Motion events: State of the art

This poster presents some initial findings of our research into the expression of motion events in different languages. The most important contribution to the typology of motion events in Talmy (1985, 1991), who postulated the difference between satellite-framed and verb-framed languages. Satellite-framed languages typically express manner on verbs and path on a separate element (satellite), while verb-framed languages express path on verbs and manner on a separate element.

English: The bottle floated into the cave
Spanish (verb-framed): La botella entró a la cueva (flotando)
the bottle moved into the cave (floating)
MOTION + PATH MANNER
Dutch (satellite-framed): De fles dreef de grot in
the bottle floated the cave into
MOTION + MANNER PATH

This two-way typology has been influential in the thinking about motion events, but it also has some problems:
- there are more ways of encoding motion events than just these two. Most importantly, an equipollently-framed category has been proposed in which both path and manner components have equal status (Skolin, 2004; Zlatev & Yangklang, 2004);
- much language-internal variation has been discovered (Beavers et al., in press).

Research Questions

The problems with Talmy’s typology and the need for more explanations of the observed patterns lead to the following research questions:
- How has the encoding of motion events evolved in the Indo-European, Austronesian, and Bantu language family?
- Are there strategies for talking about motion universal or lineage specific?
- What drives changes in encoding strategy?

The corpus study: using novels to do linguistics

For this exciting new view upon the way language evolves to express this fundamental aspect of human experience, we will focus on
- getting more information about certain languages, most importantly those that have descended from earlier branches of the tree;
- using a quantified approach which addresses language-internal variation.

We are going address these points by constructing a parallel corpus of translations of two widely translated books: Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (original language: English) and The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho (original language: Portuguese). Taking two originals from typologically opposed languages will help us to balance out translation biases.

The parallel corpus will consist of descriptions of 100+ motion events in 50+ Indo-European languages. Other language families, Austronesian and Bantu, will be included later on.

This corpus will give us a fine-grained, quantitative overview of the different strategies that are used in each language. We will use this information to get a complete picture of motion event encoding for each language in the sample.

Prospects

After the data have been collected, we will use phylogenetic comparative methods to:
- map the data onto a comprehensive phylogenetic tree;
- test the validity of Talmy’s hypothesis;
- construct ancestral states;
- test for co-evolving features that have been proposed in the literature;
- model the driving forces behind changes;
- by comparing different language families, we will find out whether these driving forces are universal or lineage specific.

The Indo-European phylogenetic tree

The phylogenetic tree above has been made by taking the tree presented in Gray & Atkinson (2003) and mapping data on the encoding patterns of 22 languages onto that tree. It has been plotted on a scale that ranges from totally verb-framed (dark green) to totally satellite-framed (brown). The data have been gathered with the use of grammars and other published sources. Based on the displayed variety, preliminary ancestral states have been inferred. From this phylogenetic tree, we can infer the following:
- The Germanic languages are mostly satellite-framed, although English also shows some verb-framed patterns;
- The Romance languages have shifted from satellite-framed to verb-framed since the break-up of Latin, 1,500 BP;
- The Celtic and Slavic languages are mostly verb-framed, but some languages (Breton, Bulgarian) show mixed behaviour;
- Probabilistic ancestral state reconstruction will be carried out in the future.

References