Role of animacy and verb types on subject expression

Introduction

The topic of how arguments are mapped into syntax has been studied from different points of view, including typological analyses of universal hierarchies derived from crosslinguistic observation. Taking data from Spanish, this paper analyzes whether Comrie's 1989 animacy hierarchy (human > animate > inanimate) can be used as a factor to determine subject position (preverbal vs. posterbal) in Spanish, and if subject animacy can be related to the type of verb (transitive, unaccusative, unergative). Using the chi-square test and a regression analysis carried out with Goldvarb X, the results indicate that animacy is not a good predictor of subject position in Spanish and that it does not interact with verb type.

Factors

The study of subjects in Spanish has been the object of abundant research in many disciplines within the area of Hispanic linguistics, such as sociolinguistics (Poplack 1980; Silva-Corvalán 1982), pragmatics (Prince 1981), and dialectology (Lipski 1977).

Mayoral Hernández 2007 postulated that verb types can determine subject placement in Spanish, and that subject position can become a reliable method to differentiate between unergative and unaccusative verbs, since the latter display a higher percentage of postverbal subjects.

Animacy has been considered as a means to predict whether an argument will surface as an object or a subject crosslinguistically. Comrie 1989 provided the following animacy hierarchy: human > animate > inanimate, where human arguments will surface as subjects more frequently in accusative languages like Spanish or English, while objects will tend to be inanimate. Unaccusative verbs, by definition, are supposed to have subjects with object properties (Perlmutter 1978), and therefore they should have a higher percentage of inanimate subjects and appear postverbally more frequently. Similarly the expectation is that transitive and unergative verbs should have a higher percentage of animate subjects, since they are associated with a high degree of agentivity (Dowty 1991).

Statistical analysis and results

450 sentences containing overt subjects were extracted from the corpus *CREA*. These sentences contained prototypical transitive, unergative and unaccusative verbs. The factors analyzed are: (i) subject position (preverbal, postverbal), (ii) verb type (transitive, unergative, unaccusative), and (iii) subject animacy (human, non-human animate, inanimate). The regression analysis indicates that verb type is the most important factor when determining subject position in Spanish. Surprisingly, the regression analysis discarded animacy from the best model. Animacy only becomes significant if transitive verbs are completely omitted from the calculations, and therefore the interaction between verb type and subject animacy can be ruled out.

The most striking discovery is that the transitive verb analyzed here (*empujar* 'push') patterned together with unaccusative verbs as far as subject animacy is concerned, with 62. 3% and 63% of inanimate subjects respectively. Therefore, Comrie's hierarchy does not seem to be a good predictor of subject mapping into syntax, and it only becomes relevant to differentiate between unergative and unaccusative verbs, with 83.8% and 37% of human/animate subjects respectively.

References

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