

Remembering how: Language, memory, and the salience of manner

Since Talmy's (e.g., 1985, 1991, 2000) seminal work on the lexicalization of motion events, the encoding of manner of motion in language has been an active area of research. More recently, Slobin (2003, 2004, 2006) refined the typology, pointing out the low salience of manner of motion in languages like Spanish, which typically employ path verbs, relative to languages like English, which typically employ manner verbs. He hypothesized that habitual attention to manner of motion by speakers of satellite-framed languages has made it particularly salient and that this differential attention to the manner dimension of motion might have some cognitive consequences (Slobin, 2003: 163-164). Among them, he postulates that manner of motion will be more salient in memory for motion events for speakers of high manner salient languages than for speakers of low manner salient languages.

In this study, we take up Slobin's suggestion that the salience of manner will have consequences on memory for motion events. We approach this question in two ways. First, drawing on the typological data, we ask whether English speakers will demonstrate better memory for manner of motion in simple motion events than do Spanish speakers. Second, drawing on recent evidence that contextually manipulating the salience of manner will result in changes in access to manner verbs in Spanish (Feist, Rojo & Cifuentes, 2007), we ask whether manner made salient in context will have a facilitating effect on Spanish speakers' recognition memory.

To investigate these questions, we asked English and Spanish speakers to watch short video-taped motion events and remember them for later recognition. Participants were either shown seven events (high manner salient condition) or three events (low manner salient condition). In each case, the videos all depicted the same path, but with different manners of motion. After completing a brief filler task, all participants were given the same yes/no recognition task, in which they were shown three motion events; the status of each of the events (old or new) was randomly determined by a computer program.

As predicted, English speakers displayed a lower false alarm rate ($M = .21$) than did Spanish speakers ($M = .41$), $F(1, 88) = 13.09$, $p < .0001$. Further, the contextual manipulation of manner salience had different effects on the two language groups, as evidenced by their hit rates ($F(1,89) = 3.78$, $p = .055$). As predicted, Spanish speakers in the high-manner-salient condition displayed greater recognition accuracy on previously seen items ($M = .96$) than did Spanish speakers in the low-manner-salient condition ($M = .90$), while English speakers evidenced the opposite effect (HMS $M = .93$; LMS $M = .98$). Taken together, these results suggest that the salience of manner of motion, either linguistically- or contextually-based, has repercussions for later motion-event memory.

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