

Motion events across languages: a parallel-corpus investigation of English, French and Japanese spatial expressions

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In his pioneering work on cognitive semantics, Talmy (2000) proposes a typological classification of the languages of the world based on how motion components are lexicalized. He distinguishes two main lexicalization patterns: (a) languages that tend to lexicalize Manner in the main verb and encode Path in their periphery (Satellite-framed), such as English; and (b) languages that tend to lexicalize Path in the main verb (Verb-framed) leaving Manner either unexpressed or in the periphery of the sentence, such as French. Some languages, however, use more than one of these types to encode complex events. For example, Japanese – despite its typical classification as Verb-framed – allows for alternative lexicalizations: coordination and compounding (Croft et al., 2010); Manner encoding in various ways (e.g., use of semi-onomatopoeic/mimetic Manner adverbs, colloquial compound Manner verbs) and Path and Deixis encodings in compound verbs (Morita, 2011; Matsumoto et al., 2017), thus raising questions about its verb-framed character.

The aim of this paper was to compare the Japanese system to another verb-framed language (French) and to a satellite-framed system (English) and thus to test the validity of previous classifications. A parallel English-French-Japanese corpus using an American novel (Gilbert, 2006) and its French and Japanese translations was built and coded following Soroli and Verkerk (2017) coding system. The coding was based on two axis: one focused on the syntactic architecture of the utterances - whether they were simple or complex; and the other on the semantics of the utterances - whether the preferred structures in the original vs. the translations were semantically dense (how many motion components were expressed) and what was their semantic focus (e.g., Manner-, Path- or Deixis-focused). In order to adopt a theory-neutral perspective the data were coded twice (method inspired by Soroli & Verkerk, 2017): (a) *P-coding*: included Deixis (movement towards or away from the speaker) as a subcomponent of Path – according to Talmy's description; (b) *D-coding*: considered Deixis as a component on its own – according to Morita's and Matsumoto et al.'s descriptions.

The results show that Japanese shows great variability in its encoding strategies when Deixis is considered independently (D-coding). Despite similarities in the domain of syntactic architecture (all three languages mainly favour simple clauses) and some common patterns in the semantic analysis (French and Japanese show similar profiles in the P-coding), the Japanese text contains: (a) less Path-only utterances than French (very few utterances leave Manner unmentioned); and (b) because of its compound constructions, Manner adverbs and participles as well as simultaneous encodings of Manner, Path, and Deixis are more frequent than in the other two languages.

To conclude, the findings: (a) suggest important within-type variations across V-framed languages (French vs. Japanese); (b) confirm the distinguishing character of Japanese; and (c) point to the need for further investigations in order to fully describe the typological characteristics and symmetrical strategies of this language.

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