How does animacy affect word order in a VOS language

Takuya Kubo (Hiroshima University), Hajime Ono (Kinki University), Mikihiro Tanaka (Showa University), Masatoshi Koizumi (Tohoku University), & Hiromu Sakai (Hiroshima University)

takuyak0625@hotmail.co.jp

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It is well known that conceptual accessibility (Bock & Warren, 1985) affects the choice of word order in a way that more accessible entities tend to be mentioned before less accessible entities (Plat-Sala & Branigan, 2000; Tanaka et al., 2011). This preference in language production is often assumed to be universal, but the number of languages investigated so far is still quite limited. Most of them have basic word order in which the subject precedes the object (either SVO or SOV). We examined how the conceptual feature of “animacy” affects word order in Kaqchikel (a Mayan language spoken in Guatemala), whose basic word order is VOS. Since Kaqchikel allows the alternation between VOS and SVO without voice change (and very limited VSO), animacy of the subject and the object might affect the choice of word order.

Participants (N=41) verbally described 24 line-drawn pictures expressing a simple transitive event, in a random order intermixed with 18 filler pictures. While the agent was always human, the patient was human, an animal, or an inanimate entity. Since the agent is always human, the accessibility hierarchy predicts that the VOS order (patient > agent orider) should be produced less often when the patient is inanimate compared to other two conditions. However the result showed the reverse tendency. Though speakers of Kaqchikel had a general preference of producing the SVO order to the VOS order in the active sentences (68.3% vs. 22.2%), they produced VOS sentences more often when the patient was inanimate than human (37.9% vs. 10.5%; Mixed effect logistic regression $\beta=2.83$, $SE=0.37$, $p<.001$).

This result shows that accessibility hierarchy might not apply directly to VOS languages. At the same time, before jumping into this conclusion, we should consider other effects that might influence this result. The first possibility is the accessibility of verbs. In this language, the verb and the subject compete with each other for the sentence-initial position. Higher accessibility of verbs might increase the production of VOS word order in the inanimate condition. The second possibility is the thematic ambiguity (Gibson et al., 2011). The VOS word order yield potential ambiguity between agent and patient when both subject and object are animate. Even though Kaqchikel verbs carry rich agreement markers in general, and a typical verb shows agreement markers for both subject and object, the subject and the object are ambiguous when they are indistinguishable with respect to animacy because the agreement marker for the (unmarked) 3rd person singular object is null (see 1). Kaqchikel speakers might have produced more SVO sentences in order to avoid thematic ambiguity.

Taken together, we showed that the animacy effect shows up in a reversed way in Kaqchikel, a VOS language. The reason why the effect is reversed wait for future research.

Example

(1)	a.	X-ø-u-ch’äy	ri ak’wal	ri xtän
		COM-Erg.3s-Abs.3s-slapped	the boy	the girl

‘The girl slapped the boy.’ or ‘The boy slapped the girl.’