

Prominence effects in argument linearization: A crosslinguistic corpus study

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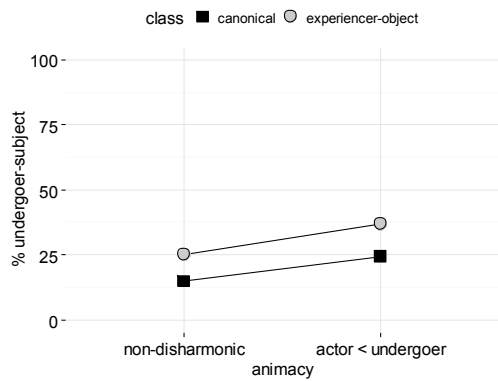
SUMMARY. An empirical challenge for the understanding of syntactic variation is to distinguish between the syntactic properties that vary and those that remain constant across languages. This talk presents an interesting case at issue in a large-scale corpus study in four typologically different languages (Chinese, German, Greek, Turkish). The study examined the factors determining the choice of linearization of arguments of transitive roots (actors and undergoers). Two strategies were examined within this functional space: (a) the choice of word order; (b) the choice of subject (actor/undergoer) and the concomitant choice of voice that is used as a linearization device (among else) (Branigan et al. 2008; Lamers & de Hoop forthc.). In a nutshell, the results show that the choice of a marked word order strongly depends on the syntax of the language at issue. That is, orders in which the object precedes the subject do not appear under identical conditions in the four examined languages. In contrast to word order, the choice of voice does not substantially vary across languages, i.e., if a voice alternation is available and can be used without substantial influence on the propositional content, its occurrence in discourse is not constrained by language-specific rules.

METHOD. We selected 20 transitive verbs per language (10 causative verbs; 10 experiencer-object verbs) and extracted a corpus of 250 sentences per verb (total = 5000 sentences per language) from written corpora (Chinese: *CCL* Corpus, Beijing University; German: DeReKo, IDS-Mannheim; Greek: *HNC* from ILSP, Athens; Turkish: *TS corpus*, Mersin University). After restricting the sample to declarative main clauses, the data was annotated for four annotation categories. The categories to serve as dependent variables are: (a) WORD ORDER (SOV|SVO|OSV|OVS|VSO|VOS), and (b) VOICE (active|non-active). The categories to serve as fixed factors are prominence scales that are known to affect the choice of linearization in discourse (Aissen 1999, Bresnan et al. 2001): (a) ANIMACY (animate|inanimate), (b) DP-type of arguments (zero|pronoun|definite|indefinite).

RESULTS. The German and Chinese results in Figure 1 illustrate part of the findings in the choice of subject (actor/undergoer). Beyond the difference in the interaction effect the pattern is similar in both languages: the proportions of undergoer-subjects (i.e., the choice of non-active voice) increases with experiencer-object verbs and is sensitive to animacy (more frequent if the undergoer outranks the actor in the animacy hierarchy). Very similar results were obtained in the Turkish and Greek corpora. The corresponding findings in the choice of word order are illustrated in Figure 2, which shows that the conditions determining the choice of word order differ across languages. While an asymmetry in animacy (such that actor $<_{\text{animacy}}$ undergoer) explains a part of the occurrence of OS orders in German the corresponding linearization in Chinese does not occur under these conditions. Both languages have syntactic constructions in which objects precede subjects in the linearization. Crucially, these constructions are different. OS orders (e.g., OVS in main clauses) are an instance of scrambling in German, while OSV orders are an instance of left-dislocation in Chinese. I.e., the object constituent is outside the core clause in the latter construction, a pattern that is highly marked and contextually restricted in comparison to German scrambling. (Turkish and Greek results are similar to German).

Figure 1. Animacy, verb class, and subject choice

German



Chinese

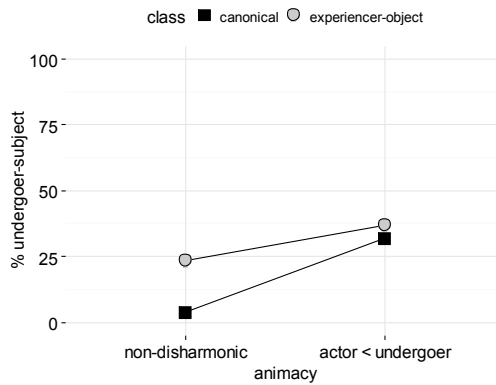
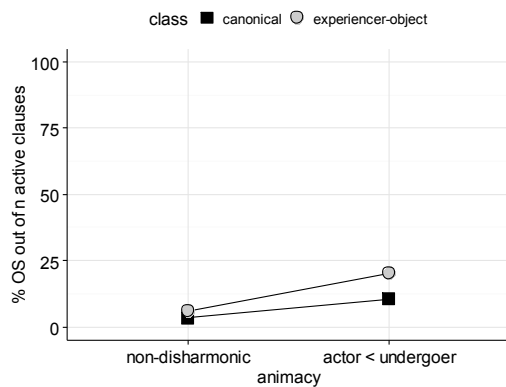
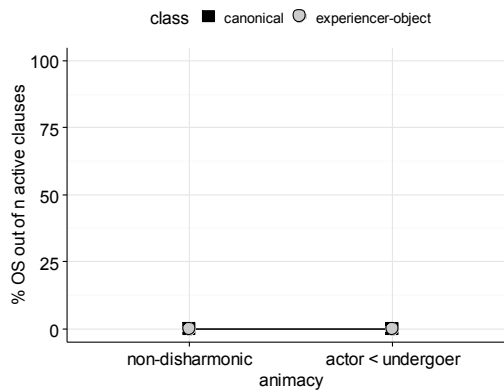


Figure 2. Animacy, verb class, and word order

German



Chinese



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