

The roles of language dominance and language mode in bilingual motion event encoding

Ladina Stocker & Raphael Berthele
University of Fribourg

ladina.stocker@unifr.ch, raphael.berthele@unifr.ch

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Patterns of cross-linguistic influence can be traced in bilingual speakers' speech. If a speaker is bilingual in two typologically different languages, his or her lexicalization patterns can show convergence of two distinct systems for different linguistic aspects. Drawing on previous studies, the extent of cross-linguistic influence can depend on factors such as dominance configurations between the languages and the state of language activation (i.e. the language mode). Cross-linguistic differences between French and (Swiss-)German have been documented extensively in the domain of motion. These differences go beyond the lexical and grammatical levels and concern semantic-structural aspects of language. A striking semantic-structural difference between the languages can be found in manner and path of motion, i.e. the way a figure moves and the path he or she covers. In French, a Verb-framed language, the path of a motion event tends to be expressed in the verb, the manner of motion is typically expressed in adverbial elements. In (Swiss-)German, a Satellite-framed language, the description of motion events usually shows the mapping of the manner component on the verb and the mapping of the path component on verb-external elements. Patterns of semantic convergence manifest in, for instance, an increasing number of manner verbs in French constructions or an increasing use of path verbs in German.

This paper sets out to combine a set of interrelated questions on the role of dominance constellation between a person's languages, the role of language mode and how these factors can have an effect on cross-linguistic influence in motion event descriptions. In this way, the study aims to connect fundamental questions of bilingual production with questions on semantic convergence and variation within motion event description.

To this end, oral descriptions of motion events from 154 bilingual speakers have been elicited by means of video clips showing self-propelled motion events. The speakers show varying degrees of language dominance, which is assessed via an online questionnaire. They were asked to describe 60 animated video clips, 30 critical items (translational motion events) and 30 filler items (caused motion events) in four conditions: a monolingual mode in German, a monolingual mode in French, a bilingual mode once with critical items in French and filler items in German and a bilingual mode with critical items in German and filler items in French. The results indicate that — in line with previous studies — dominance configurations show an effect on certain variables, but do not influence both languages to the same degree. The manipulation of language mode, however, does not lead to the predicted patterns. In sum, the findings partially support the impact of dominance, but in particular with respect to language mode, they do not support our hypotheses. These partially inconclusive findings both enrich and complicate the understanding of crucial factors in bilingual production and certainly leave room for future research.