Static spatial descriptions in five Germanic languages ☆

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Raphael Berthele [a],[*], Matthew Whelpton [b], Åshild Næss [c], Pieter Duijff [d]

[a] University of Fribourg, Rue de Rome 1, CH-1700 Fribourg, Switzerland
[b] University of Iceland, Sæmundargötu 2, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland
[c] School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia
[d] Fryske Akademy, PO Box 54, 8900 AB Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents qualitative and quantitative analyses of expressions describing static topological relations in Frisian, Icelandic, and Norwegian (Bokmål), Swiss German, and Standard German. According to the literature, speakers of Germanic languages typically express more than just the bare minimum of spatial relational information when describing spatial scenes. As an example, they can add postural or other manner information as an unmarked choice in their spatial descriptions (the cup *stands* on the table vs. the cup *is* on the table). The main focus lies on a detailed description of the modalities and proportions of this additional expression of information on the spatial scene in the five languages. Distributed expression of spatial relational semantics, posture verb usage and resultative constructions are analyzed. Descriptive and inferential methods are used to show the similarities and differences across the five languages, on the level of group tendencies (means), of individual speakers, and of individual stimulus items. The analyses show considerable differences across the languages. Speakers of Standard German and Frisian are most prone to integrate additional manner information into the descriptions, whereas speakers of Icelandic, Norwegian or Swiss German only rarely integrate this kind of information into their spatial descriptions.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the linguistic encoding of static topological relations in a sample of Germanic languages: Icelandic, Frisian, Standard High German, Bernese Swiss German, and Norwegian. It examines the degree to which speakers of these languages integrate rather specific information on the spatial configuration into their verbal descriptions

(e.g. the posture of the figure), and the degree to which spatial relational information is distributed across different elements of the clause.[1] As Svorou (1994) argues, verbal descriptions of spatial configurations differ with respect to the degrees of specificity and explicitness of information. As our analyses show, considerable variation in the degree of specificity can be observed even within groups of speakers of closely related languages. In terms of Talmy's classical typology of spatial expressions, all the languages in our sample are satellite-framed languages and their repertoire of lexical and morphological material for the expression of spatial relations is largely drawn from the same historical source; by keeping these parameters constant and conducting a detailed analysis of a small set of closely related languages, we are able to discover more fine-grained patterns of variation which may contribute to a refinement of the analytical models used in research on spatial language.

Both domains of variation explored in this paper point to a problematic aspect of the Talmyan contrastive analysis of spatial language: Firstly, the availability of a slot, e.g. the verb slot in satellite-framed languages, for the expression of co-event information does not automatically entail that it is necessarily used for this purpose by the speakers (see also Wälchli, 2001, 2009 for empirical evidence against a strong correlation of the manner and path domains). Secondly, spatial relational meaning can be distributed across the clause and a narrow focus on one-to-one mappings does not reflect the patterns found in actual usage. Such findings emphasize the importance of taking into account potential variability in usage-patterns and they call for data-driven inter- and intra-language comparisons.

The goal of our analysis is to shed light on the usage patterns of co-event verbs and distributed spatial semantics in five Germanic languages. The analyses are a response to the growing interest that both typologists and variationists (i.e. quantitatively oriented sociolinguists and dialectologists) have developed in each other's fields (Kortmann, 2004; Trudgill, 2011; Wälchli, 2009). They contribute to a better understanding of macro-level typologies, such as the framework suggested by Talmy (see Section 2 below), and how such typologies which make quite general statements about languages ('German') and language families ('Romance') can be empirically tested and refined. To do this, we will firstly investigate the degree of multiple or complex expression of spatial relational semantics (Section 4.1), and we will also discuss the question of which stimuli seem to trigger relatively more frequent usages of complex spatial expressions in our data. Secondly, we will investigate the use of verbs and constructions involving verbs that contribute to higher degrees of specificity (Svorou, 1994) of the description: The use of posture verbs (Section 4.2), then the use of resultative constructions[2] (Section 4.3) and of other co-event verbs in general (Section 4.4). Following Talmy, for whom the term covers different semantic domains such as Manner, Cause, Precursion, Enablement, Concomitance, Subsequence, etc., and in line with many other researchers in the field, we chose to subsume these three phenomena under the term co-event (see e.g. Lemmens and Perez, 2010; Kopecka and Narasimhan, 2012). For each of these categories, we will give an overview of the relative frequency of the patterns as well as a detailed discussion of the stimuli that are prone to trigger the patterns under investigation. In a final Section 5, we will discuss the findings and discuss implications for further investigations.

2. Theoretical background

Cross-linguistic diversity in spatial language has been investigated intensively in recent decades. The influential framework proposed by Talmy (1985, 2000) gave rise to an impressive number of studies focusing primarily on the expression of motion in space (Berman and Slobin, 1994; Slobin, 2004, 2006; Strömqvist and Verhoeven, 2004). The main interest of researchers has been to investigate patterns of information packaging in the two semantic domains of manner of motion and path of motion. The central aspect of the framework associated with Talmy is the focus on the locus of the expression of what Talmy calls the core schema, i.e. the spatial relational semantics. Both motion in space and static spatial relations involve a relationship – the association function – between a figure and a ground. This association function expresses the place or trajectory of the figure with respect to the ground. The association function is instantiated either by path semantics in descriptions of motion or by place semantics in static descriptions. For our present purposes, the contrast between the two mapping patterns described by Talmy (2000) is relevant: Satellite-framed languages map the spatial association function onto a particle ('satellite', e.g. verb prefixes), whereas verb-framed languages map the association function onto the verb. Typically, verb-framed languages such as French or Spanish express the path of motion in common verbs (*sortir*, 'to exit', *entrer*, 'to enter'), whereas in satellite-framed languages the verb is commonly not the main locus of path expression. According to Talmy and many other scholars, as the verb in satellite-framed languages is available for the expression of other semantic content, it 'attracts' complementary information, the so-called 'co-event', often in the form of manner of motion, or manner of position in the static domain. Thus Talmy argues that in addition to the main spatial event relating figure and ground via the association function, a second event can be integrated into the spatial language clause.

In motion events, on the other hand, this co-event is typically instantiated by semantic content referring to the cause or the manner of motion, in static spatial relations the co-event refers to manner or cause of position. For our present purposes it is

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[1] The main goal of the stimuli used lies on the cross-linguistic exploration of detailed descriptions of topological relations, i.e. on geometrical aspects of the relation between a figure and ground object(s). Therefore, no systematic investigation of spatial frames of reference or perspective is possible by means of this elicitation tool. Most often, the data collected using this (or a similar) set of stimuli are analyzed with respect to different ways of carving up semantic space, e.g. in the domain of adpositions (Bowerman, 1996; Becker, 1994; Vandeloise, 1986).

[2] We use "resultative" to refer to passive participle forms of verbs used to refer to the final state of the theme of the verb (e.g. "x is hung from the hook") and not complex predicate forms such as "to hammer x flat".