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Holistic Spatial Semantics reveals different patterns of motion description in Swedish, French and Thai

Abstract:

Motion event typology has moved beyond the Talmian binary S/V typology to include (a) clearer definitions of key concepts such as Path (Imbert, 2012), (b) an open-ended typology, focusing on different constructions (Croft, et al., 2010), and (c) usage-based data showing extensive variation (Berthele, 2013). Naidu et al. (2018) document this trend, and propose a particular theoretical model, Holistic Spatial Semantics (HSS) to address current challenges. In short, the model proposes 10 universal categories of spatial meaning (Frame of Reference, Path, Direction, Motion, Region, Figure, Landmark, Manner, Cause, Shape) and that these can map in many-to-many ways to form classes, either overtly (as part of lexeme’s conventional meaning) or covertly (in the context). For example, in (1) Motion and Manner are conflated in the main verb, Region is locally expressed by the preposition, but Path is covertly specified, by the construction as a whole, along with world knowledge.

(1) Marie a couru dans la cuisine
Marie AUX run.PST-PTCPin DEF kitchen
Figure Motion+Manner Region:In LM =>Path:End

Using this model and based on Frog Story narratives, Naidu et al. (2018) showed that Thai (Tai-Kadai) and Telugu (Dravidian) speakers used significantly different proportions of the HSS categories in the expression of self-motion events. In the present study, we compare Thai with two languages that may be considered typical for the original Talmian model: Swedish and French, and look at a wider variety of events and constructions. 20 adult native speakers of each of the three languages were provided with 38 video-recorded translocative events. The stimuli varied with respect to causation and boundedness. The participants’ descriptions were recorded, transcribed, segmented into clauses, and coded for the 10 HSS categories, plus covert expression.

As could be expected from the Talmian model, Manner was expressed more often in the Thai (62%) and Swedish (61%), than in the French (29%) descriptions. However, (bounded) Path was also expressed less often (35%) in the French descriptions than in Swedish (55%) and
Thai (53%). To some degree, the French speakers compensated with covert expressions of Path, as in (1). Thai speakers, on the other hand, expressed Direction (i.e. unbounded motion) much more often (74%) than the Swedish (41%) or the French speakers (32%). There were also differences when considering self-motion and caused motion constructions separately. In sum, there are both qualitative and quantitative differences between the three languages that cannot be accounted for in any binary typology.

References:

Berthele, R. (2013). Disentangling manner from path: Evidence from varieties of German and Romance. In J. Goschler & A. Stefanowitsch (Eds.), Variation and change in the encoding of motion events (pp. 55-76). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

