

## Agentivity and the typology of the psych-alternation

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The causative alternation provides three options for the derivation of transitive/intransitive verbs which appear Between and Within languages, i.e. transitivization, detransitivization, and conversion. Similarly, the psych verb inventory of many languages displays a strong valence orientation preference (Nichols et al. 2004). One type (e.g. Spanish, Icelandic, Greek) derives intransitive experiencer-subject (ES) verbs from transitive experiencer-object (EO) base verbs. This contrasts with another type (e.g. Turkish, Yucatec, Korean, Chinese) which creates EO verbs by transitivizing intransitive bases. Yet other languages make use of mechanisms of underspecification such as double derivation (e.g. Finnish, Hungarian) or conversion (English).

In this talk I will pursue the question whether the cross-linguistic differences in verbal morphology have correlates in the semantics and syntax of psych verbs or whether morphological variation is just a random factor for the creation of verbal inventories? Based on a series of cross-linguistic studies, including experimental and corpus evidence, I will show that (a) languages differ with respect to the root expressions of psych verbs; (b) this typology is relevant for the semantics of the root in terms of agentivity, and (c) agentivity has repercussions for the syntax regarding non-canonical subject properties.

In the second part of the talk, I will discuss the role of *gradience in agentivity*. In the context of the empirical turn in current linguistics, the assumption of discrete features is questioned by studies based on corpora or speakers' intuitions showing that the diagnostics of semantic features involve gradience. These findings are challenging for grammatical theory: are we justified to assume the existence of discrete verb classes or do the established properties indicate scalar dimensions of meaning? Based on two empirical studies – an acceptability study and a corpus study – I will examine the role of agentivity in distinguishing verb classes and in predicting the syntactic behavior of verbs. Acceptability data show that the diagnostics of agentivity involve gradience, which cannot be reduced to random sources of variation. However, a comparison of scalar vs. categorical models of agentivity based on these diagnostics reveals that the syntactic variation in word order found in written corpus data is best accounted for through a model that assumes a binary division into a  $\pm$ agentive and a non-agentive verb class.