

Motion in Narratives: Finding the Way in Kavalan

Abstract

Crosslinguistically speaking, it is common for all the three Frames of Reference (Levinson 2003; Talmy 2000a, Zlatev 2006; hereafter abbreviated as FoR) to be present in the same language. However, they typically demonstrate some “division of labor” within a single language, with some preferred for micro-orientation and others exclusively for macro-orientation. In this paper we would like to discover how the three FoRs are exploited in Kavalan, an endangered Austronesian language in Taiwan, and whether there is preferred FoR under certain circumstances. To this end, we chose route directions as our object of investigation, for they are perfect loci for all the three FoRs to be present at the same time.

By analyzing the recorded data from native speakers narrating the same route, we look into the distributions of different types of FoRs and spatial chunking (Klippel *et al.* 2003). The narrated route lies within Hsinshê Village, the largest tribe of the Kavalan people where the Kavalan language is spoken on a daily basis. The result shows that of the three types of spatial chunking, numeral chunking is the least favored type and landmark chunking the most frequent one. In addition, although the whole route descriptions include just four occurrences of direction change, only two speakers mention all of them. More importantly, the four occurrences of direction change do not demonstrate a consistent deployment of any particular type of FoR, both within and across speakers. For example, while the Geocentric FoR is exploited by all the speakers, the Viewpoint-centered FoR is adopted by three and the Object-centered FoR is only restricted to one speaker. Moreover, no speakers employ the same type of FoR across all occurrences of direction change, except for one, who consistently refers to the cardinal directions. These results may imply the Geocentric FoR is the commonest reference system in Kavalan route directions.

Last but not least, in terms of the syntactic structures that express both direction and action, two constructions are recurrent. Interestingly enough, when direction follows action, the FoR exploited is either Geocentric or Object-centered. When direction precedes action, however, the FoR is exclusively Viewpoint-centered. Although the other way around is not unacceptable, this dichotomy should be something more than a coincidence. It seems that the Kavalan people are conscious of the uniqueness of the Viewpoint-centered FoR and organize it differently by changing the linear ordering between action and direction. A possible explanation is that the ternary relationship in the Viewpoint-centered FoR (among the Figure, the Ground, and the viewer), as opposed to the binary relationship in the Geocentric and Object-centered FoR (between the Figure and the Ground), generates a different degree of cognitive complexity, which contributes to the eventual difference in syntax.