The entanglement of spatial and temporal categories in linguistic representations of distance

The categories of space and time can be viewed from the perspective of a unitary framework of space-time with reference to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity developed in physics, which forces us to accept that time is not a completely separate category independent of space, but is combined with it to form the entity called space-time. However, Langacker (2012, pp. 200–203) warns us that an assumption that space and time form a four-dimensional representational space in conception is a foregone conclusion. For instance, although from the outlook of modern physics it would be equally accurate to assume that motion through space occurs in time or that motion through time occurs in space, in everyday language we are inclined to say that a falling apple gets “closer and closer”, rather than “later and later” to the ground. Thus, although the basic construal of spatial–temporal experience is undeniably grounded on biological mechanisms developed in the course of evolution of the human species, it is the cultural development of the human race, including language as one of most vital elements, that determines its conceptual complexities (Kövecses, 2005; Sharifian, 2017).

This paper discusses relations between the categories of space and time in linguistic representations of distance found in English language corpora in the semantic context of motion events (Talmy, 2000). Results indicate that in such scenarios, space, time, and motion can be viewed as elements of a unified conceptual frame, which dictates the relationship between these categories in a metonymical fashion. Kövecses (2005, p. 53) notes that in English one can say, for example, “I slept for fifty miles while she drove”, as well as “San Francisco is half an hour from Berkeley”. Engberg-Pedersen (1999) points out that we can use names of places, which are primarily spatial words, to denote punctual moments in time in terms of spatial locations, e.g. “I haven’t had a drink since London”.

The results indicate that in linguistic expressions of distance the categories of space and time should be viewed from the perspective of a unified conceptual frame of SPACE-TIME-MOTION, in which space and time can stand metonymically for each other: time elapsed in motion can be used to express spatial distance; space traversed in motion can be used to identify duration, which is commonly used for telling the time by the Sun’s position in the sky; a punctual moment in time can be used to specify a location passed while traveling; and a specific location passed during traveling can be used to refer to a specific moment in time.

REFERENCES

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