

Prominence scales and subject choice: a crosslinguistic corpus study

Several prominence scales, among them the animacy scale, the person scale, the thematic role hierarchy, the topic scale, have been argued to account for the choice of voice in grammar and discourse. The effects of the specific scales and their interaction vary across languages (see Aissen 1999, Bresnan et al. 2001). Based on these observations the present paper tests the effects of animacy and discourse prominence of arguments in speech production in a cross-linguistic comparative corpus study comprising Chinese, Modern Greek, and Turkish. The corpus study was designed as follows: we selected 20 transitive verbs per language and extracted a corpus of 250 sentences per verb (total = 5000 sentences per language) from written corpora (Chinese: *CCL Corpus*, Beijing University; Greek: *HNC* from ILSP, Athens; Turkish: *TS corpus*, Mersin University). The sentences were annotated for the following parameters: voice of verb, animacy of arguments, DP-type of arguments (including zero vs. pronominal vs. lexical realization and definiteness).

The results (based on the valid tokens: main declarative clauses with two arguments) are summarized in Fig. 1. Following Aissen 1999 we model the data on binary scales and observe disharmonic and non-disharmonic (=all other) configurations of (the “protoroles”) actor and undergoer. Disharmonic configurations are those in which the undergoer outranks the actor on the respective prominence scale. Hence, with respect to animacy, disharmonic cases are those with an inanimate actor and an animate undergoer. Regarding discourse prominence (pronominal/lexical realization), the disharmonic cases involve a discourse-prominent (=pronominal or zero) undergoer and a non-discourse-prominent (=lexical DP) actor. The crosslinguistic comparison empirically confirms the idea that prominence scales do not have the same impact across languages: in Chinese, both animacy and discourse prominence have effects on the choice of subject, which are cumulated in case of disharmonic configurations on both scales (Fig.1.a). In Greek, we found only an animacy effect in the corpus (Fig.1.b). In Turkish, there is an interaction between animacy and discourse prominence such that a substantial amount of non-active clauses only appears in the case of disharmonic configurations on both scales (Fig.1.c).

These facts are in line with the assumption of crosslinguistic constraints and differences between languages in the constraint ranking: e.g., the constraints *SU/LOWERANIMACY and *SU/LOWERDPROMINENCE outrank *SU/PAT in Chinese, but only *SU/LOWERANIMACY does so in Greek (see Aissen 1999). The challenge is to identify the structural facts that account for the crosslinguistic differences. A crucial structural difference between the investigated languages is that Chinese and Turkish are languages with object-drop while Greek does not allow object drop and uses pronominal clitics whenever the object is the discourse topic. This typological difference accounts for the fact that there is no effect of discourse prominence in Greek, while there is an effect in the other languages.

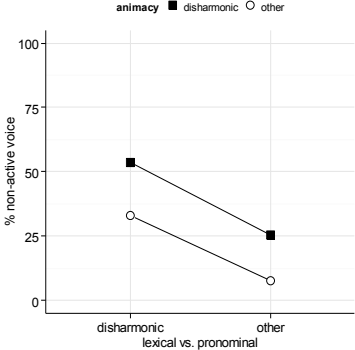
References

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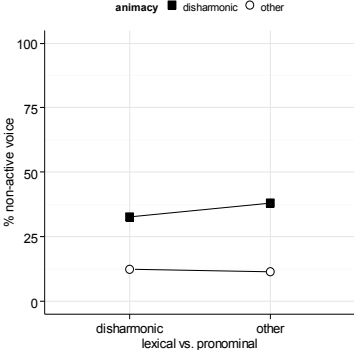
Figures

Fig. 1. Proportions of tokens with non-active voice out of the valid tokens in the corpora

(a) Chinese (n=1636)



(b) Greek (n=1722)



(c) Turkish (n= 3101)

