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HEARING in English and Spanish

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to identify what meanings are recruited by speakers to describe HEARING events in English and Spanish and those meanings are expressed in the two languages. In contrast to most studies on perceptual language, which start with a list of words pre-selected by the analyst, our approach is concept-driven and not limited to individual words, but to expressions as they appear in a context where a HEARING event is described in texts, as shown in (1) and (2).

(1) I was only able to overhear the end of the conversation
(2) It seemed that the furniture creaked too much

Following Viberg (2015), we divide the hearing events into Experiencer-based and Phenomenon-based descriptions. Example (1) presents an Experiencer-based perspective of the hearing event. The context is that the protagonist is not just passively overhearing a conversation, but is a spy who is eavesdropping, i.e. is a wilful actor who is listening to the conversation. This can be seen in contrast to a description of a situation where a person just happened to overhear a conversation, which would still be Experiencer-based but would be effected by a passive undergoer. Such different readings of constructions including overhear highlight why it is crucial for the analyst to actually read the whole text where the expression is used. In (2), ‘the furniture’ is both actor and the source from which the sound comes. This is a Phenomenon-based HEARING event in that the object emits the sound that protagonist hears.

Three questions govern our study:

• How are HEARING events lexicalized?
• What are the differences between experiencer-based HEARING events and phenomenon-based portrayals of the participants of the event?
• What are the typological and distributional difference between English and Spanish?
In order to answer these questions, we have compiled two corpora of fiction in English and Spanish (934,809 and 1,002,743 words respectively). In absolute numbers, we have identified 3,202 instances of HEARING events in the English data set and 2,714 in the Spanish data set, and at this point, in time we see a tendency in English to have a preference for impersonal Phenomenon-based existential constructions such as there was a noise rather than Experiencer-based constructions such as we heard a noise, which seem to be more common in Spanish. The analysis is very much work in progress. The corpora have been compiled and the data will be properly analysed in the spring of 2019.

References: