marked phrases as agents. If, however, the initial constituent includes a *den*-marked unanimated noun, it is classified as non-agentive. At the same time, animated *den*-marked nouns are chosen as agents although the morphological marker clearly indicates non-agentivity. Only later in language development animacy information tends to play a minor role in the decision making process.

My study indicates that animacy is essential to learning functions of morphological forms when it comes to determining semantic relations within transitive constructions. L2 learners of German rely on animacy information when acquiring morphological features of the target language. Animacy is thus not only an essential feature of semantic roles and relations, it also serves as a key when it comes to constructing syntactic structures as well as morphological knowledge.

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