

Different Approaches to Prototypical Transitivity and the Evidence drawn from Polish Participles

George Lakoff's theory of a transitive prototype (1977), expanded and enriched by Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson (1980), has later been questioned by i.e. Anat Ninio (1999) and Victoria Vázquez Rozas (2007). The Hopper and Thompson's approach to the semantics of transitivity allows us to see transitivity as a multi-factorial continuum instead of a dichotomy, with the prototype defined as a punctual, volitional and telic action performed by an animated agent over highly individuated, clearly affected object; the action should also 'happen for real' (be expressed by an affirmative clause and in a realis mode). As convincing as it seems, it doesn't match all linguistic evidence, as pointed by i.e. Sally Rice (1987) and Vázquez Rozas (2007). What is more, the evidence coming from child development studies shows that transitive verbs that humans learn first (i.e. 'to want') are not prototypical according to the afore-mentioned theory (cf. Ninio 1999). Ninio proposes new definition of prototypical transitivity, relating it to 'inclusion in, and exclusion of objects from the personal domain'. Vázquez Rozas adopts this perspective and underlines the role of causality as a key factor of transitivity, which can be related to not only physical but also mental and verbal activities. The transitive prototype would be primarily built on the latter.

However, new evidence drawn from the Polish language seems in line with the classical Hopper and Thompson approach. The study about Polish active participles shows a positive correlation between many factors analyzed and high transitivity. Especially the factors related to the agent's potency: animacy and volitionality turn out to be crucial. There are four distinct Polish participles; three of them are active and thus allowing both transitive and intransitive verbs. The active adjectival participle shares morphological and syntactic features with the adjective, and it is used as a specifier for nouns. The two adverbial participles (anterior and contemporary) are also active, show no inflection, and roughly mirror English or French absolutive constructions. The study was conducted both automatically on the whole National Corpus of Polish Language (matching all participle data with the classification of transitive verbs withdrawn from SGJP Grammatical Dictionary of Polish Language) and manually on 600 hundred random sentences containing participles (regarding all semantic factors distinguished by Hopper and Thompson). The aim of the study was to trace correlations between the type of a participle, syntactic transitivity (identified according to the data drawn from SGJP Grammatical Dictionary of Polish Language) and semantic prototypical transitivity.

The adverbial participles show both high syntactic transitivity and high semantic prototypical transitivity, particularly when considering agency and volitionality. Especially, the anterior adverbial participle – predominantly punctual, kinetic, and telic - seems extremely prone to transitivity in Hopper and Thompson's sense of the term. The active adjectival participle, on the contrary, reflects both low syntactic transitivity and low semantic prototypical transitivity. These facts lead, as well, to some reflections regarding the nature of different participles, i.e. to differences in positioning on the adjective/adverb - verb continuum and to the specifics of multi-action events in relation to agent's potency.