

## The prominence of sentience

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Agent arguments are the highest ranked arguments with a privileged status in many linguistic phenomena. It has been proposed that this privilege can be explained by the notion of prominence (cf. Himmelmann & Primus 2015), but the prominence status of other roles such as 'pure' experiencers, verbal arguments with sentience as their only semantic role property, has not been investigated. By using fine-grained semantic role features instead of monolithic roles (cf. Dowty 1991), the present paper investigates the prominence status of experiencers within an experimental approach. Dowty's prototypicality account predicts an agentivity cline which is stable across different constructions and in which a 'pure' experiencer argument is a less prototypical agent compared to an argument with the additional proto-agent features of volition and autonomous motion. By contrast, prominence predicts agentivity clines that vary depending on the construction and its discourse function. When investigating experiencers in terms of prominence the question arises whether different types of sentience – specifically emotion, perception and cognition (e.g. Lehmann et al. 2004) – may lead to a prominence cline between subtypes of experiencers.

In order to address these issues, we conducted three acceptability judgement experiments with constructions that are claimed to be restricted to or strongly preferred with volitional agents: Pseudoclefts with *do* (Cruse 1973, Jackendoff 2007) in Experiment 1, personal passives (Eisenberg 2013) in Experiment 2 and impersonal passives (Dowty 1991, Primus 2011) in Experiment 3. The stimulus materials in Experiment 1 (N= 60) and Experiment 2 (N= 69) comprise five verb classes, each with six transitive verbs referring to volitional perception (BEOBACHTEN 'watch'), non-volitional perception (SEHEN 'see'), non-volitional emotion (HASSEN 'hate'), and non-volitional cognition (KENNEN 'know'). The fifth class (AUFWEISEN 'have, exhibit') includes verbs whose subject participant lacks volition, sentience and autonomous motion. BEOBACHTEN, HASSEN and SEHEN entail a mental process that is initiated by the proto-agent participant and that is characteristic for the situation denoted by the verb (autonomous motion in a broad sense), while KENNEN and AUFWEISEN are genuine states (cf. Kratzer 1995). See Figures 1 and 2.

In Experiment 3 (N= 83) we used four verb classes, each with six intransitive verbs referring to volitional activity (ARBEITEN 'work'), non-volitional bodily process (SCHWITZEN 'sweat'), non-volitional emotion (BANGEN 'fear') and a state that does not entail any of the agentive properties under investigation (GLÄNZEN 'glitter'). See Figure 3.

The results of our three experiments reveal that the privileged status of 'pure' experiencers compared to that of volitional agents varies depending on the construction and its discourse function (active vs. passive, *do*-pseudocleft vs. passive), in support of an explanation in terms of prominence. In addition, our findings also suggest that Dowty's protoagent features, sentience in particular, may need further decomposition.

References: Cruse, D.A. 1973. Some thoughts on agentivity. *Journal of Linguistics* 9, 11-23. | Dowty, D.R. 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. *Language* 67, 547-619. | Eisenberg, P. 2013. *Grundriß der deutschen Grammatik*. Bd. 2: Der Satz. 4. Aufl. Stuttgart. | Himmelmann, N./Primus, B. 2015. Prominence beyond prosody. In: De Dominicis, A. (ed.) *Prominences in Linguistics*. Viterbo, 38-58. | Jackendoff, R. 2007. *Language, Consciousness, Culture*. Cambridge/MA. | Kratzer, A. 1995. Stage-Level and Individual-Level Predicates. In: Carlson, G./Pelletier, F. (eds.) *The generic book*. Chicago, 125-175. | Lehmann, C. et al. 2004. Person prominence and relation prominence. 2nd. ed. München. | Primus, B. 2011. Animacy and telicity: Semantic constraints on impersonal passives. *Lingua* 121/1, 80-99.

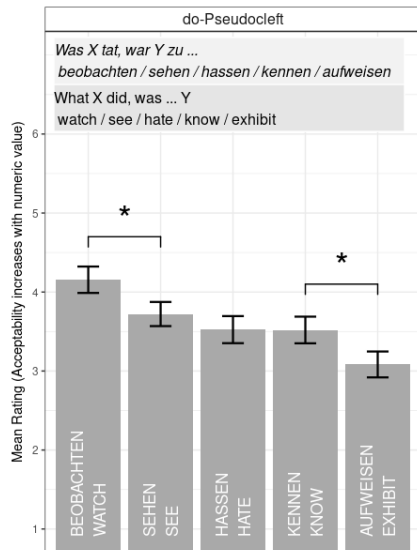


Figure 1: *do*-pseudocleft, examples, mean acceptability ratings for each condition

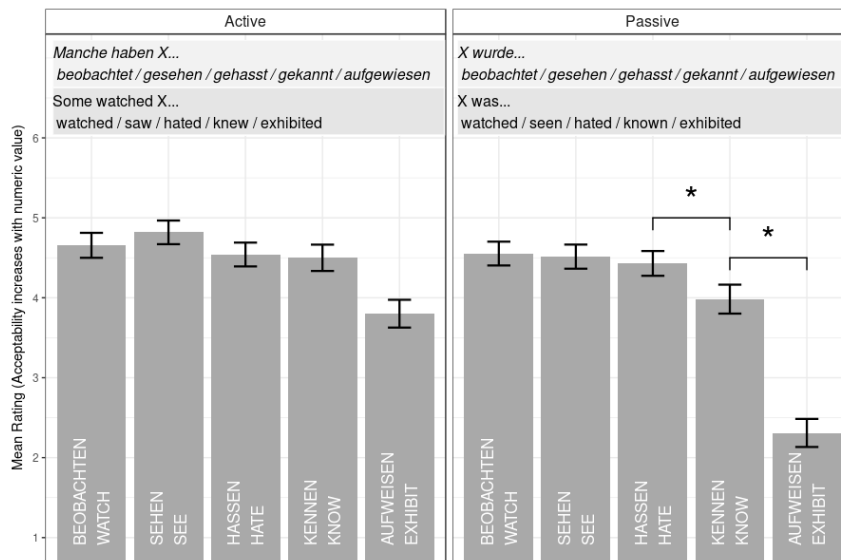


Figure 2: active vs. personal passive, examples, mean acceptability ratings for each condition

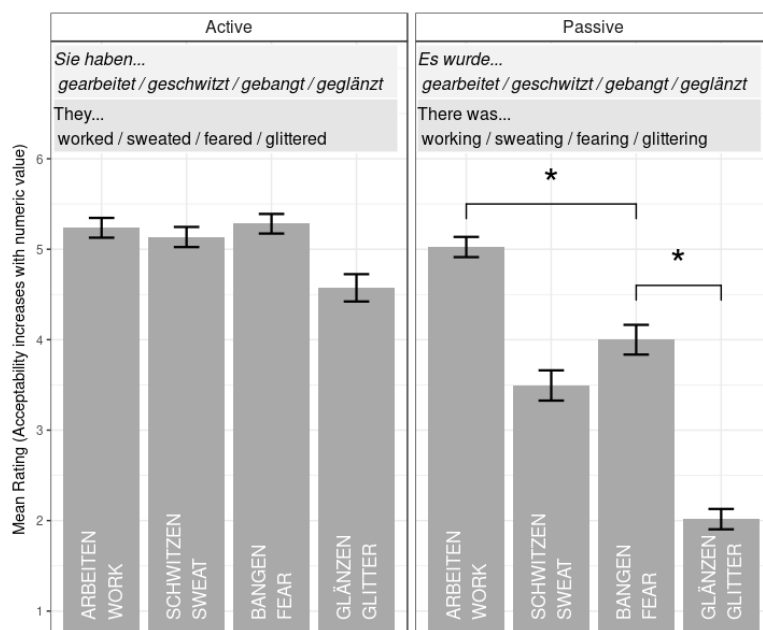


Figure 3: active vs. impersonal passive, examples, mean acceptability ratings for each condition