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CONCEPTUALIZATION THROUGH THE LENS OF LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH INTO POLISH-ENGLISH BILINGUALISM

This paper concerns itself with the process of conceptualization, which is understood as on-line conceptual and linguistic formation of messages prior to verbalization. The issue is discussed in terms of Levelt's (1989) model of speech production and von Stutterheim's (2003) paradigm for text analysis. In particular, the paper looks into the claims advanced by von Stutterheim regarding the role of grammatical aspect in the construal of events, which may be either closed or open-ended, the perspective taken by the speaker and the resultant amount of information packaged into utterances. Even though the underlying theory constitutes a consistent framework, the incoming research data is beginning to show divergent stylistic preferences within aspectually related language types. This calls for careful examination of the existent findings, with emphasis on specific languages and/or language pairings rather than broad typological categories. The paper ends with predictions regarding event encoding patterns in Polish, as these are likely to influence L2 encoding preferences.

1. Introduction

The 20th century witnessed the emergence of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, whose main tenet is that language and thought are inextricably tied together, to the extent that categorization of experience is carried out along the lines laid down by linguistic categories. Even though the hypothesis did not receive unequivocal empirical support, it aroused interest in the issue, giving rise to more elaborate theoretical frameworks and distinctions. One of them, the thinking for speaking hypothesis (Slobin 1996) posits that speech requires special, i.e. language-dependent thinking that is carried out on – line as messages, both spoken and written, are being formulated. This requires that the speaker's mental representations are pared down into schematic syntactic frames of language, and thus become *filtered through language into verbalized events* (1996: 75). The formulation process is automatized and occurs before the selection of specific lexical items (Papafragou et al. 2006). Slobin (1996) maintains that conceptual

representations of external events can never be fully expressed by language, which selectively schematizes them according to available grammatical, semantic and/or discursual resources.¹ The remaining un verbalized information is provided by the background and inferred by the listeners (ibid. 75), who, on their part, enrich the message extracted from skeletal linguistic forms, drawing on experience-based conceptualizations of related events and pragmatic principles (Dipper et al. 2005).

A complementary perspective on *thinking for speaking* can be derived from research by von Stutterheim and colleagues (von Stutterheim and Nüse 2003; Carroll et al. 2004; Carroll and von Stutterheim 2003), who looked into the conceptual make-up of events, as demonstrated by oral descriptions of unfolding scenarios reported online. The prediction they sought to test was that grammaticised categories, such as aspect, are the driving force behind the process of selecting content for expression at the pre-verbal level. This was done in recognition that grammar is not independent of semantics but, conversely, conveys meanings, which are instrumental in conceptualizing external reality. These meanings are hence given prominence by way of grammaticalization and offer a blueprint for the structuring of utterances according to language-specific patterns of information organization (Carroll and von Stutterheim 2003).

Unlike Slobin, the von Stutterheim team did not focus on the encoding of a specific semantic field, such as directed motion, but instead, chose to adopt a much broader and inclusive notion, i.e. that of an event, which tends to be defined as a situation unfolding at a specific point in time and space (Bylund 2009). To prevent cultural and contextual factors from interfering with linguistic phenomena, they examined culturally diverse languages, such as English and Arabic, which share grammatical features like aspect. That was because grammatical aspect was believed to induce similar encoding patterns with regard to the type of information conveyed and its semantic-syntactic rendition within the utterance. Analyses involving typologically contrasting languages, e.g. English and German, the latter of which has no grammatical means for conveying ongoingness, were also conducted. Since aspect relates to the temporal dimension of events, and as such, has no directly observable referents as these can only be cognized via language, the relation between the concept and its linguistic form is all the more relevant to the debate on language-mediated cognition (Carroll et al. 2004).

2. Processes of conceptualization

Theorywise, a point of departure for von Stutterheim's team's investigations was Levelt's model for speech production (Levelt 1989). More specifically, 'the blueprint for the

¹ At this point, Slobin unwittingly admits that there may be a dissociation between linguistic and conceptual representations.

speaker' envisages three separate levels of representation, which constitute the conceptual and execution base for language production, namely, the conceptual level (the conceptualizer), and two linguistic levels: one involving the lemma and lexeme (the formulator), and the other their phonetic implementation (the articulator). As regards speech production, one of the functions of the conceptualizer is to convert nonlinguistic world knowledge into a format, which can be accessed by linguistic means at the lemma level. This format is referred to as the preverbal message (Levelt 1989) or temporary conceptual structure (Carroll and von Stutterheim 1993), and the transformation processes involved bear the name of conceptualization. Following Habel and Tappe (1999), Stutterheim and Nüse (2003) partition conceptualization into a sequence of stages, the first of which is the segmentation of conceptual content into its components such as states, properties and events, and deciding where each of them begins and ends, as well as which of them to refer to (Nüse 2003). The amount of conceptual detail called upon for verbalization determines the message's level of granularity. The second stage, i.e. selection, involves choosing specific components for verbalization, such as endpoints² of motion events. Next, structuring, being a perspective-driven process, consists in anchoring the message within a specific referential frame, e.g. the observer or other events. Finally, linearization of the preverbal message allows a smooth transition into the medium of language as it involves word ordering. Overall, all four stages are imbedded in two distinct planes of conceptualization, i.e. macro planning and micro planning, the former of which determines what to verbalize while the latter shapes the form of verbalization. In Levelt's (1989) model, both levels are included in the conceptualizer. What is more, both seem to show linguistic effects (Jarvis 2007; Stutterheim and Nüse 2003; c.f. Levelt 1989).³ In fact, these can be found as early as the segmentation stage, if not earlier, and filter into the subsequent phases. In this connection, Stutterheim and Nüse (2003) established that, with regard to segmentation, German and English subjects' accounts of video clips showing motion events (film retells) differ in terms of the amount of detail conveyed in each language. More precisely, English speakers mention more events more frequently, while German users summarize the story omitting finer episodes, which are, by contrast, verbalized in English. Likewise, at the selection level, German descriptions of events tend to contain elements signifying closure, i.e. an endpoint or result, while in English they contain a verb implying an open-ended activity, as exemplified by *Two nuns are walking down a road*, as opposed to the German *Two nuns walk along a lane toward a house* (Odlin 2005). The endpoint in the German descriptions can be real or imagined, while the English tend to adhere to what they have actually seen. The differences between the two languages are so pronounced that if, in describing an event without a visible right boundary, 90% of German speakers mentioned the endpoint, it would have been re-

² Bylund (2009) defines endpoints as locative phrases referring to the arrival at or intention to arrive at a goal, as in *to go to school* or *to walk towards a building*. Schmiedtová and Flecken (2008) refer to endpoints as right boundaries.

³ Levelt (1989) restricted linguistic influence to micro-planning.

ferred to by 50% of English speakers only (Stutterheim and Nüse 2003). In interpreting these contrasts, Stutterheim and Nüse (2003) conclude that English encodes the phases of an activity (phasal decomposition), thus highlighting its ongoingness while German adopts a holistic approach and portrays events as bounded wholes or *entities with boundaries* (ibid.: 866). This, in turn, has consequences for the structuring process, which is perspective-driven. That is, German adopts an event-based perspective, where events/entities are linked to each other in a seemingly chronological order and serve as internal anchor points for the unfolding temporal line, e.g. *and tries to dig himself out/which he doesn't succeed in doing/and is then swallowed up by the funnel* (ibid.: 867), by analogy to the formula: event X was completed before event Y started (Carroll et al. 2003). English, in turn, uses a speaker-oriented external perspective, where events are decomposed into fine-grained open-ended episodes, which are mentioned one by one without reference to temporal relations between them, e.g. *he's on his knees/and he's starting to dig/and starts digging faster and faster...* (von Stutterheim and Nüse 2003: 868). These relations have to be inferred from context or remain unspecified. This type of perspectivation emphasizes the duration of the fine-grained episodes, each of which is linked to the deictic NOW (von Stutterheim and Nüse 2003: 869).

On weighing the evidence, von Stutterheim concluded that at the heart of these contrasts was the category of grammatical aspect rather than tense, and that it was grammaticalized aspect, which had the potential to induce specific patterns of conceptualization. These predictions have been born out by the studies referred to in this article, whose findings show that languages, which in general mark the verb for aspect, regardless of its type, and encode phasal decomposition of events (Algerian Arabic, English, Russian, Spanish, Italian) do not frequently verbalize endpoints and/or results. They also adopt an observer-oriented perspective, which accentuates ongoingness. Speakers of languages that lack grammaticalized aspect, such as French, Swedish, Norwegian or German,⁴ encode endpoints, goals or results of events and take an event-based temporal perspective (Bylund 2009).

The above hypothesis was tested in a speech onset study, which drew on the assumption that speakers of German would need more time to conceptualize and then verbalize events than speakers of English, which does not need to encode endpoints. In line with these predictions, the German subjects started speaking 4.54 seconds after stimulus onset, i.e. the start of the video clip, while their English counterparts needed only 3.51 seconds to conceptualize the plot. The result was statistically significant (Carroll et al. 2004). Likewise, eye-tracking research with Dutch and English speakers shows that they concentrate on the core aspects of events, as they unfold in time, disregarding the endpoint areas (Schmiedtová and Flecken (2008; c.f. Papafragou et al. 2008). Further analysis ruled out the possibility that these effects could have been

⁴ So far, the only language that diverges from this pattern is Dutch, which despite its typological allegiance to Germanic languages, behaves like English in its rendition of ongoingness (Carroll et al. 2004).

accounted for in terms of cultural differences or task instructions, which focused on the progressive, i.e. ‘what is happening in the video’ as opposed to ‘what happens’ (von Stutterheim and Nüse 2003, c.f. Carroll et al. 2004 and Papafragou et al. 2006).

Summing up, in the light of the available evidence, it transpires that conceptualization is language-specific and originates at the level of macro planning since this is where decisions are made as to the content of messages, i.e. what to say, and specific lexical concepts are generated (Nüse 2003). Further, conceptualization is the domain of the conceptualizer since the principles of information organization the von Stutterheim team speak of do not belong in the realm of grammar or lexis, despite being language-specific, and are acquired together with the L1. It follows that the nonlinguistic preverbal message that is produced as a result is linguistically constrained, and that the conceptualizer functions as the interface between language and nonlinguistic conceptual structure, and as such, provides a window on those conceptualization processes that precede speech. Differences in conceptualization patterns are induced by the grammatical category of aspect, which Bylund (2009) further qualifies by reducing the category’s range to the codability of the progressive, i.e. the ease and frequency of expression of the concept of ongoingness, and not the mere possibility to express this concept, e.g. lexically. Finally, Carroll et al. (2004) explain that even though speakers of particular languages show preferences for one pattern of conceptualization over another, this does not imply a deterministic tendency since some individuals may opt for alternative options. Statistically, they are in the minority, however.

3. Conflicting evidence

The role of progressive aspect in inducing unbounded event frames is called into question in a study by Schmiedtová and Flecken (2008), who investigated conceptualization patterns in typologically related languages, such as Czech and Russian. Both languages encode two contrasting categories of grammatical aspect: the perfective and imperfective. Perfectivity is marked by means of a prefix, which is attached to the verb stem. As well as causing aspectual changes, the operation induces change in the word’s semantics (RUS. *Pisat* – *VY-pisat*). By contrast, the addition of a suffix, as in Czech *vypsat* ‘to write out’ – *vypis-OVA (-t)* ‘to be writing out’ affects the verb’s grammatical aspect only, by making the verb imperfective. The resultant construction is called the secondary imperfective. Despite these similarities, native speakers of both languages show markedly different preferences for the encoding of endpoints and results. These become most apparent in responses to visual stimuli where the endpoint cannot be seen and needs to be inferred. It turns out that in such scenarios Czech native speakers refer to endpoints three times as often as Russian speakers. Czechs also use the perfective form in contrast to Russian speakers, who show a clear preference for the secondary imperfective. In Russian, the perfective is solely reserved for scenes showing endpoints. Schmiedtová and Flecken (2008) do not explain how the preference for perfective or imperfective aspect influences perspectivation patterns, or indeed, the granularity of encoding in both languages.

Putting together the findings of the studies presented thus far, it is now possible to draw tentative conclusions about the role of grammatical aspect in the linguistic and conceptual construal of events. As the Schmiedtová and Flecken (2008) study shows, the tendency to encode endpoints cannot be solely ascribed to languages that lack grammatical aspect altogether since the usage of endpoints can also be linked to a preference for the perfective, as is the case with Czech. The progressive and imperfective, by contrast, do not require closure since conceptually they do not encompass endpoints. The picture becomes somewhat fuzzy when one considers the fact that some languages, like English, have two aspect categories, the progressive and perfect, of which only the former seems to have considerable cognitive weight. Von Stutterheim and Nüse (2003) explain that the key to this conundrum lies in the acquisition order of L1 morphemes, where the *-ing* ending is the first to be acquired. Since the meaning it conveys is linked to the deictic here and now, the English child is sensitized to the concept of ongoingness early in the process. The attention of a German child is directed to the past participle, which may influence the AKTIONSSART of the verb, giving it a resultative reading. This automatically implies an endpoint, and results in the choice of a holistic event-related perspective for event construal.

Ironically, research shows that attempts to generalize the discovered patterns of event construal to all forms of linguistic output need to be put and kept in perspective, as well, as two studies by Nüse (2003) narrow the scope of conceptualization to online processing of unfolding event sequences. The first study concerned itself with event segmentation in the non-verbal domain. Using the same films as the verbal retells reported on above, Nüse (2003) asked that subjects, who were native speakers of English and German respectively, to press a button when they thought a particular event was over. The results did not reveal any statistically significant differences between speakers of German and English. Interestingly, the number of events identified by the subjects from both language groups was markedly lower than in the verbal task, which shows that speaking requires that content is packaged according to language-specific principles, which do not apply to nonverbal cognition. Simply put, conceptualization does not entail Whorfian effects. The second study by Nüse (2003) makes it possible to qualify the scope of conceptualization even further. Namely, it shows that speakers of English and German when asked questions about observed events, i.e. *what did the protagonist do before he did X?*, do not produce different replies or indeed differ in the amount of detail they mention. Nüse (2003) interprets these findings as being indicative of the cognitive significance of the progressive aspect, which prompts fine-grained descriptions of ongoing activities, while not affecting reports of activities requiring a different temporal viewpoint. It does not seem to affect long-term storage, either.

Taken together, these findings, however incomplete and in need of elaboration, call for a data-based approach to the analysis of language-induced conceptualization patterns. Given the inconsistency of the observed trends, the conclusion that presents itself is that the +/- grammatical aspect feature is a formative factor in event conceptualization. Still, the exact framing of events is dependent on language-specific aspectual configurations, and as such may be determined by the acquisition order for a particular language.

4. Conceptualization in bilinguals and second/foreign language learners

As hinted at above, the von Stutterheim paradigm has been applied to the study of bilingualism in natural and advanced foreign language learning contexts (Carroll and von Stutterheim 2003), in an attempt to obtain insights into how the coupling of typologically contrasting languages impinges on the ensuing conceptualization patterns. In this connection, Bylund (2009) examined Spanish and Swedish, which differ in terms of aspect, as well as endpoint and Path encoding (Slobin 2005). Of the two languages, Swedish lacks grammatical aspect altogether while Spanish distinguishes between the progressive, i.e. *Rocinante esta trotando/Rocinante is trotting* and non-progressive, as in *Rocinante trota/Rocinante trots* (Bylund 2009: 308). Consequently and true to previous research, Swedish speakers verbalize endpoints more often than their Spanish counterparts. Likewise, Swedes segment events into bounded entities while Spaniards produce fine-grained event descriptions, which are unbounded. The inclusion in the study of Spanish/Swedish bilinguals, who were Swedish residents and who acquired their L2 before age 9 and were thus Swedish dominant, sheds light on how conceptualization patterns in a possibly attriting system are transformed in accordance with those of the dominant language. More specifically, bilinguals with an early age of L2 Swedish acquisition, who are at greatest risk from attrition, are the most likely to encode endpoints for goal-oriented motion events in L1 Spanish, giving at times way to Path expressions, which are ungrammatical in the language (c.f. *saltando para abajo a una colchoneta/jumping down(wards) onto a mattress*, Bylund 2009: 314). They also show a preference for the simple present tense, in accordance with Swedish verbalization patterns.

To digress for a moment, it seems worth pointing out that perhaps the most promising feature of the study is the integration of aspectual/temporal and directed motion data, which shed light on conceptualization in its entirety while allowing researchers to draw conclusions about the cognitive weight of specific encoding options and their likely impact on both short and long-term memory. In future research an avenue worth exploring is whether aspect has any bearing on the encoding of directed motion in terms of Manner and Path (Slobin 2004). Accordingly, it would be especially interesting to reassess the Slobin and Papafragou research referred to earlier in terms of aspectual contrasts, and to evaluate the cognitive prominence of categories, such as grammatical aspect and semantic Path and/or Manner. In the light of the available evidence, it seems plausible that, at least in the case of directed motion, perfective aspect or its lack will prioritize Path over Manner, making the former more cognitively salient. This in turn could have an impact not only on endpoint encoding but also on long-term conceptual representations.

The conceptual prominence of the dominant native language is also brought to the foreground in research into advanced second language learner varieties. As shown by Carroll and von Stutterheim (2003), native speakers of German tend to choose an event-based perspective in accordance to L1 perspectivation patterns when describing events in L2 English. This often results in an inconsistent structuring of information, as the

event-based perspective is intermingled with an external time frame due to the choice of inappropriate temporal categories. While the effects of taking the wrong perspective can only be observed at the local micro planning level, the overall impression they create is that of unnatural, if not, foreign style. Likewise, Schmieđtová and Flecken (2008) report that Czech learners of L2 German adhere to the L1 concept of perfectivity in their L2, and consequently, encode endpoints more often than the average native German speaker, despite the fact that Germans tend to mention endpoints quite often. In the light of these findings, it becomes apparent that the challenge foreign language learners are faced with involves not only learning new structures and meanings but also learning to recognize how these influence patterns of discourse structure at both macro planning and micro planning levels. Since most of these processes remain under a strong L1 influence, they are open to cross-linguistic transfer even at the most advanced levels of L2 proficiency, making the prospect of achieving native-like competence in the L2 fairly remote.

5. Practical implications

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the question of how native speakers of Polish construe events, and whether their aspectual preferences trigger off phasal decomposition and endpoint encoding to the extent exhibited by von Stutterheim's subjects. Since Polish has one aspectual opposition: the perfective and imperfective, it is plausible to assume that it follows the conceptualization patterns that are inherent in the /+ aspect/ category, by analogy to Algerian Arabic, which also has the perfective-imperfective opposition and does not encode ongoingness in the verb. According to von Stutterheim and Nüse (2003), the latter is not a necessary condition because the driving force behind event construal patterns in general are specific viewing perspectives, which are morphologically encoded in the verb. Their research does not envisage the possibility that typologically related languages with identical aspectual configurations may show divergent encoding preferences. Further, given that Polish uses the imperfective to express ongoingness (Nagórko 1998), it should show a preference for scarce endpoint encoding by analogy to Russian (Schmieđtová and Flecken 2008), which von Stutterheim and Nüse (2003) put in the same category as /+aspect/ languages. This makes the Czech data difficult to account for in terms of the theory. Moreover, evidence from research into Polish verbs of directed motion, which prioritize Path (Laskowski 1999; Krucka 2006), as well as highlighting the right boundary, indicates that the possibility of frequent endpoint encoding in Polish should not be dismissed out of hand. A contributing factor is the relative ease and rate with which Polish children acquire the perfective. Studies of L1 Polish acquisition show the age of 3 to be the final acquisition point for the perfective while the imperfective causes interpretation problems up to the age of 5 (van Hout 2005). To resolve these ambiguities, research in the area needs to adopt a more inclusive approach and integrate findings from different strands of research into conceptualization and from numerous languages.

As regards L2 teaching, there can be no doubt that the conceptualization model proposed by the von Stutterheim team has important implications for syllabus design, which in addition to established teaching content, should focus on language-specific granularity levels, as well as patterns of perspectivation and endpoint encoding. Awareness of these factors may also come in handy in translation research since without considering cross-linguistic differences at the structuring and segmentation levels, it may be virtually impossible to establish degrees of semantic equivalence between languages whilst simultaneously maintaining native speaker standards.

To conclude, although the research seems to be concerned with linguistic detail, it is nevertheless an avenue worth pursuing since it seems to provide yet another missing piece of the puzzle as to why it is so difficult to achieve native-like/monolingual levels of L2 proficiency. And it is one that previous research has failed to deliver.

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