

Agency and agents in the English WAY-construction

Caterina Cacioli
University of Florence

The WAY-construction (exemplified in sentence 1) generally describes a movement along a path. Specifically, in the literature (Goldberg 1995) it has been constrained to a self-propelled movement:

(1) I made my way through the crowd

Being the action self-propelled, there must be an agent capable of engaging in a movement. Interestingly, self-propelled motion is not constrained to intentional movements or movements accomplished by an animate agent: the action need not be volitional and inanimate entities participate in the construction as long as motion is *construed* as self-propelled (Goldberg 1995):

(2) The seeds pushed their way through crusted soil

(3) *The wood burned its way to the ground

(Goldberg 1995)

Moreover, the construction has been constrained to unergative verbs (Goldberg 1995; Levin and Rappaport 1995) thus ruling out the unaccusative ones, which are associated with lack of agentivity and self-initiation (Van Valin 2001).

A dedicated research on the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) allowed to gather a large quantity of data to point up the relation between intentionality of action, self-propelled movement and inanimate entities. Acceptability judgement tests were also used to furtherly illustrate this relation.

Following Oyon (2013) I argue and show with data that motion involved in the construction does not need to be self-propelled – simply, the subject must be able to undergo or perpetuate motion. Moreover, it is shown that while unergative verbs are highly preferred, unaccusative verbs are also used¹, as for example the verb *grow*. In particular, they are used when they denote a specific manner (as with *shrink* or *roll*). In explaining the results from acceptability judgements, it may be argued that the acceptability of the sentence increases when the action is construed as intentional:

(4) Mary wasn't paying attention and fell her way down the stair.

(5) Mary wasn't paying attention and tripped her way down the stair.

(6) The skater wanted to make a new record but tumbled his way down a high ramp.

¹ Narasimhan (2003) discusses the ability of English manner of motion verbs to be construed as unergative or unaccusative.

These sentences scored a 5-point Likert scale mean of, respectively, 1.91, 2.96 and 3.27. *Fall* is not attested and neither acceptable, while *trip* and *tumble* are attested and seem to receive higher acceptability judgments based on the intentionality of the action in which they are used: in (5) the subject is not actively performing an action, while the subject in (6) - the skater - is.

Intentionality of action is also most importantly at stake when the subject is inanimate. Occurrences with inanimate entities are construed around a context of *perceived intentionality*. Certainly, the actions in (7-9) are not intentional, but are perceived as such:

- (7) The doughnut quickly worked its way into American culture (COCA, San Fran Chron 2004)
- (8) [the magma] is going to melt its way to the surface and to destroy us [...] (NOW, The daily Galax, 2013)
- (9) the group examined how a robot powered by a nuclear reactor would melt its way through the ice (NOW, yahoo news 2018)

Conversely, the subject in sentence (3) is not perceived as intentional: the wood is moving in a downward direction while burning because of an evident causer, the fire. Instead, sentences (7-9) may be perceived as intentional in lack of an overt causer of the action. I argue that the variation in the acceptability of sentences (7-9) and (3) relies on humans' capability of conceptualizing actions and attributing intentionality.

References

- Goldberg, A. (1995). *A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Israel, M. (1996). The Way Constructions Grow. In A. Goldberg, *Conceptual Structure, Discourse and Language*, (pp. 217-230). Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Levin, B., & Rappaport, M. (1995). *Unaccusativity at the Syntax-lexical Semantic Interface*. Oxford: The Mit Press.
- Narasimhan, B. (2003). Motion events and the lexicon: a case study of Hindi. *Lingua*, 113, 123-160.
- Oyón, A. (2013). Revisiting Goldberg's semantic constraints on the 'way' construction. *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada*, 26, 349-364.
- Perek, F. (2018). Recent change in the productivity and schematicity of the way-construction: A distributional semantic analysis. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*, 14, 65-97.
- Van Valin, R. (2001). *An Introduction to Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.