

Spatial Conceptualization in French and Italian Speakers: A Contrastive Approach in the Context of the Linguistic Relativity Theory

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Abstract : The connection between language and cognition has been one of the main interests of linguistics from several years. According to the Sapir-Whorf Linguistic Relativity Theory, the way we perceive reality depends on the language we speak which in turn has a central role in the human cognition. This paper is in line with this research work with the aim of analyzing how language structures reflect on our cognitive abilities even in the description of space, which is generally considered as a human natural and universal domain. The main objective is to identify the differences in the encoding of spatial inclusion relationships in French and Italian speakers to make evidence that a significant variation exists at various levels even in two similar systems. Starting from the constitution a corpora, the first step of the study has been to establish the relevant complex prepositions marking an inclusion relation in French and Italian: au centre de, au cœur de, au milieu de, au sein de, à l'intérieur de and the opposition entre/parmi in French; al centro di, al cuore di, nel mezzo di, in seno a, all'interno di and the fra/tra contrast in Italian. These prepositions had been classified on the base of the type of Noun following them (e.g. mass nouns, concrete nouns, abstract nouns, body-parts noun, etc.) following the Collostructional Analysis of lexemes with the purpose of analyzing the preferred construction of each preposition comparing the relations construed. Comparing the Italian and the French results it has been possible to define the degree of representativeness of each target Noun for the chosen preposition studied. Lexicostatistics and Statistical Association Measures showed the values of attraction or repulsion between lexemes and a given preposition, highlighting which words are over-represented or under-represented in a specific context compared to the expected results. For instance, a Noun as Dibattiti has a negative value for the Italian Al cuore di (-1,91), but it has a strong positive representativeness for the corresponding French Au cœur de (+677,76). The value, positive or negative, is the result of a hypergeometric distribution law which displays the current use of some relevant nouns in relations of spatial inclusion by French and Italian speakers. Differences on the kind of location conceptualization denote syntactic and semantic constraints based on spatial features as well as on linguistic peculiarity, too. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the domain of spatial relations is basic to human experience and is linked to universally shared perceptual mechanisms which create mental representations depending on the language use. Therefore, linguistic coding strongly correlates with the way spatial distinctions are conceptualized for non-verbal tasks even in close language systems, like Italian and French.

Keywords : cognitive semantics, cross-linguistic variations, locational terms, non-verbal spatial representations

Conference Title : ICCL 2019 : International Conference on Cognitive Linguistics

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : September 19-20, 2019