THE IMPACT OF GOAL SALIENCE ON MOTION EVENT DESCRIPTIONS: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY

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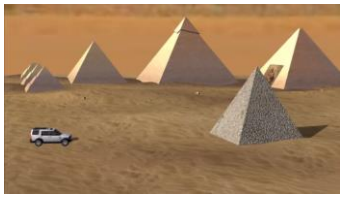
The encoding of motion events is a central element in determining the nature of linguistic as well as conceptual representations underlying the verbalization of events across languages. Motion event descriptions have been shown to vary cross-linguistically due to different factors such as the lexicalization pattern (Slobin 2003; Talmy 1991) or, more prominently, the absence or presence of grammatical aspect across languages such as German, English, Spanish, Russian etc. Several studies focus on the extent to which cross-linguistic differences in the domain of grammaticized concepts affect the conceptualization of motion events (Papafragou et al. 2008; Athanasopoulos & Bylund 2012). Stutterheim & Lambert (2005) argue that speakers of German and English rely on different principles when structuring information, which the authors attribute to the grammatical category of viewpoint aspect present in English as opposed to German. The authors conclude that during the verbalization of motion events, speakers of aspect languages prioritize the process of an event whereas speakers of non-aspect languages tend to focus on the endpoint (Stutterheim et al. 2012; Mertins 2018), see example 1).

As opposed to mono-factorial models, recent studies have now given rise to a more multifaceted perspective, in which non-grammatical, cognitive factors like the visual salience of a motion endpoint are considered to systematically affect event conceptualization, too (Bepperling & Härtl 2013; Georgakopoulos et al. 2019). In such a model, a binary grammatical factor like a language's aspectual category is implemented as part of a more complex interplay of factors that determine language-specific differences in the conceptualization of motion events. To clarify the interaction between non-linguistic, cognitive and linguistic, grammatical factors, we conducted a within-subject online survey using endpoint salience as a factor to investigate this interplay. Native speakers of German and English (each n = 30) participated in two consecutive linguistic verbalization tasks and one non-linguistic memorization task. The first verbalization task constitutes a baseline aiming at the investigation of the prominent assumption that speakers of non-aspect languages include more endpoints in their event descriptions than speakers of aspect languages. The stimulus material for both verbalization tasks consisted of 40 animated videoclips (20 critical, 10 control, 10 filler). As a non-grammatical factor, the salience of the motion event's endpoint was implemented. To materialize this factor, the endpoint size was doubled in critical items of the second verbalization task. This phase aims to investigate the hypothesis that salient endpoints are verbalized more often than less salient ones. Further, salience is anticipated to have a higher influence on native speakers of English, who are expected to verbalize more endpoints in the second part due to the increased salience, resulting in a higher interaction between 'salience' and 'language'. German speakers are expected to focus on the endpoint in both conditions, resulting in only a small increase of verbalized endpoints in the second part. In the memorization task, pictures containing endpoints from the verbalization task were used as stimuli, i.e. ten endpoints, and ten new objects, not presented before, see examples 2) and 3). We hypothesize that the verbalization of endpoints correlates with the participants' ability to remember the objects used as endpoints.

The data indicate a main effect for 'endpoint salience' such that an increase was observed in verbalizing endpoints in the salient endpoint condition. However, this result was only statistically significant for native speakers of English. This implies that salience indeed has a higher influence on speakers of English. Further, in the baseline study, we observe a (non-significant) tendency for 'language' such that more endpoints were verbalized in German than in English. Data taken from the memorization task show a tendency for speakers of both languages to remember the endpoint better if it was verbalized before as opposed to remembered endpoints which were not verbalized previously. To conclude, our results point at an interdependency between linguistic and non-linguistic factors in the conceptualization of motion events, which we discuss in light of recent theoretical debates on the influence of language-specific categories on conceptual event representations.

1) Car towards pyramid – baseline


0:00 min


0:03 min


0:05 min

Expected answers

[1] *Ein Auto fährt auf eine Pyramide zu.* (Lit. A car drives to a pyramid)

[2] *A car is driving.*

2) Endpoint object presented before

3) New object

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