

Agentivity Inferences and Verbal Aspect in German

According to some studies (e.g. Bach 1986, Maienborn 2000), intransitive position verbs form a verbal aspect class between statives (e.g. *resemble, know*) and processes or activities (e.g. *rain, walk*). What was neglected in past research is that this classification varies with the choice of an animate vs. inanimate subject referent and the agent-related pragmatic inferences we draw from the animate-inanimate distinction.

While an interaction between agentivity, animacy and verbal aspect has been shown to influence the choice of telicity-related markers, i.e. HAVE vs. BE in German and LE vs. ZHE in Chinese, for position and motion verbs (Keller & Sorace 2003, Liu 2007), there is to date no experimental study investigating these factors for the German *am*-progressive.

We will discuss experimental data from a speeded acceptability judgement task showing that animacy and certain features of agentivity, i.e. the capability of self-propelled motion, influence the acceptability of the progressive. We tested German progressive forms of position verbs such as *stehen* 'stand', *liegen* 'lie' or *hängen* 'hang' while varying subject animacy systematically. Furthermore, we contrasted the progressives of position verbs with progressive forms of motion verbs (e.g. *fahren* 'drive') and compared both with their simple past counterparts, which function as a baseline condition.

Position verb:

*Dass das Kind / der Schirm hinter der Tür **am Stehen war / stand**, ...*
'That the child / the umbrella behind the door was standing / stood', ...

Motion verb:

*Dass der Kollege / das Fahrrad auf der Straße **am Fahren war / fuhr**, ...*
'That the colleague / the bicycle on the street was driving / drove, ...'

Our data reveal that there is a complex interaction between verb type, animacy and construction. The acceptability is diminished for the rather infrequent progressive in general. Furthermore we see a disadvantage for position verbs compared to activity verbs in the progressive. With regard to the position verbs the progressive sentences with animate subjects are rated better than those with inanimate subjects.

Our results show that agentivity related features of the referent (i.e. the capability of self-propelled motion), pragmatically inferred via animacy, indeed facilitate the integration of position verbs in a progressive construction while inanimate referents lacking agent properties do not.

Our present study will sharpen our understanding of verbal aspect between stativity and dynamism and of presumably universal, evolutionarily ancient core features of agentivity such as goal-directedness and self-propelled motion (see e.g. Leslie et al. 2004, Spelke & Kinzler 2007, Gelman 2002 and Carey 2009 based on developmental data).

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