

“Put” and “take” verbs in Tzeltal (Mayan)

This talk examines the expression of “putting” and “taking” events in Tzeltal. Based on 12 consultants’ descriptions of the videoclips in the PUT task (an elicitation tool developed at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics depicting events of placement and removal), the paper examines the semantics of verbs and other relevant spatial vocabulary, the constructions employed, and the extensional patterns of verbs used in “put” (Goal-oriented) vs. “take” (Source-oriented) descriptions.

Tzeltal has a number of relatively general placement verbs, including *ak* ‘put/give’ (applicable regardless of the animacy of the Goal), *otzes* ‘insert’, and *tzak* ‘take/grasp in hand’. However, responses to this elicitation task showed a relatively limited role for semantically general verbs. Rather, Tzeltal is a “multiverb language” which provides many different verbs to describe events of “putting” and “taking”, with verb choice largely determined by the shape, orientation, and resulting disposition of the Figure and Ground objects. This is illustrated in (1) and (2):*

- (1) (put cup on table)

la s-pajchan-0 ta ba mexa
CMP 3E-set.down.bowlshaped-3A PREP top table
‘S/he set down [a bowl-shaped object] on the table top.’

- (2) (take beans from flat surface)

la s-jop-0 bel ta s-k’ab
CMP 3E-gather.in.hand-3A DIRgoing PREP 3E-hand
‘He gathered (them) awaywards with his hand.’ [pile of beans]

A second point of interest is the use of the reciprocal to express unidirectional “give” events, as in (3):

- (3) (take coke can from someone)

la y-ak’-be-0 s-ba
CMP 3E-give/put-DIT-3A 3E-RECIP
‘They gave it each other [one gave, one received].’

The talk considers the consistency of verb usage across speakers in descriptions of “putting” vs. “taking”, the frequency of verb usage and the range of events individual verbs can encompass, and differences in the linguistic treatment of “putting” vs. “taking” events. The asymmetry that has been observed in other languages, with Goal-oriented “put” verbs much more finely distinguished lexically than Source-oriented “take” verbs, is also apparent in Tzeltal.

* CMP=completeive; 1/2/3E (A) =1st/2nd/3rd ergative (absolutive); DIR=directional; DIT=ditransitive; PREP=generic preposition (there is only one); RECIP=recipient.