Grammatical Aspect and Goal Preferences: Evidence from Linguistic Analysis and Motion Event Categorization

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The domain of motion has been a central topic for investigations of Whorfian effects over the past two decades. In parallel with many inquiries into the encoding of path and manner (e.g., Talmy, 2000), the present study focuses on the temporal properties of motion events and tests whether the grammatical category of aspect may influence the extent to which speakers attend to the goal of motion events. To do this, I examined Mandarin Chinese and Swedish speakers' verbal and non-verbal behavior with endpoints by means of a linguistic description task and a memory-based triads-matching task (see Athanasopoulos and Bylund, 2013)

Previous research has found the linguistic effect of grammatical aspect among speakers of Afrikaans, Arabic, Dutch, English, German, Spanish and Swedish. Specifically, speakers of [-aspect] languages are more likely to include endpoints in event construal (e.g., Bylund, Athanasopoulos, & Oostendorp, 2013), to fix their eyes more on potential endpoints (e.g., von Stutterheim et al., 2012) and to exhibit higher percentages of selecting reached endpoints as the criterion for categorizing goal-oriented motion events (e.g., Athanasopoulos & Bylund, 2013) than speakers of [+aspect] languages. To expand our knowledge of this line of research to a more global picture, I look at speakers' goal preferences in a language pair, [+aspect] Mandarin Chinese and [-aspect] Swedish.

Twenty native speakers of Chinese were first asked to describe what was happening in 12 scenes, each showing a motion event with an intermediate degree of goal orientation. The results showed that Chinese speakers mentioned event endpoints in 35% of scenes, a percentage similar to that of [+aspect] English speakers but significantly different from those of [-aspect] Swedish and Afrikaans speakers (Athanasopoulos & Bylund, 2013; Bylund et al., 2013). It is also interesting to note that Chinese speakers made reference to nearby endpoints in clips showing a short path more frequently than endpoints far in the distance which were located almost at the end of a long path.

In the memory-based triads-matching task, participants were asked to judge which alternate (one without any visible endpoints and the other showing a reached endpoint) looked more similar to the target with an intermediate degree of goal orientation. The results answered to the question of whether Chinese-Swedish bilinguals who acquired a typical non-aspect language as a foreign language would behave differently from Chinese 'monolinguals' or not. Despite non-significant differences in endpoint preferences between twenty-three Chinese speakers and twenty Chinese-Swedish bilinguals, a positive correlation between length of stay in Sweden and endpoint preferences provided the indirect evidence of a developing cognitive pattern from progress-salience in the [+aspect] L1 to endpoint-salience in the [-aspect] L2. From a usage-based perspective (Langacker, 2008), I interpreted that bilinguals immersed in a Swedish setting might be constantly exposed to a common usage pattern that event endpoints are frequently encoded in descriptions of ongoing events, but without any available grammatical markers of imperfectivity. Their longer stay in an L2 setting means more exposure to this usage pattern and more opportunities to apply the maximal temporal viewing frame to the construal of similar situations.

References

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