

Object omission in English depends on subject intentionality

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Background: The acceptability of object omission in English, as in (1), is subject to many factors [1,2,3], including the animacy of the subject [4,5,6]: while object omission is acceptable in (1a), with an animate subject, it is less acceptable when the subject is inanimate as in (1b). Analyses of animacy effects include null noun incorporation [4], separate lexemes with different argument structures [5], and in terms of sortal criteria needed to interpret transitive verbs coerced into intransitive syntactic frames [6]. Notably, all these accounts invoke **intentionality as a key property of animate subjects**. This predicts that the acceptability of object drop is modulated by intentionality of the subject (contra [7]).

Experiment 1 (animacy as a factor): Participants (n=180) were presented with constructed sentences like those in (2), which differed in the presence of an overt object and in whether the subject was animate or inanimate. They provided Likert-type acceptability judgements on a scale from 1 to 7. The stimulus set included verbs such as *clean*, which allow optional object omission with animate subjects, as well as control verbs that consistently require or disallow objects (e.g. *make*, *come*). We conducted mixed-effects regressions with animacy and object presence as fixed effects and participant and test item as random effects. A significant interaction was found between animacy and object presence: **sentences with object drop and an inanimate subject were less acceptable than with an animate subject**, relative to corresponding sentences with overt objects (Fig 1).

Experiment 2 (intentionality as a factor): The second experiment followed the same format, except that instead of sentences with animate or inanimate subjects, sentences had animate subjects acting intentionally or unintentionally, as in (3). The same analysis was conducted (with intentionality instead of animacy); we again observed a significant interaction:

sentences with object drop and an unintentional subject were less acceptable than with an intentional subject, relative to corresponding sentences with overt objects (Fig 2).

This similarity between inanimate subjects and animate subjects acting unintentionally suggests that a single phenomenon is involved, and that **intentionality is a key component of animacy** with regard to object omission.

Discussion: The findings confirm predictions regarding intentionality as a key component of animacy. The results have further implications for deciding amongst different accounts, as well as further work that remains to be done. Moreover, the concept of ‘intentionality’ itself is not uniform; it can be decomposed into multiple components, including control of one’s physical actions and pursuit of a conscious goal [8]. It is hoped that future research will continue to clarify our understanding of the cognitive basis of these phenomena.

References

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Examples

- (1) a. *John is cleaning the car. He isn't cleaning very well.*
b. *The rain is cleaning the car. ??It isn't cleaning very well.*
- (2) a. *John is pulling some toy boats down the river. He's pulling (them) quite fast.*
b. *The tide is pulling some toy boats down the river. It's pulling (them) quite fast.*
- (3) a. *Mary bent down and impatiently pulled the phone charger out of the wall. She pulled (the charger) really hard.*
b. *Mary tripped and accidentally pulled the phone charger out of the wall. She pulled (the charger) unintentionally.*

Figures

Figure 1: Participant ratings (Experiment 1)

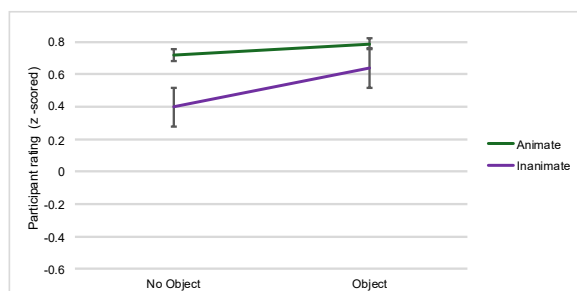


Figure 2: Participant Ratings (Experiment 2)

