Motion events in Japanese and English: Does learning a second language change the way you view the world?

Pei Sui Luk (University of Pittsburgh)

Previous research has shown that native speakers of different languages attend to different aspects of an event due to different language specific 'requirements' (e.g. Boroditsky, 2001; Imai & Mazuka, 2007; Lucy & Gaskin, 2001). One domain of interest in this area is the S-language and V-language typology in describing motion events proposed by Talmy (1985, 2000). Hohenstein (2005) has shown that English-speaking 7-year-olds paid more attention to Manner than Spanish-speaking 7-year-olds and both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking 3.5-year-olds, which suggests children’s attention gradually conform to what their language requires. The present study attempts to investigate whether we would see a similar effect in second language learners whose first language (L1) is a V-language and who learn an S-language as a second language, and vice versa.

English is an S-language, conflating Motion and Manner in the main verb, whereas Japanese is a V-language, conflating Motion and Path in the main verb. It is predicted that L1 English learners of Japanese will pay more attention to Path than monolingual English speakers, and L1 Japanese learners of English will pay more attention to Manner than monolingual Japanese speakers. The participants in this study are monolingual English speakers (EM), low- and high-proficiency L1 English learners of Japanese (EJ), monolingual Japanese speakers (JM), and low- and high-proficient L1 Japanese learners of English (JE) (6 groups). Adopting Hohenstein's (2005) methodology, the participants were instructed to view 36 sets of videos of motion events. In one set of videos, there were a target (e.g. skipping around a statue), a Manner-match video (e.g. skipping behind a statue), and a Path-match video (e.g. jumping around a statue). They were asked to indicate which video (Manner-match or Path-match) they thought was more similar to the target. The amount of time the participants fixated visually on each video, which was used as a measure of attention, was measured.

Contrary to the prediction, no significant difference was found between EJ and EM, and between JE and JM, suggesting that EJ do not pay more attention to Path than EM, and JE do not pay more attention to Manner than JM. However, two interesting observations were made. First, learners seemed to follow a U-shaped development when they become more proficient in their second language. Low-proficiency EJ pay more attention to Path than EM and high-proficiency EJ. Similarly, low-proficiency JE pay more attention to Manner than high-proficiency JE. Second, a significant difference was found for two items with native Japanese speakers, with low-proficiency JE paying more attention to Manner than high-proficiency JE, and no such difference was found with native English speakers. The results may suggest that Path is more basic than Manner cognitively (cf. Talmy, 1985, p. 60-61). Because English native speakers have been used to paying attention to Manner on top of Path, learning Japanese does not alter their way of paying attention in a significant way. However, because Manner is less basic, more cognitive load is cost to Japanese native speakers when they learn English, leading to such a result.
References


