Exploring the sources of animacy distinctions

Animacy is a semantic category that influences the grammatical structure of languages in different ways. Its manifold effects have been linked to the functioning of a typological hierarchy, called either Nominal or Referential or Animacy Hierarchy, which has been claimed to be a true universal (Kiparsky 2008), not just a widely held typological generalization. Nevertheless, recent research on the sources of several animacy markers (Cristofaro 2013, 2019) has shown that at least some of them do not arise as morphemes specifically signaling animacy distinctions or that the function that they serve synchronically is preconditioned by the circumstances of their origin (in the Indic language Maithili, for instance, the pluralizer *lokən* is used only with human nouns presumably as a consequence of its original lexical meaning being 'people').

This source-oriented approach reveals that the association of certain morphemes with animacy can be regarded as secondary or contingent, a mere accident of their historical evolution. If this were the case of every morphological marker of animacy, the significance of the Animacy Hierarchy as a typological generalization (or even universal, be it absolute or statistical) would somehow be compromised, at least at a certain level of analysis (see Cristofaro & Zúñiga 2018). Some of the examples that we will examine in this paper are certainly suggestive of grammaticalization (or regrammaticalization) processes having led to the present animacy-based values (as occurred with the emergence of specialized inflectional markers such as the nominal dative singular case in *-ovi* in Slovak and other Slavic languages, formerly a common ending of a specific declension class).

However, the documented (or else presumed) existence of shared paths of change across languages as well as the convergent development of animacy-based innovations (materialized in similar asymmetries in the expression of plurality, differential object marking, animate first ordering in syntax, etc.) appear to demand a more comprehensive explanation, beyond the specific one referring to the history of each individual marker. Actually, this convergence in the outcomes, captured by such generalizations as the Animacy Hierarchy itself, suggests interpreting animacy as a fundamental cognitive (and linguistic) property, which is also evidenced by cognitive and psychological experiments (Jones et al. 1991, New et al. 2007, Trompenaars et al. 2021).

The diachronic coherence in the rise of animacy distinctions is a tendency identifiable both in morphological markers of the category (animacy as a feature) and in its behavior as a factor conditioning the selection of values of other features (animacy as a condition; cf. Santazilia 2020). Moreover, the grammatical consequences of the manifestation of animacy can ultimately be explained in terms of identical selective pressures and analogous evolutionary responses (Haspelmath 2019: 15), in much the same way as some biological traits (the wings of birds, bats, insects and old pterosaurs, for instance) are considered to have arisen for similar functional reasons, in spite of the fact that they have rather different evolutionary histories. Thus some general, overarching principles may turn out to be responsible for the attested structural similarities among languages (which would explain why universally preferred constructions may emerge even without any preconditions in the grammaticalization source, see Seržant & Rafiyenko 2021).

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