Instrumentality of fictive motion in coextension path expressions

Coextension paths (Talmy, 1996, 2000) are a specific category of fictive motion expressions (Langacker, 2005, 2008) used to depict spatial configurations of stationary objects in terms of motion over the object’s extent. It has been established that the choice of verbs in fictive motion is not insignificant or random, but is motivated by mental simulations grounded in embodied cognition (Matsumoto, 1996; Matlock, 2004).

Employing a corpus-based cognitive approach to language study, this paper demonstrates on the basis of data found in the British National Corpus that verbs used to express coextension paths are subject to an instrument condition, which essentially forbids structuring fictive motion with semantic patterns conflating instrumentality in the absence of sentient agent capable of making use of a motion instrument. This condition appears to explain why roads typically run, but not drive to destinations.

However, because the semantic aspects of instrument and manner are inextricably linked to one another (Mari, 2006; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2009; Waliński, 2013), the instrument condition overlaps, at least to some extent, with the previously stated manner condition (Matsumoto, 1996). For that reason, it can be overridden in certain situations, in which a certain property of motion instrument can be used to represent some specifically correlated property of the path.

In more general terms, the corpus-based findings presented in this paper fit into the broader cognitive framework of mental imagery and cognitive simulation (Bergen, 2012). An answer to the question if fictive motion expressions can involve instrumentality may be regarded as an indicator whether cognitive simulation of motion plays a key conceptual role in structuring coextension paths: it seems that our cognitive ability to mentally simulate motion implied by the motion verb plays a key conceptual role in structuring fictive motion.

References


