Mark the unexpected! Animacy preference and motion marking in visual language

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Abstract

In our cross-cultural corpus study of 332 comics, we asked whether animacy preference plays a role in comics. Are animates or inanimates more or less grammatically marked compared to each other, similarly to differential marking modulated by animacy in grammars of many languages? Following Opfer (2002), we considered the animacy preference as the expectation that only animates move in a goal-directed way. We focused on two visual morphological markings that indicate motion in comics and differ in their goal-directedness: the goal-directed motion lines (trailing a moving entity) and the non-goal-directed circumfixing lines (surrounding an entity). We found that inanimates are more marked by motion lines than animates in our data, while there is no difference between the two groups with circumfixing lines. This indicates that inanimates need to be marked by motion lines in order to signal their goal-directed movement, which is otherwise unexpected. We call this the principle of "Mark the unexpected!".

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