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SYMPOSIUM: GRAMMAR AND SPACE

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ABSTRACTS

Stephen Levinson (Max Planck Institut for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen)

From landscape to grammar

The space we live in is, on a macro-scale, the landscape we inhabit. It's not obvious that landscape distinctions are of much interest to linguistics. But in fact it turns out that the ontologies behind landscape terms and toponyms are culture-specific, and that e.g. verbal distinctions can presuppose landscape distinctions. A further finding is that, in some small-scale societies at least, there are covert templates ('semplates') which serve to organize chunks of the lexicon - templates which are often hooked to landscape distinctions. These distinctions in turn are associated with collocational restrictions, which takes us to at least the edges of grammatical territory. I will illustrate throughout with data from Yéli Dnye, a Papuan isolate, with occasional reference to other languages.

Sotaro Kita (School of Psychology, University of Birmingham)

The relationship between grammar and gesture: a case of space

In this presentation, I will talk about gestures that spontaneously accompany speech, especially those that iconically depict spatial concepts. I will discuss two lines of studies that demonstrate that iconic gestures do not depict spatial concepts independently from the grammar of spatial expressions. The first set of studies concerns gestural and grammatical encoding of Manner and Path of motion events. We found that whether or not Manner and Path is distributed over two clauses or expressed within a clause in speech is reflected in the way Manner and Path are gesturally depicted. The second set of studies concerns gestural and grammatical encoding of the rotation of an object. When describing the rotation of an object, the speaker can make the agent of rotation explicit or implicit in their speech (e.g. active sentence "one could rotate it to the right by 90 degrees" vs. passive sentence "this could be rotated to the right by 90 degrees"). This difference is reflected in how the gesture depicts the rotation. To summarize, both line of studies showed that the same spatial events / concepts in the external world were gesturally depicted differently, according to the grammatical choice the speaker made to describe the events / concepts. Thus, gesture is shaped by the grammatical choice of the speaker.

Maarten Lemmens (University of Lille 3, France)

Location verbs in English, Dutch and French

The present talk will report on an on-going research project, in collaboration with Dan Slobin (University of California). Within the framework of Talmy's (2000) typological distinction between Satellite- and Verb-framed languages, the project analyses *static* locative relationships as expressed by verbs in French, Dutch and English. The data analysed is drawn from picture descriptions elicited during experiments where subjects were asked to talk about the location of certain entities on these pictures. In Talmy's typology, static location follows the typological distinction between Satellite and Verb-framed languages that has been amply documented for motion events. However, as we will show, the parallelism is only partially correct and needs to be revised in view of the fact that some Satellite-framed languages, such as Dutch (but also German and Swedish) use four basic verbs ('sit', 'lie', 'stand', and 'hang') to refer to (canonical) location. This has considerable consequences for the attention that speakers attribute to location as well as where in the sentence they express it. A second area that needs to be revised concerns the aspectual (or causative) typology that Talmy proposes. He groups languages into three aspectual classes, depending on whether their lexicalisation patterns are preponderantly stative ("be in a state"), inchoative ("enter into a state") or causative ("put in a state"). Our contrastive data bring us to reconsider the grouping of languages that he proposes; this revision is in fact closely related to the preceding one, since it is once again the use of posture verbs that can be held responsible for the inter-Germanic differences.

References

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Maya Hickmann (CNRS & University of Paris 8)

Motion across languages: typological constraints in acquisition

Languages vary widely in how they represent space. This linguistic diversity has revived fundamental questions concerning universal vs. variable patterns of language acquisition. Particular attention has been placed recently on the acquisition of spatial language in relation to motion events. In this context, I will show systematic differences in how children (3 to 10 years) and adults represent various types of motion events in controlled experimental situations across several languages (French, English, German). Despite some similarities in the developmental progressions that can be observed among children across languages, cross-linguistic differences follow the predictions that can be made on the basis of typological properties (Talmy, 2000). Complementary data show similar results in early child language from about 18 months on, as well as in adults' second language acquisition, where source and target language properties both influence the acquisition process. The results suggest the strong impact of typological factors during language acquisition and raise a number of questions concerning the more general implications of such typological constraints on human spatial cognition.

Regine Eckardt (Göttingen University)

The grammar of spatial description: locative inversion

English grammar allows for some nonstandard constructions that violate the general SVO pattern.

Locative inversions like in (1) are an example.

(1) Under the couch sat a fat, ugly rat.

They show a non-standard syntax which is subject to peculiar lexical and structural restrictions, and tied to very specific circumstances of use. In my talk, I will argue that these restrictions can be understood if we view the locative inversion as a fossilized remnant of an earlier contrastive topic construction (Büring, 2003). It can be shown that most of the features that are reported in current grammatical descriptions of the construction can be derived from the pragmatic and syntactic properties of contrastive topic constructions. Locative inversion hence shows that certain communicative tasks in the description of space must have been sufficiently urgent to maintain an otherwise dying grammatical pattern.