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Variation in syntactic structure:
status & effect of animacy

The notion of animacy is highly relevant for typological and cognitive studies in linguistics: the animacy hierarchy is defined as a language universal (Comrie 1989) which has radical effects on linguistic structure. Conceptualization of referents in terms of animacy which leads to "animacy-first effects" is related to linearization and should be differentiated from further consequences animacy has on clause structure, e.g. the choice of subjects and assignment of semantic roles. Although these are said to be linked to animacy ("animate referents are prototypically subject and agent"), discrepancies are observed cross-linguistically. For example, passive constructions may result in an animate-first structure, yet the semantic role of the subject is non-agent. Thus, the question is how these dimensions interact and which one determines the others in different constructions and in individual languages. Cross-linguistic data indicate that animacy per se does not suffice to explain these discrepancies. In addition, the marking of specific agents and undergoers and the "sneaking in" of inanimate referents in subject positions need a coherent description.

I will discuss a modified account to such phenomena, partially on the basis of Dahl's "egophoricity" (2007) and Primus' (2010) account on the interaction of animacy and agency. This talk will present two studies focussing on animacy effects in Cabécar (Chibchan). The aim is to discuss how animacy influences referent conceptualization on the one hand and their linguistic realization on the other, and if the results support the need for a decomposition of the animacy concept.