



# Agency and agents in the English WAY-construction

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## ABSTRACT

This study is conducted within the theoretical framework of **Cognitive Construction Grammar** and focuses on the constraints of the English WAY-Construction. A combination of corpora research and acceptability judgement allowed to shed light on the construction's constraints. Intentionality emerged as an influencing factor on the acceptability of the construction, in relation to semantic and syntactic features..

## BACKGROUND

The construction as described in previous literature:

- Prototypically denotes a self-propelled movement along a path;
- There must be an agent capable of engaging in a movement;
- Despite being self-propelled, the action does not need to be volitional and inanimate entities participate in the construction if motion is construed as self-propelled;
- Only unergative verbs are usually accepted (being the unaccusative ones associated with lack of agentivity and self-initiation - Van Valin: 2001).

## METHODS

- **Corpora:** data mainly retrieved from American English corpora and web-based corpora
- **Acceptability judgements:**
  - Two short acceptability tests
  - Likert scale 1-5, where 1 = not acceptable and 5 = acceptable
  - 100 English L1 respondents per test

**Construction:** Subj + Verb + Poss + WAY + Prep  
**I made my way through the crowd**

### Highlights:

- WITH UNACCUSATIVE VERBS, THE ACCEPTABILITY OF THE SENTENCE INCREASES WHEN THE ACTION IS CONSTRUED AS INTENTIONAL;
- WITH INANIMATE SUBJECTS, THE CONSTRUCTION IS USED WHEN THE ACTION IS PERCEIVED AS INTENTIONAL.

## RESULTS

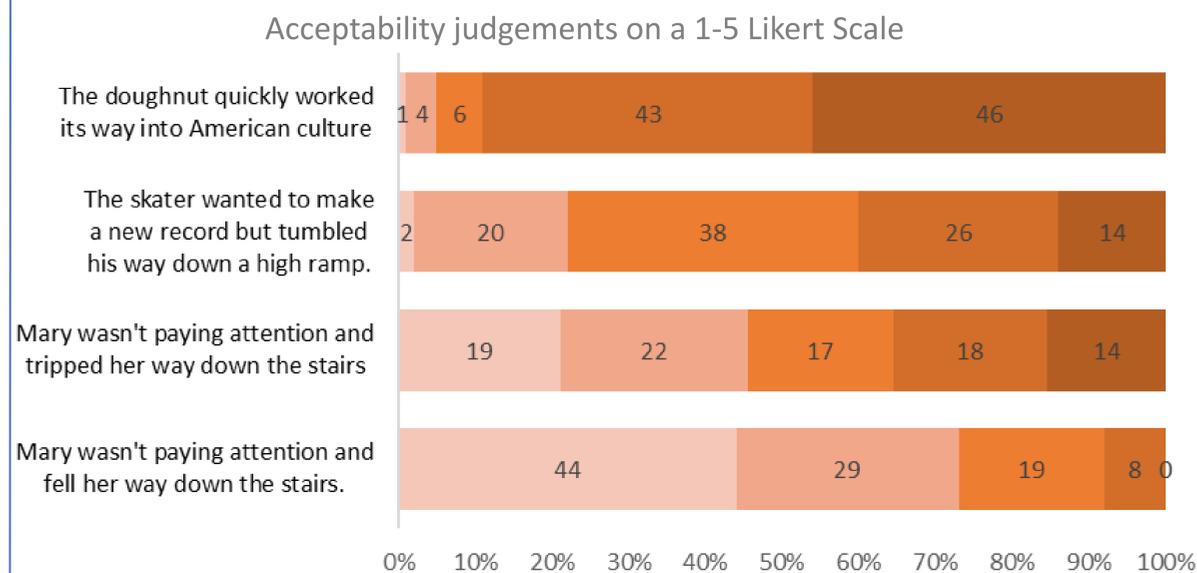


Figure 1: Stacked bar chart reporting the acceptability judgements given on a 1 to 5 Likert scale on sentences with unaccusative verbs and an inanimate subject; acceptability increases from left to right (lighter colour =1; darker colour = 5)

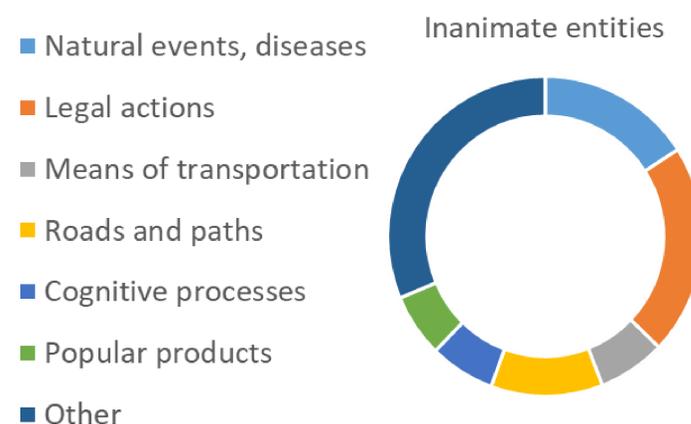


Figure 2: Pie chart reporting categories of inanimate entities used in the construction as emerged from corpora research.

## DISCUSSION

- The variety of in animate subjects, listed in Figure 2, shows that motion does not need to be self-propelled – simply, the subject must be able to undergo or perpetuate motion, in a literal or metaphorical way;
- Unergative verbs are highly preferred; unaccusative verbs are also used when they denote a specific manner (e.g. *shrink*, *roll*);
- The acceptability of the sentence increases when the action is construed as intentional;
- Occurrences with inanimate entities are construed around a context of perceived intentionality.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Intentionality plays a role in determining more or less acceptable constructs of the WAY-construction when used with unaccusative verbs;
- Within the inanimate realm, sentences score high acceptability judgements if action and subject are perceived as intentional in lack of an overt causer of the movement.

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