

# The language of an inanimate narrator

Thijs Trompenaars<sup>1</sup>, Lotte Hogeweg<sup>2</sup>, Wessel Stoop<sup>3</sup> & Helen de Hoop<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Dept. of Dutch Linguistics, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Language and Speech Technology, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Animacy – the property of being alive – is a major distinction in human cognition (Dahl, 2008). The evolutionary underpinnings of the distinction are clear: Simply put, it matters if that thing you saw out of the corner of your eye is a bear, a rock, or another human being. Given the relevance of this distinction it should come as no surprise we find it reflected in every level of language: from simple lexical distinctions ('who' versus 'what') to more subtle differences in word order, agreement and topicality (Branigan et al., 2008; Lamers & de Hoop, 2005).

Still, even this crucial distinction stands no chance in the face of human creativity. In literary fiction we find examples of strawberries, paintings, even toilet seats, reflecting on life and acting on their surroundings. Inanimate characters come to life in our imaginations and feature as narrators or even protagonists in a wide variety of literary works, despite our traditional understanding that they have no inner workings or volitions – A first person perspective from that which cannot have a perspective. We do this seemingly without difficulty: embedded in the appropriate context, it makes less sense to talk of peanuts being salted than it does peanuts falling in love (Nieuwland & van Berkum, 2006).

Yet, research on animacy thus far has almost solely regarded it as a static attribute. What does the inanimate character in literary fiction, this singular phenomenon by which we bring life to inanimate objects, contribute to our understanding of animacy? What of the human versus non-human distinction, if objects can have a perspective? Can we tell these characters apart from their animate counterparts, based on the language used?

We compared two novels by Dutch author Willem Jan Otten – *De Wijde Blik*, featuring an animate narrator, and *Specht en Zoon*, featuring an inanimate narrator in the form of a painting – and found clear differences between the two. Whereas the context of the animate is dominated by action verbs (49.3%), the inanimate is associated with cognitive (37.1%) and sense verbs (17.8%). We also find this distinction reflected in thematic roles: The animate is attracted to the Agent role (42.5%), whereas the inanimate (associated with 16.7% Agentive verbs), is a 'mere' Experiencer (43.8%), undergoing and commenting on the events in the story. Its inability to act on its surroundings does not harm our acceptability of the painting as a living entity, but may harm our sympathy for its plight. Even though we may accept the inanimate narrator in a narrative, this is still an inanimate object whose limitations are clear from the context.

Thus, while it may appear as if in a story everything goes, in fact, inanimate characters in literary fiction are bound by certain limitations as compared to their animate counterparts in terms of their ability to act upon the world. This may in turn influence how we experience such narratives (Nijhof & Willems, 2015). Understanding these limitations can help clear the way for the use of inanimate characters in literary contexts to expand our knowledge of animacy, this most fundamental of cognitive distinctions.