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Animacy, discourse prominence, and construction choice in Movima

Inverse systems, known e.g. from Algonquian languages, are usually characterized as reflecting the status of event participants in a referential hierarchy involving animacy (Klaiman 1991): when in a two-participant event the higher-ranking referent (e.g. a human) acts on a lower-ranking referent (e.g. an inanimate entity), a “direct” verb form is used, and in the reversed case, an “inverse” verb form is used. At the same time, inverse systems can have a voice function, privileging the event participant that is more prominent in discourse. Therefore, even though animate participants are typically more prominent in discourse than inanimate ones, there can be a conflict between animacy and discourse prominence, and the question is how inverse systems deal with this.

This paper investigates the role of animacy in the direct/inverse system of Movima (isolate, lowland Bolivia). The Movima direct-inverse system is fully grammaticalized in the domain of speech-act-participants: for instance, when the first person acts on a second or third person, the direct verb form is used, and when a second or third person acts on the first person, the inverse verb form is used. This direct/inverse opposition also functions in clauses containing two third-person arguments, and the question is which factors determine the choice here. In a database of 1250 clauses describing transitive events with two third-person participants from spontaneous discourse, it was investigated which construction is chosen depending on the expression of the arguments (NP, pronoun) and the animacy status of the arguments’ referents (human, non-human animate, or inanimate). Since discourse prominence in the sense of “givenness” is more difficult to measure, the expression of an argument as either a pronoun or an NP was taken as an indicator of discourse prominence.

The study shows that the choice between the direct and the inverse construction in Movima is largely open to the speaker’s intentions, and functions in a way comparable to the active/passive alternation in English or German. The direct construction, which is by far the most frequent one (93% of all examples) is often chosen also when this goes against the animacy hierarchy, and the inverse, though rare, can be found when both arguments are expressed in the same way (and are therefore assumed to be equal in discourse prominence). However, the inverse is never used when a human acts on an inanimate, which is an indicator that animacy may play a decisive role after all. Thus, while inverse systems have led typologists to postulate a distinct typological parameter such as “hierarchical alignment” (Nichols 1992), at least in the third-person domain their function is largely that of a voice alternation, albeit without any difference in transitivity.

References:

- Klaiman, M.H. 1991. *Grammatical voice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nichols, Johanna. 1992. *Linguistic diversity in space and time*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.