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The role of event structure in language production: Evidence from structural priming in Chinese motion event descriptions

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Abstract

The present study investigates the role of abstract event structure in Chinese speakers' language production. Two experiments adopted a structural priming paradigm. Three types of prime sentences which varied in their conceptual overlap with target events and violated the normal positions (Experiment 1) or order (Experiment 2) of conceptual contents of motion events were designed to test whether they are potent enough to induce Chinese speakers to change their preference in encoding motion events. Results showed that conceptual overlap influenced Chinese speakers' choices of conceptual information (manner and/or path mention), illustrating that abstract event structure is activated at the stage of Message Planning, consistent with the findings obtained from English speakers. The results from both language groups indicate that the activation of event structure during preverbal Message Planning is a cross-linguistic phenomenon. In addition, the present study also finds that Chinese speakers' mapping of event structure to linguistic form has its own characteristics, illustrating that the process of mapping conceptual structure to linguistic form is language-specific. We argue that this language-specific encoding of motion events provides evidence that Chinese is an "equipollently-framed language".

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1. Introduction

The processes of language production mainly consist of three stages: Message Planning, Linguistic Formulation and Articulation. During the stage of Message Planning, also called "the conceptualizer", speakers encode the conceptual contents they prefer to express in their utterances; during the stage of Linguistic Formulation, also called "the formulator", speakers map their conceptual information into syntactic structures; during the stage of Articulation, speakers generate a sequence of speech (Bock and Levelt, 1994; Levelt, 1989; Levelt et al., 1999).

Many factors may affect the processes of language production. For example, the Message Planning and Linguistic Formulation stages may be affected by the speaker's competing goals, processing efficiency and available cognitive resources (Grice, 1975; Qian and Jaeger, 2011; Smith, 2000); the Linguistic Formulation stage alone may be guided by

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the speaker's pragmatic intentions to emphasize some important information and ignore some other less important information (Talmy, 2000). In addition, the processes of language production are also constrained by some linguistic factors, such as the choice of a particular verb to form the argument structure of an utterance and semantic constraints which determine the number of arguments in a sentence (Levelt, 1992; Levin, 1993; Merlo and Stevenson, 2001; Pinker, 1989; Scott and Fisher, 2009).

Language bias is another factor that may have great impact on the processes of language production. Slobin (1996) first came up with the term “thinking for speaking”, meaning that the coding of conceptual information varies from one language to another and thus influences speakers’ on-line thinking for speaking pattern in different ways due to the different languages. To be more specific, language-specific grammatical encoding biases may affect the way speakers choose the conceptual components they will communicate, the perspective from which they want to construct the conceptual components and how they organize these conceptual components during the stage of Message Planning (Bock, 1995; Levelt, 1989).

Little is known about the role of abstract conceptual structure in the Message Planning stage and its downstream effects on the processes of linguistic formulation. However, a recent study (Bunger et al., 2013) found that the abstract conceptual structure characterizing an event was really activated while English speakers planned their messages and the activated structure affected the downstream selection of linguistic form during the Linguistic Formulation stage. But whether such top-down processes of language production are language-specific or not remains unclear. Previous studies (e.g., Slobin, 2004; Chen, 2005, 2007; Chen and Guo, 2009) showed that the world's languages can be classified in terms of how they frame motion events and Chinese and English belong to different classes. Therefore, the present study, through investigating Chinese speakers’ descriptions of motion events, aims to explore the role of event structure in language production.

2. The structure and typology of motion events

At the stage of message planning, human beings construct a conceptual representation of abstract causal, temporal and spatial information about real world events. The conceptual structure of an event includes information about agents that participate in the event, properties of those agents, and the specific relations among them (e.g., Jackendoff, 1990; Talmy, 1985a, 2000). In accordance with the types of participants involved and the relations between them, events can be classified as either causative, transfer, or motion events. The present study focuses on motion events because these are concrete, easily identifiable and well-studied in linguistic and psycholinguistic literature (Papafragou et al., 2002, 2008; Slobin, 1996, 2003; Talmy, 1985b, 2000); Moreover, there exist considerable cross-linguistic variations in how to express motion events (Slobin, 2003; Talmy, 2000), meaning that motion events provide an opportunity to observe whether the activation of abstract conceptual information in language production is language-specific or not.

According to Talmy (1985b:60–61), a motion event can be defined as an event in which one object (the Figure) moves in a certain way and experiences a location change with respect to some other object (the Ground). In addition to the Figure and Ground, Talmy (2000) holds that a motion event includes two other internal components: Motion and Path. For example:

- 1 The man walked into a shop.
[Figure] [Motion + Manner] [Path] [Ground]

In the motion event described in (1), “The man” is the Figure, the verb “walked” the Manner, the proposition “into” the Path, and the noun phrase “a shop” the Ground.

Talmy (1985b, 1991, 2000) identifies two different types of languages in the world with respect to how motion events are framed: verb-framed languages (hence V-languages) and satellite-framed languages (hence S-languages). These types of languages differ specifically in terms of how they encode path information. In V-languages (e.g., Spanish), path information is usually conveyed by the main verb, while in S-languages (e.g., English) this information is often encoded in a satellite position, like in a post-verbal prepositional phrase (e.g., out, in, across) or it will not be mentioned at all.

English is a typical S-language in that it shares the main characteristics of this type of language. Example 2 (extracted from Bunger et al., 2013:300) illustrates the typical ways of describing a bounded motion event in English:

- 2 a. The alien drove. (Manner only)
b. The alien drove into the cave. (Manner + Path)
c. The alien entered the cave. (Path only)
d. The alien entered the cave, driving. (Path + Manner)
e. The driving alien entered the cave. (Manner + Path)

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