Cases, semantic roles and markedness

In 1968 Charles Fillmore published his seminal paper on deep cases. His list included, for example the roles of Agent, Instrument and Locative. He was also wise enough to add that his list was not meant as exhaustive, and more detailed studies of semantic roles may render revisions necessary. As a result, semantic roles are even today a recurrent topic of linguistics studies. The list of roles is considerably longer today, and there are numerous studies dealing with the coding of Agent, Beneficiary, Comitative, Instrument and Recipient, for example. However, despite the intensive study of semantic roles, we have still not arrived at a full understanding of how the roles should be defined, and what is the exact number of roles attested in languages.

One way to study semantic roles is to see them as prototypes. This approach has been successfully applied to Agent and Patient, for example by David Dowty (Dowty 1991). Dowty sees semantic roles, not as clearly defined and distinct notions, but rather as bundles of features. This makes it possible to classify different instances of one and the same role more or less typical. Later a similar perspective has been adopted, for example, by Åshild Naess (Naess 2007). One of the features relevant here is illustrated by animacy. Certain roles, such as agent and recipient, are typically animate, while others, such as patient and instrument, are not. This also means that the opposite cases, i.e. inanimate agents and animate patients, for example, may be seen as marked cases. This marked nature is also manifested in their coding, and they typically bear more elaborate marking than the unmarked bearers of the role. Some languages allow non-human agents, but in many cases their coding is different from canonical human agents. For example, Finnish allows only non-human instigators of events to be coded by a locative case. The effects of animacy are not related to agents only, but animacy has consequences for the coding of other roles as well. Patients are typically indefinite and non-human and as has been shown, for example, by Aissen (2003) human patients are usually more marked than non-human ones. Recipients are usually human, while Goals (as mere endpoints of transfer) are typically non-human. Consequently, human Recipients and inanimate Goals bear less coding than their opposites (see Kittilä 2008). Finally, locatives are typically non-human, which renders animate locations marked, both conceptually and linguistically (see Aristar 1997).

In our talk, we will discuss the semantic roles from the viewpoint of animacy and markedness. The goal of our paper is to show that conceptual markedness correlates with linguistic markedness. In the case of semantic roles, conceptually marked roles receive a more elaborate coding. Moreover, we wish to show that a prototype analysis better captures the nature of semantic roles, and all definitions of semantic roles should also consider markedness and also animacy.