Where is the agent? Insights from an empirical study on eye-witness memory expressing agency in German.

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Our mind is constantly integrating sensed stimuli with assumptions stored in our long-term memory, commonly accepted into our cultural background (Ansorge & Leder, 2011; Myers et al., 2005) and language becomes a tool to construct reality (Langacker, 2015; Tomasello, 2003). Different syntax constructions due to diverse language systems open a window into human cognition and the expression of different socio-cultural realities (Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010, 2011). Joint action gives language users the choice of various constructions to describe the same situation (Croft, 2009). Therefore, an investigation of the connection between human cognition and grammar, the agency expression in German in unintrinsically spontaneous and uncontrollable events such as accidents or mishaps (Kemmer, 1993) was operationalised. In some languages, such as English, more agentive constructions are used when describing such events.

In contrast, other languages, such as Spanish, prefer the usage of non-agentive intransitive constructions erasing the semantic role of an agent (Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010, 2011). In German, speakers focus on the patient that is affected by the event rather than on an active agent (Lasch, 2016) by forming a sentence with a non-agentive intransitive construction (e.g., "Die Vase fiel herunter.") (Auer, 2013; Schäfer, 2018). This entails cognitive effects starting with the focalisation of the observer's attention on the object involved (Lasch, 2016; Wilson, 2016). This study explores the expression of agency in witnessed mishaps, expecting that German native speakers would construct agentless sentences with intransitive verbs when describing an unintrinsically spontaneous and uncontrollable event. An off-line quasi-experiment was designed to gather qualitative data on syntax construction (Eifler & Leitgöb, 2019). In this experiment, 63 native German speakers watched a muted video showing a mishap. The provided written descriptions by the participants were then analysed using content analysis methods (Mayring, 2007) and discourse analysis (Bendel Larcher, 2015), which supplied 43 sentences describing the same event with different grammatical constructions and semantic content.

The results show that most participants tended to form agentless sentences with a patient focusing on the commutation of the object involved. The syntactical constructions of these native German speakers included ergative verbs, verb function structures and verb-adjective combinations without an agent to allow the observer to distance themselves from the unanticipated event (Ágel & Hennig, 2010) and underline the commutation (Lasch, 2016). These linguistic patterns might support the theory of construction grammar, where form and meaning are specifically combined (Goldberg, 2006). The findings after data analysis might be used to reinforce the idea that there may be cognitive effects resulting from the preference for different linguistic constructions caused by different socio-cultural backgrounds (Croft, 2009; Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010, 2011). Furthermore, these possibilities of syntax constructions suggest significant insight for linguistics, but also other disciplines, such as economy, natural science or the law.

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