

Learning to think in another language: The case of motion

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Abstract

The linguistic relativity hypothesis holds that language affects cognition, in predictable ways. If so, which language do multilinguals rely on as a source for cognitive categorisation? Recent research shows that speakers of languages with no obligatory grammatical aspect (e.g., German) tend to establish holistic event perspectives, mentioning the endpoint/goal of some action when describing an event, e.g., “two nuns walk to a house”, and paying more attention to event endpoints when matching scenes from memory. Speakers of aspect languages (e.g., English) are more prone to defocus the endpoint of an event and instead direct attention to its ongoingness, which is reflected both in their event descriptions, e.g., “two nuns are walking”, and in non-verbal similarity judgements (Athanasopoulos & Bylund, 2013; von Stutterheim et al, 2012). This talk summarizes empirical evidence from the past 5 years or so, probing the extent to which motion event cognition patterns may change as a function of additional language learning. Data on L2 users with different bilingual profiles (e.g., foreign language learners and functional multilinguals) and different language constellations (e.g., L1 isiXhosa-L2 English, L1 German-L2 English, L1-English-L2 German, L1 Swedish-L2 English, L1 Afrikaans-L2 English, and Afrikaans-English-isiXhosa-isiZulu-seSotho multilinguals) were collected by means of a non-verbal similarity judgement task, where participants had to match a target scene that had intermediate degree of endpoint orientation, with two alternate scenes with low and high degree of endpoint orientation, respectively. Analyses reveal that the learning and use of a typologically different additional language may indeed lead to restructuring of motion event cognition. However, the extent of this restructuring is dependent on the intricate relationships between language proficiency and length of L2 exposure on the one hand, and on age of onset of bilingualism and language testing context on the other hand. Frequency of L2 use and language of primary education also present as significant variables for cognitive outcomes in functional multilinguals.