

Animacy effects in inflectional morphology

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Animacy is multiply expressed in different languages, and the asymmetries based on animacy affect various grammatical levels and linguistic categorization devices, depending on language. There is still a need for classifying all the grammatical phenomena in which animacy is involved. An international group of linguists is currently working on a thorough taxonomy of animacy-based effects, following previous typological research (especially Ortmann 1998, Dahl 2000, Kittilä et al. 2011). One of the domains which is being actively investigated is that of inflectional morphology, where we can find different kinds of marking asymmetries. On the one hand, some languages make use of special affixes in certain cases to express the semantic opposition between animate and inanimate nouns (or between human and non-human nouns). This is true of Basque, for example. On the other hand, as is the case in the majority of Slavic languages, there are morphological systems characterized by diverging patterns of case syncretism, which crucially depend on the animacy of the referent. Other inflectional systems that are usually subject to the influence of animacy are the expression of number and verbal morphology.

Some insights will come from history. The development of animacy in the Slavic languages shows the tight interplay between semantic and formal factors. Grammatical animacy –primarily the accusative-genitive syncretism in noun paradigms– is subordinate to gender (it is in fact usually defined as a subgender, cf. Corbett 1991), but other factors –such as the pre-existing syncretism between the nominative and the accusative cases or the inflectional class membership– are involved as well (Klenin 1983). In addition, the evolution of the category demonstrates that it may occasionally go beyond its original, well-established limits (affecting, for instance, other genders than the masculine, cf. Igartua 2009, 2015). Analogy can also play a role in secondary innovations. Conversely, animacy seems to be restricted in certain syntactic constructions where it is to be expected. All these properties could receive a satisfactory treatment within a prototype-theoretical approach to animacy (in the classic sense of Lakoff 1987), according to which animacy is viewed as a radial category that exhibits gradual realization depending on several factors.

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