

Conceptualization of motion event by Chinese-English Bilinguals: A study of difference between Cantonese and Mandarin

Thomas Siu Ho Yau
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
shyau@link.cuhk.edu.hk

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In the description of motion events, the proposal by Talmy (1985) classifies languages into two main categories with regard to how the path information is encoded. In verb-framed languages (e.g. Spanish and French), path is encoded by the main verb in a sentence while the manner of motion is described by adverbials or gerunds. In contrast, in satellite-framed languages (e.g. English and German), path is specified in particles of a sentence while manner is encoded in the main verb. In the discussion of motion events in Chinese, scholars have expressed a divided view towards the language's typological status as some consider Chinese as a satellite-framed language (e.g. Talmy, 2000) while others proposed that Chinese should be classified under the third category of language, namely the equipollently-framed language, because both path and manner are expressed with an equal grammatical status (e.g. Chen & Guo, 2009), as also found in languages such as Thai (Zlatev & Yangklang, 2004). However, the discussion on the typology of Chinese often only focuses on Mandarin, while relatively less studies have investigated other varieties such as Cantonese. The work by Yiu (2013) is one of the few examples featuring a comprehensive investigation of Cantonese and Mandarin in the expression of motion events. Despite the close resemblance of these two dialects, one significant difference is that the use of directional verbs to encode path in caused (or called agentive) motion events could only be found in Cantonese but not Mandarin. The examples below are extracted from Yiu (2013:549).

1. 他進*了信入信封裡。(Mandarin)

Tā jìn le xìn zài xìnfēng lǐ.
He enter (aspect marker) letter at envelope inside
'He put the letter into the envelope.'

2. 佢入咗封信入信封。(Cantonese)

Keoi5 jap6 zo2 fung1 seon3 hai2 seon3 fung1.
s/he enter (aspect marker) (classifier) letter at envelope
'S/he put the letter into the envelope.'

As demonstrated above, agentive use of the path verb “進” is not allowed in Mandarin, while it is possible with the agentive use of path verb “入” in Cantonese. On the other hand, following the thinking for speaking hypothesis by Slobin (2003), the lexicalization patterns of motion characterized by a language affects the non-linguistic representation in mind. Therefore, one may wonder if this difference between Cantonese and Mandarin would influence speakers' of both varieties in their conceptualization of motion event in a common L2, such as English. In view of this, this paper presents a preliminary study to investigate this intricate properties through narrative data of the classical frog study by the recruited Cantonese and Mandarin learners of English in both their first language and second language. It is expected that this study could provide further evidence to better understand the effects of intra-language difference in the conceptualization of motion events, which is essential in the area of study of second language acquisition.

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