

On transitivity prominence in Estonian

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Keywords: Transitivity prominence, Uralic languages, morphological marking, case frames, semantic categories

This paper examines transitive coding in Estonian as compared to the results in the ValPaL dataset (Haspelmath 2015). We investigate the comparable verb set and outline the semantic verb types that occur in the transitive case frames without ranking the verb types on a scale (cf. Vaiss (2021).

A transitive verb takes, as a minimum, a volitionally acting Agent argument (A) and a more passive Patient/Undergoer (P) as their core arguments (e.g. Hopper and Thompson 1980, Haspelmath 2011), as in (1):

- (1). a. Väike must kass lõi väikest rohelist madu.
little.NOM black.NOM cat.NOM hit.PAST.3.SG small.PART green.PART snake.PART
“The little black cat hit the small green snake.”
- b. Väike must kass lõi väikese rohelse
little.NOM black.NOM cat.NOM hit.PAST.3.SG small.GEN green.GEN
mao surnuks.
snake. GEN dead.TRANSL
“The little black cat hit the small green snake and the small green snake died.”

Generally, A is unmarked and P – marked in nominative-accusative languages. This opposition is also present in Estonian, as seen in (1) above, yet the morphological marking of the P argument varies (PART/GEN in the singular) due to factors such as e.g. the boundedness of the NP, and the telicity of the event (Metslang et al. 2023: 607-628).

The ValPaL dataset consists of 80 basic verb meanings which are: 1. diverse in terms of their meanings. 2. reasonably common in a language, and 3. likely to have counterparts in other languages (Appendix 1). The Estonian dataset consists of the counterparts of the same verb meanings - 89 verbs, of which 64% (57) occur with the NOM-PART/GEN coding in the singular. This figure places Estonian marginally higher on the ValPaL transitivity prominence scale than the studied European languages (Italian - 62%, and English - 58% (Haspelmath 2015)). The semantic categories of the verbs that were not encoded in the NOM-PART/GEN frame include e.g. verbs of physical experiences (‘to be cold’); verbs of preference (‘to like’); verbs for certain activities or cognitive processes (‘to laugh’, ‘to shout’), which is largely in line with Malchukov’s (2005) cross-linguistic generalisation.

In sum, transitivity prominence is slightly higher in Estonian than in the European languages in ValPaL. This supports the conclusion drawn in Haspelmath (2015) and refutes the claim in Lazard (2002), that “the Western European languages are particularly transitivity prominent”. However, the verb groups not occurring in the NOM-PART/GEN frame still fall broadly within the already attested semantic categories typologically.

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