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The inhumane accusative: an empirical investigation

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Abstract: Leo Weisgerber (1957/58) made the much debated claim that in German referring to human beings via a direct (accusative) object where an indirect (dative) object paraphrase would be available is an inhumane choice, since it entails subtly depersonalizing the referent: Dative use implies ascribing human characteristics to referents, accusative use amounts to degrading them to mere objects. Assuming that agentivity and mental experience in action are salient human characteristics, Weisgerber's claim fits nicely with the dative and accusative object prototypes proposed by Langacker (1991): A dative object suggests an active experiencer, an accusative object an inanimate thing. In his cognitive model of German cases, Smith (1985) observed also a difference in action participation between these personal objects. We used a priming experiment to test the hypothesis that persons introduced via dative as opposed to accusative objects are more readily perceived as highly agentive and mentally involved.