Agency and agents in the English WAY-construction
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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 o 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.

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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


