

Representing motion events beyond language use: An exploration of L1 and L2 learners

Yinglin Ji

Research Center for Language and Cognition, Shenzhen University

Languages differ systematically in how to encode a motion event. English characteristically expresses Manner in verb root and Path in verb particle; in Chinese, varied aspects of motion, such as Manner, Path and Cause, can be simultaneously encoded in a verb compound. This study investigates whether typological differences, as such, influence how first and second language learners conceptualize motion events, as suggested by behavioural evidences. Specifically, the similarity judgments of Chinese learners of English, at three proficiencies, were compared to that of two groups of monolingual speakers in a triads matching task.

The research findings are twofold. First, when assessed by the explicit measure of selection strategies (i.e. either Manner-match or Path-match), both monolingual and bilingual speakers showed a general preference for the Path-match, attributable either to the universal Path salience in motion event conceptualisation or to a Whorfian effect nullified by verbal interference. Second, the reaction time analysis suggests that English monolingual speakers reacted significantly more quickly in selecting the Manner-matched scenes compared with monolingual speakers of Chinese, who tended to use an approximately equal amount of time in making Manner- and Path-matched decisions, a finding that can arguably be mapped onto the typological difference between the two languages. Further, the pattern of response latency in low- and/or intermediate-level L2 learners looked more like that of monolingual speakers of Chinese, thus revealing some language-specific constraints from the L1 and suggesting that the process of conceptual reconstructing, as demonstrated in the current experimental situation, can be cognitively demanding and needs a longer period of time to complete. Overall, the results reveal a possible effect of language typology on motion event cognition, consistent with a weak version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis.

Keywords: motion event cognition, linguistic relativity, similarity judgment, reaction time, voluntary and caused motion events

Yinglin JI (PhD, Cantab) is Professor of Linguistics at Shenzhen University where she directs the Research Centre for Language and Cognition (RCLC). Her broader research interests cover cognitive linguistics, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive science. Her more specific interests within linguistics include motion event typology, language and thought, universal versus language-specific influences in L1 and L2 acquisition, and semantics-syntax interface in discourse. She has published nearly thirty papers in peer-reviewed journals of high visibility and influence such as *Cognitive Linguistics*, *Frontiers in Psychology–Language sciences*, *Lingua*, *Linguistics*, and *Language and Cognition*. Her recently published books include *Cognitive Representation of Motion Events: An exploration of English and Chinese* (2016) and *Representing Motion in Language and Cognition* (2015).