Motion Events in L2 Chinese: verbal and non-verbal behaviour across languages

Yu-Hui Liao
University of Edinburgh
yliao@ed.ac.uk

Keywords: motion event, second language acquisition, cross-linguistic differences, typology, Mandarin Chinese

According to Talmy's (2000) binary typology of motion events, the world's languages are classified into satellite-framed and verb-framed languages. Talmy argues that Chinese falls into the satellite-framed category in that Chinese uses post-verbal particles to encode the path, similar to English. Talmy's typological classification of motion verbs presents a problem in Chinese since it is both S- and V-framed depending whether V1 or V2 is taken as the main verb (Tai, 2003). Slobin (2004) proposes that serial-verb languages such as Chinese are equipollently-framed, which means that aspects of motion event (manner, path, deixis) have equal morphosyntactic status. Since then, a great number of studies have been conducted to examine the motion descriptions by native speakers as well as L2 learners.

There is still room for discussion, especially on the saliency of manner, types of path, and tendencies in deixis. The present study aims to investigate the expressions of motion event by adult English and French learners of Chinese. We look at the cross-linguistic influence in a equipollently-framed L2 Chinese from a satellite-framed L1 English and verb-framed L1 French. The study investigates whether the effect of language typology can go beyond motion event description, and influence motion conceptualization.

The participants were a group of Chinese learners of English (N=45) and a group of Chinese learners whose native language is French (N=45) at three proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced). Both proficiency group is composed of 15 participants. So that baseline data can be gathered, fifteen monolingual native speakers of Chinese were recruited.

The experiment asked subjects to verbally describe various motion scenes, which differ in manner, path and deixis. The task was coupled with eye-tracking paradigm in order to determine how participants prioritized the visual information during the perception of unfolding motion events. A set of 18 animated cartoon stimuli involving six types of manner that either involved the use of an instrument (bicycle, scooter, skates) or involved no such instrument (run, jump, crawl), two types of path, (boundary-crossing out of, into and across; without boundary-crossing up and down), and the deictic directions (toward the speaker, away from the speaker) were administered. Results show that descriptions of motion events had more manner expression in English group and variation in both groups. In addition, the eye movement data showed difference in speakers' attention allocation relevant to manner and path regions.

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