

Iconicity in event representation across languages

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This presentation examines the role of iconicity in event descriptions on the basis of crosslinguistic evidence from a typologically, genealogically, and areally diverse sample of 18 languages. Chafe's (1977) classic 'Verbalization of Experience' (VE) model posits a number of cognitive processes involved in the transformation of experience into linguistic representations: subchunking into verbalizable units; propositionalizing of these units, involving the individuation and typing of states of affairs (SoAs) and their participants and the identification of the roles of the participants in the SoAs; the linguistic categorization of SoAs and participants, identifying suitable expressions; and the assignment of an information perspective ('packaging') and morphosyntactic form. Previous research on the linguistic representation of motion events and causal chains (Bohnemeyer et al 2007, 2010) has uncovered crosslinguistic variation in the linguistic categorization of events – their lexicalization and the grammaticalization of event-encoding constructions – that predicts language-specific effects at all levels of VE. Yet, it has also produced evidence of certain tendencies in the mapping between form and meaning that appear to be shared across languages. It will be argued that these tendencies reflect a universal preference for iconic mapping among representations across VE. At the discourse level, iconicity has long been known to be the central structuring principle of event representations (Labov & Waletzky 1967, Reinhart 1984, inter alia) across languages (Bohnemeyer 2003). At the clause level, every language in the sample has event-description constructions that obey abstract 'diagrammatic' iconicity (Haiman 1980) in referent tracking (one mention per referent), role assignment (one assignment per role), the relations among subevents (roles correspond to subevents of the same macro-event), and in domain-specific properties such as the encoding of direction vectors (one per unit). These constructions are language-specific and vary greatly in how much information they convey about a given subchunk. But they all share the 'macro-event property': they disprefer constituents that describe subevents from combining with their own temporal modifiers and in this sense present the subchunk as a single event. Across languages, VE seems to rely on macro-event expressions as the loci of diagrammatic iconicity in syntax, with each macro-event expression carrying a unique set of subevent and role assignments and event participant mentions. It is argued that these iconic encoding constraints are not properties of an innate Universal Grammar, but rather emergent properties that have evolved in response to the basic design properties of language – in particular, the linearity of discourse – and the cognitive processes involved in VE.

References

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