

Gapping in Romanian comparatives: an experimental perspective on case marking and animacy

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In this paper, we concentrate on the ways in which animacy affects case marking in Romanian elliptical comparatives that involve gapping (Ross 1967), cf. (1).

In order to tease apart contradictory data obtained from informal introspective judgments ((2a), cf. Van Peteghem 2009 vs. (2b), cf. Zafiu 2013), we present an experimental study on the alternation between nominative and accusative case for the pronominal subject remnants in Romanian, showing the relevance of the semantic factor of animacy: there seems to be a preference for accusative marking of the subject remnant when it is not followed by an animate remnant (3a), whereas the nominative seems to be the only strategy which is available when both remnants are animate (3b).

We ran an acceptability judgment task, by using a 2x2 factorial design (experimental factors: CASE and ELLIPSIS). We built 20 experimental items, 10 with animate and 10 with inanimate nouns. For each item, there are four conditions, as illustrated in (4) for inanimate remnants. The conditions (4c) and (4d) served us as control items: ungrammatical control in (4c) vs. grammatical control in (4d). The rating (Likert) scale was 1-7. We had 56 participants who did the task on the IbexFarm platform.

Our results confirm our hypothesis: there is indeed a case alternation (*pace* Van Peteghem 2009), which is not free (*pace* Zafiu 2013), but rather conditioned by a more general semantic constraint of animacy. Both linear mixed-effect and cumulative link models on our participants' acceptability ratings reveal a significant interaction between ellipsis, case, and animacy ($p < .001$, see also Figure 1).

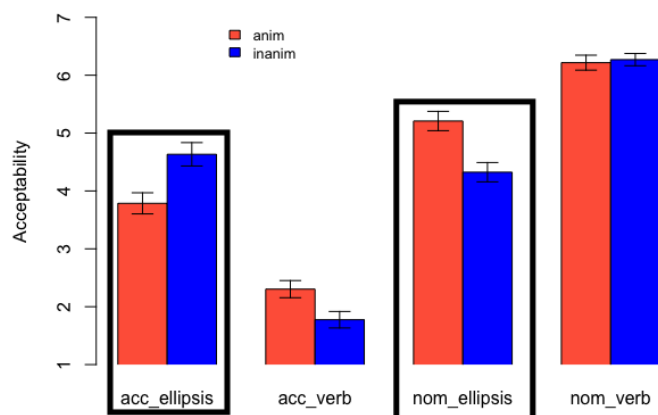
In order to account for the preferences we observe with respect to the case marking of the subject remnant in the presence of a second remnant in gapped comparatives, we propose an explanation in terms of processing (cf. Sag et al. 1985): gapping is more acceptable if both remnants are clearly dissociated by a linguistic mean, e.g. case marking or different semantic type. The strong preference for nominative case when the second remnant is animate could be explained by the explicit case marking dissociation we observe in these contexts (the accusative animate object usually bearing the differential object marker *pe*), whereas the strong dispreference for accusative case could be explained by the redundancy of case marking (both the subjects and the object remnants bearing the accusative case). If both remnants have the same semantic type in terms of animacy, one should have different case marking in order to disambiguate. On the other hand, if remnants do not have the same semantic type, there is no significant acceptability difference in terms of case marking.

Overall, our study shows the importance of experimental methods, which provide more reliable and richer data (Wasow & Arnold 2005, Gibson & Fedorenko 2013, Sprouse et al. 2013).

Linguistic examples from Romanian:

- (1) *Ion o iubește pe Maria mai mult decât ea pe el.*
 ‘Ion loves Maria more than she him.’
- (2) a. *Ea lucrează mai mult acasă decât {tu_{NOM}/*tine_{ACC}} la serviciu.* (Van Peteghem 2009)
 ‘She works more at home than you at the office.’
 b. *Eu sunt mai bucuros azi decât {tu_{NOM}/tine_{ACC}} ieri.* (Zafiu 2013)
 ‘I am happier today than you yesterday.’
- (3) a. *Ana iubește geografia mai mult decât {tine_{ACC}/tu_{NOM}} istoria.*
 ‘Ana likes geography more than you history.’
 b. *Ana îl iubește pe Ion mai mult decât {tu/??tine} pe Dan.*
 ‘Ana loves Ion more than you Dan.’
- (4) a. [accusative, ellipsis]
Ana iubește geografia mai mult decât tine_{ACC} istoria.
 ‘Ana likes geography more than you history.’
 b. [nominative, ellipsis]
Ana iubește geografia mai mult decât tu_{NOM} istoria.
 ‘Ana likes geography more than you history.’
 c. [accusative, verb]
Ana iubește geografia mai mult decât iubești tine_{ACC} istoria.
 ‘Ana likes geography more than you like history.’
 d. [nominative, verb]
Ana iubește geografia mai mult decât iubești tu_{NOM} istoria.
 ‘Ana likes geography more than you like history.’

Figure 1. Animate vs. inanimate distinction in the 4 experimental conditions



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