The syntactic packaging of caused motion components in a second language: English learners of Chinese

Yinglin Ji [a,*], Jill Hohenstein [b]

[a] Shenzhen University, PR China
[b] King's College London, UK

Abstract

Previous studies of L2 acquisition of motion expressions have tended to focus solely on Indo-European languages and on spontaneous motion. This study expands the sphere of research by investigating how Chinese L2 learners, at different proficiency levels, acquire arguably more advanced linguistic skills in the syntactic packaging of caused motion information. Our results show firstly that learners are not trapped in their source pattern when packaging a set of particularly dense semantic information (Cause, Path and varied types of Manner), even, if they have not yet entirely acquired the target system. They have arrived at an inter-language, showing considerable resemblance to the target system rather than traces of the L1 influence. Further, no developmental tendency was observed at the initial and intermediate stages of acquisition; changes occurred only when learners progressed to an advanced level, suggesting that, unlike lexicalisation of motion components, syntactic strategies of packaging information are more complex and need to be adapted to over a longer period of time.

1. Introduction

Although humans share a universal biological heritage in spatial perception and understanding, representation of spatial experience differs significantly across languages. Many studies have revealed that specific properties of a given language constrain the spatial conceptualisation available in linguistic encoding of motion events (see, for instance, Allen et al., 2007; Hohenstein et al., 2004; Berman and Slobin, 1994; Bowerman, 1999; Bowerman and Choi, 2001, 2003; Hickmann, 2006; Levinson, 2003; Naigles and Terrazas, 1998; Slobin, 1996, 2004; Mandy et al., 2010). Recent findings in the domain of space, language and cognition raise important questions, among other things, for second language (L2) acquisition: to what extent can L2 learners shake off their L1 linguistic pattern in order to acquire a new language system? And to what extent do L2 learners have to alter their way of mentally representing motion information for its expression in a non-native language? The present study addresses these questions by focusing on how English learners of Chinese at three proficiency levels (low, intermediate and advanced) acquire the expression of caused motion events, paying particular attention to syntactic representation.

---

* Corresponding author at: Research Centre for Language and Cognition, Shenzhen University, No. 3688, Nanhai Avenue, Nanshan District, Shenzhen City 518060, Guangdong Province, PR China. Tel.: +86 0755 26749807.
  E-mail address: yinglin.ji@szu.edu.cn (Y. Ji).

According to Talmy (1985), a spontaneous (or voluntary) motion event contains a set of universal semantic elements: Motion itself, Figure (moving entity), Ground (reference frame in relation to Figure's motion), Path (e.g. *up*, *across*, *towards*, *along*), and optional Manner (e.g. *swimming*, *jogging*, *limping*). In caused motion events one more element is included, that is, Cause of motion coupled with Manner of Cause (e.g. *pushing*, *pulling*, *throwing*, *kicking*). As it is grammatically impossible to represent all information as equally important, speakers must make choices about how to encode complex semantic caused motion components. Firstly, they may choose to encode a motion event within the boundary of a single clause, selecting only certain types of components for expression whilst omitting others. Secondly, they may choose to manipulate linguistic devices at their command to encode all information albeit representing with unequivalent saliency across clauses. For example, speakers may foreground certain types of information in the marked grammatical category of verbs in the main clause whilst syntactically backgrounding others in the periphery of an utterance via subordination, dependency, gerunds and/or adverbials. Seen in this way, speakers' syntactic organisation of particularly dense information within or beyond the boundary of clause presents an interesting topic, which constitutes the focus of investigation in the present paper.

Talmy (1985, 2000) classified world languages into two broad categories: Satellite-framed (S-language hereafter) and Verb-framed (V-language hereafter), depending on how the core element of motion, Path, is encoded via grammatical means. In the former, Path is typically encoded outside the verb in 'satellites', such as particles, whilst Manner and/or Cause are expressed in main verbs (e.g. English, German, Example 1). In contrast, Path is incorporated into the main verb in V-languages; Manner and/or Cause, if expressed, are encoded independently through use of adverbials or gerundive clauses (e.g. French and most Romance languages, Example 2).

(1) *Hoppy **rolled** the ball **across** the street*. [S-framed]
(2) *Hoppy **traverse** la rue **en faisant rouler** le ballon*. [V-framed]
     'Hoppy crossed the street rolling the ball.'

Not all languages fit neatly into this dichotomy. Some have argued (e.g., Slobin, 2004) that there is at least one more type in which multiple motion components can be compactly encoded via co-verbs or verb compounds. For instance, in Chinese several aspects of motion are normally packaged into a Resultative Verb Compound (RVC). The first constituent in an RVC typically encodes Manner and/or Cause, the second constituent expresses Path of motion and the third one indicates the deixis of motion (either *lai* 'come' or *qu* 'go', see Example 3).

(3) 球   滚过去   了。
     *qiu*2 ***gun*3-*guo*4-*qu*4** *le*
     ball   roll cross go ASP[1]
     'The ball rolled across away from the speaker/listener.'

Perhaps controversially, Slobin (2004) argued that the Path constituent in an RVC is a full verb that can stand independently as a predicate (Example 4). In contrast, Talmy (2000) held that Chinese is an S-language because the second constituent in an RVC is a closed class set, and even though still existing as main verbs, these verbs are restricted in use.

(4) 球   过   了   马路。
     qiu2 ***guo*4** *le*   *ma*3*lu*4
     ball   cross ASP street
     'The ball went across the street.'

Slobin (2004) termed serial verb languages such as Chinese as 'equipollently-framed' (E-framed hereafter) in the sense that in some predicates different semantic aspects of a motion event (Path, Manner, Cause, Deixis) can be simultaneously expressed in grammatical constituents of equal status and with equal formal significance.[2] Ji et al. (2011c) further argued that 'being equipollently-framed' means that languages like Chinese are neither entirely S-framed nor V-framed. They show S- and V-framing properties depending on such factors as the nature of motion event involved (e.g. spontaneous versus caused).

---

[1] The following abbreviations are used in this paper: ASP, aspectual marker; ASSOC, associative *de*, genitive/adjectival/adverbial marker; AUX, auxiliary verb; CL, classifier; DEF, definite article; DUR, durative aspectual marker *zhe*; PAST, past tense; 1sg, first person singular.
[2] According to Slobin (2004), a verb in the equipollently-framed language can assume various forms. Apart from verb compounds (i.e. Manner verb + Path verb) in serial-verb languages such as Chinese and Thai, there are bipartite verbs (i.e. [Manner + Path] verb) in languages like Hokan, and cluster verbs such as 'Manner preverb + Path preverb + Verb' in Jaminjungan languages.