

HOW ANIMACY ANIMATES GRAMMATICALITY AND L2- ACQUISITION

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The paper focuses on how the semantic category of animacy manifests itself in several fields of Czech grammar and how it may affect learning Czech as a foreign language. So far, animacy in Czech has been viewed as a grammatical category finding its expression especially in separate masculine declensions. However, animacy deserves more attention, since it affects the interpretation and grammaticality of various syntactic constructions. The paper also attempts to answer the question how animacy influences second language acquisition: whether it helps learners as a language universal, or rather makes their life harder because of its miscellaneous effects in individual languages.

Key words: Czech, animacy, nominal declension, pronouns, reflexive clitics, reflexive passive, mediopassive, infinitives

0. Goal of the paper

The aim of the present paper is twofold. First, it shows how the semantic category of animacy manifests itself in different fields of Czech grammar. It is claimed that animacy does not find its expression only within Czech morphology, as is well-known (Petr, ed. 1986, Petr, ed. 1987, Karlík, ed. 1995), but that it also considerably affects Czech syntax.

Second, the paper is concerned with the question of how animacy influences learning Czech as a foreign language. More specifically, whether it helps the learners as a semantic language universal, or rather makes their life harder because of its different morphological and syntactic manifestations in individual languages.

1. Animacy

Comrie (1989) argues that animacy is a semantic language universal that can be defined by the general scale human > animal > inanimate. Different languages make more or less fine distinctions and the boundary between animate and inanimate is not clear-cut. For example in Czech, the word *červ* (worm) is an animate noun, while the word *hmyz* (insect) is

inanimate. Animacy also affects the grammar of languages in different ways: it may be involved in case marking, number distinctions, verbal agreement and other morphosyntactic domains. In the next section, we will focus on how the category of animacy manifests itself in the grammar of Czech.

2. Animacy in Czech

2.1. Well-known Cases of Animacy in Czech

Czech is a West-Slavonic, highly inflectional language. To take an example of nominal declensions, it has different inflections for three genders, two numbers and seven cases. Moreover, it distinguishes between hard and soft declension types. The Czech nominal declension system thus results in 98 different forms, leaving aside adjectives, pronouns and numerals.

Within Czech morphology, the category of animacy takes its form especially in separate masculine declensions, both in singular and plural, as indicated in table 1.

(1)

	SG.		PL.	
Type	<i>hrad</i> – M_{inanim}	<i>pán</i> – M_{anim}	<i>hrad</i> – M_{inanim}	<i>pán</i> – M_{anim}
N	hrad	pán	hrady	páni / pánové
G	hradu (-a)	pána	hradů	pánů
D	hradu	pánu / pánovi	hradům	pánům
A	hrad	pána	hrady	pány
L	hradu	pánu / pánovi	hradech	pánech
I	hradem	pánem	hrady	pány

Table (1) shows the hard masculine paradigm, which systematically distinguishes between the inanimate type *hrad* (castle) and the animate type *pán* (man). The latter is characterized especially by identical genitive-accusative forms in singular and typical animate endings in dative and locative singular and nominative plural. The same holds for the soft masculine declension.

Animacy manifests itself also in accusative forms of masculine personal pronoun *on* (he), making difference between the animate form *něho* and the form *něj*, which may be both animate and inanimate. Examples in (2) illustrate this contrast.

- (2) a. Dívám se na něho.
 look_{1.SG.PRES} at him_{ACC} (= a human)
 b. Dívám se na něj.
 look_{1.SG.PRES} at him_{ACC} (= a thing, an animal or a human)
 „I'm looking at him.“

The last well-known case of animacy distinction in Czech is the expression of possessivity. As shown in (3), only animate nouns may appear in the form of inflected possessive adjective, while possessive genitive must be used with inanimate ones.

- (3) a. přítelovo jméno
 friend_{POSS.ADJ} name
 „friend's name“
 b. jméno ulice
 name street_{GEN}
 „name of the street“

2.2 Less-known Cases of Animacy in Czech

This subsection deals with less or not generally known cases of animacy in Czech, which pertain to the domain of syntax. More concretely, animacy impacts on grammaticality and interpretation of reflexive constructions, dative arguments and subject infinitives.

Let's start with the Czech reflexive clitic *se* in constructions given in (4).

- (4) a. Žáci se opravují.
 pupils_{NOM} se correct_{3.PL.PRES}
 A. „Pupils are (being) corrected.“
 B. „The pupils are correcting themselves.“
 C. „The pupils are correcting one another.“
 b. Hodinky se opravují.
 watch_{NOM} se repair_{3.PL.PRES}
 A. „The watch is being repaired.“

While the sentence (4a) with the reflexive clitic *se* and animate subject *žáci* (pupils) allows for three possible interpretations, i.e. reflexive passive, reflexive and reciprocal, in sentence (4b) only the reflexive passive reading is available. Hence, for the clitic *se* to be interpreted as a true reflexive/reciprocal pronoun, the subject of the sentence must be animate.

In Czech, there are other constraints regarding reflexive passives,

namely the availability of instrumental adjuncts, which again depends on their in/animacy. As demonstrated in (5), only an inanimate instrumental adjunct is allowed in the reflexive passive construction.

- (5) a. *Vila se stavěla Petrem.
 villa_{NOM} se build_{3.SG.PAST} Peter_{INSTR}
Intended: „The villa was being built by Peter.“
- b. Vila se stavěla jeřábem.
 villa_{NOM} se build_{3.SG.PAST} crane_{INSTR}
 „The villa was being built by a crane.“

The same contrast obtains with anticausative verbs, generally also formed with the clitic *se*. Again, an instrumental animate adjunct is ruled out, while an inanimate one is allowed for, as shown in (6).

- (6) a. *Větev se zlomila Petrem.
 branch_{NOM} se break_{3.SG.PAST} Peter_{INSTR}
Intended: „The branch broke by Peter.“
- b. Větev se zlomila tíhou jablek.
 branch_{NOM} se break_{3.SG.PAST} weight_{INSTR} apples
 „The branch broke because of the weight of apples.“

Another syntactic domain where animacy is relevant, is the availability of dative arguments in so-called mediopassive constructions given in (7).¹

- (7) a. Petrovi se ten příklad počítá obtížně.
 Peter_{DAT} se the task_{NOM} calculate_{3.SG.PRES} with-
 difficulty
 „For Peter it is difficult to calculate this task.“

¹ For a theoretical account of these constructions see Hudousková 2010.

b. *Kalkulačce se ten příklad počítá obtížně.
 calculator_{DAT} se the task_{NOM} calculate_{3.SG.PRES} with-
 difficulty

„For a calculator it is difficult to calculate this task.“

While the animate dative argument in (7a) is fine, it is not so for the inanimate one in (7b). Interestingly, if the preposition *pro* (for) is used instead of the dative form, both animate and inanimate nouns are possible in a similar type of construction with identical meaning, as illustrated in (8).

(8) Pro Petra/kalkulačku je obtížné spočítat ten
 příklad.
 for Peter/calculator_{ACC} be_{3.SG.PRES} difficult calculate_{INF} the
 task_{ACC}

„For Peter / a calculator it is difficult to calculate this task.“

Finally, animacy affects the interpretation of infinitives in the subject position.² Let us consider the triplet of examples in (9).

- (9) a. Padat ze schodů je nebezpečné.
 fall-down_{INF} from stairs be_{3.SG.PRES} dangerous
 „It is dangerous (for a human being) to fall down from stairs.“
 b. Uklouznout na náledí je snadné.
 slip_{INF} on ice be_{3.SG.PRES} easy
 c. *Dělit se na kmenové buňky je rychlé.
 divide_{INF} into stem cells be_{3.SG.PRES} fast
Intended: „It is fast to divide into stem cells.“

Infinitives in the subject position in (9) have no antecedent that could be interpreted as the subject of the infinitive itself. Hence, by default, such infinitives are interpreted as having a human subject. Consequently, the sentence in (9a) can be uttered only about human beings, not about e.g. a cat or a vase. Similarly, (9b) cannot be an utterance about a car. Consequently, the sentence (9c), which cannot be understood as speaking about a human agent, is ruled out, as it does not conform to the animacy constraint.

² A more detailed description this type of constructions is given in Hudousková 2009.

3. Animacy and L2-Acquisition

The last point to be discussed is whether animacy, being a semantic language universal, facilitates or rather complicates L2-acquisition. For the purpose of this research, foreign students at the Institute of Czech Studies were asked to fill in a questionnaire in which they had to judge the grammaticality and interpretation of sentences where animacy had to be taken into account. The questionnaire included also questions from morphology, but syntax was in the center of interest. So, the students had to consider the plausibility of reflexive structures, dative arguments and subject infinitives.

Unfortunately, the group of questioned students was not very representative. Out of the total number of twenty students, twelve were Slavonic languages speakers (mostly Russian), five Germanic and three Japanese speakers. Other languages, i.e. Bulgarian, Macedonian, Latvian, Dutch and Greek, were represented only by one speaker each. All students were advanced speakers of Czech, at the level B2 or higher of the CEFR.

As regards Czech morphology, it appears to be difficult for all students, presumably as a consequence of an extreme richness of Czech inflections, irrespectively of animacy. On the other hand, it seems that the semantic category of animacy can help to understand the grammatical category of animacy in Czech. As regards syntax, the most unproblematic was the interpretation of subject infinitives, followed by the interpretation of dative arguments. Most confusion was caused by Czech reflexive constructions.

Hence, let us go through the relevant syntactic constructions in turn. The students were first asked to mark possible interpretations of the sentence with the clitic *se* and an animate subject, repeated in (10).

(10) Žáci se opravují.
pupils_{NOM} se correct_{3.PL.PRES}

Most students, regardless of their native language, marked reflexive and reciprocal readings. However, they ignored the possible reflexive passive interpretation, which they claimed to be available only in sentences with an inanimate subject.

Furthermore, reflexive passive was problematic for Russian speakers yet for another reason. In Russian, reflexive passive allows for an animate instrumental adjunct, which is ruled out in Czech. Therefore, they judged the sentence in (11) inadequately as grammatical.

- (11) *Vila se stavěla Petrem.
 villa_{NOM} se build_{3.SG.PAST} Peter_{INSTR}
 „The villa was being built by Peter.“

Second, the students were asked to judge the plausibility of dative arguments in mediopassive structures. Although dative is considered to be a typical „human/animate“ form cross-linguistically, there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding the acceptability of the proposed structures. However, it might be due to the fact that these structures, repeated in (12), are not very frequent in use.

- (12) a. Petrovi/*kalkulačce se ten příklad počítá obtížně.
 Peter/calculator_{DAT} se the task_{NOM} calculate_{3.SG.PRES} with-
 difficulty
 b. Pro Petra/kalkulačku je obtížné spočítat ten příklad.
 for Peter/calculator_{ACC} be_{3.SG.PRES} difficult calculate_{INF} the
 task_{ACC}
 „For Peter / a calculator it is difficult to calculate this task.“

Finally, as was already mentioned, the interpretation of subject infinitives, repeated in (13), was relatively unproblematic, except for Japanese speakers.

- (13) Padat ze schodů je nebezpečné.
 fall-down_{INF} from stairs be_{3.SG.PRES} dangerous
 „It is dangerous (for a human being) to fall down from stairs.“

The students' results in the questionnaire are summarized in table (14).³

(14)

	Reflexivity	Datives	Infinitives
Slavic	! reflexive passive	?	□
Germanic	□	! Dutch	! Dutch
Japanese	?	?	!
Other		! Latvian, Greek	! Latvian, Greek

³ The tick stands for no problems, the question mark for uncertainty and the exclamation mark for problems.

Although the results of this preliminary survey are by no means representative or conclusive, it is clear that students' performance in the questionnaire depends both on their native language and the type of tested construction. Undoubtedly, careful cross-linguistic study of (not only) animacy could help us to better understand specific problems of language learners in the course of L2-acquisition.

4. Conclusion

In this paper it was argued that in Czech the semantic category of animacy manifests itself not only in morphology, as claimed traditionally, but also in the domain of syntax. We showed that animacy constrains grammaticality and interpretation of different syntactic constructions, namely reflexive constructions, dative arguments in mediopassive structures and subject infinitives.

In the second part of the paper animacy was analyzed from the perspective of L2-acquisition. On the basis of the results of a preliminary questionnaire filled in by foreign students of Czech we attempted to answer the question in which ways animacy influences learning Czech as a foreign language. On one hand, as a semantic language universal, it helps to understand the grammatical category of animacy in Czech that manifests itself especially in masculine declension types. On the other hand, however, it may complicate acquisition of more complex syntactic structures. For the sake of better understanding of what is going on in these cases, a more detailed cross-linguistic study of this phenomenon is called for.

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