

How to speak “geocentric” in an “egocentric” language: A multimodal study among Ngigua-Spanish bilinguals and Spanish monolinguals in a rural community of Mexico

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It has recently been shown that individuals residing in rural, indigenous communities rely on geocentric conceptualizations of space, e.g., north/south/east/west, even after they have shifted to a language that is known to favour egocentric conceptualizations, e.g., right/left (Meakins, Jones & Algy 2016; Adamou & Shen 2017). In this paper we explore how this combination works in practice by conducting a study in a previously non-investigated indigenous community of Mexico, the Ngiguas. The originality of our study is twofold: First, we investigate linguistic conceptualizations among the last Ngigua-Spanish bilingual speakers when they speak their native language, Ngigua, and the colonial, state language, Spanish, to see whether they have different linguistic conceptualizations of space or a single one. Second, we compare the linguistic conceptualizations of the bilinguals, as expressed in speech and co-speech gesture, to those of the monolingual Spanish speakers from the community.

To study speech and co-speech gesture we used a verbal localization task for community-scale relations. We filmed the responses of 17 early bilinguals in Ngigua (Otomanguean, ISO-639 code: coz) and in Spanish as well as of a control group of 17 Spanish monolinguals from the same rural community. We measured dominance among the bilinguals using a verbal fluency task and comprehension through an online picture-matching task. Statistical analysis of speech and co-speech gestures reveals that bilinguals use the geocentric linguistic conceptualizations in both languages, but restrict the egocentric ones to the new, dominant language, Spanish. Against our predictions, Spanish monolinguals also use high rates of geocentric gestures that they frequently combine with cardinal terms.

In sum, the Ngigua data confirm that geocentric conceptualizations can be transmitted to monolingual generations, including in a language where egocentric means prevail in other settings, provided there are no major disruptions in the community's habitat and way of life. This result is in accordance with the Sociotopographic Model, which stresses the importance of environment and people's interactions with it in their everyday lives (Palmer et al. 2016). Our study also shows that this process of transmission relies on conceptual convergence between the two languages that takes place at the level of the bilingual generation of speakers.

Regarding the second question of the Workshop, we will discuss ways in which our research can be relevant to revitalization efforts, such as those undertaken by the Regional Committee for the language Ngiba/Ngigua. As the collaboration is ongoing, we will draw primarily on our past experience within an ELDP language documentation programme on a closely related language, Ixcatec, where community initiatives are engaged in indigenous language teaching. In particular, we will report on a workshop conducted by E. Adamou in the local primary school with pupils and teachers. The goal of the workshop was, on the one hand, to raise confidence in the ability of the pupils to relate to the endangered indigenous language through their access to a variety of conceptualizations of space and, on the other hand, to inform teachers of the diversity of spatial conceptualizations available to their pupils. Indeed, both the Ixcatec and the Ngigua studies show that the more educated speakers rely on Spanish cardinal terms to strengthen the existing geocentric representations, therefore consolidating locally-relevant conceptualizations of space rather than abandoning them altogether for the benefit of the egocentric, literacy-based representations.

References

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