Linguistic Relativity & Motion Events in English

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Abstract

Recent research has indicated that native speakers of verb and satellite framed languages experience motion events, because the morphology of their language encodes the concepts of Path and Manner in divergent ways (Slobin 1996 and 2000). This article presents two cognitive experiments where the stimuli are visual (i.e. televised video clips), and the task is cognitive (i.e. similarity judgment tests). The aim is to provide some cognitive evidence from French and English native speakers to elucidate the question of whether and how language may influence non-linguistic cognition. The findings reported here only look at English speakers’ cognitive performance on the tests. So far, they seem to contradict relativistic arguments, as subjects attended to Path as the decisive factor in their similarity judgments in approximately 60% of cases, and to Manner in about 40% of cases. This suggests that Native English speakers do not experience motion events in terms of either action or result in straightforward ways.