How Chinese Sign Language (CSL) and Spoken Chinese Speakers Describe Motion Events: Focus on Serial Verb Construction

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Historically, sign languages have emerged in different countries around the world; they are surrounded by the local spoken language. Such is the case for Chinese Sign language and spoken Chinese. As argued by Talmy (2003: 170), spoken language and sign language are both based on some more limited core linguistic system that connects with further subsystems for the full functioning of the two different language modalities. This paper adopts a corpus-based paradigm to examine the parallel between Chinese Sign language and spoken Chinese by analyzing serial verb constructions under the framework of Motion Event theory (Talmy 1985, 2000).

I hypothesized that the difference of motion events in spoken language is paralleled by a difference in sign language. For example, in spoken Chinese "Gun XiaQu (roll down)", manner of movement is expressed in the main verb Gun(roll), while the path is encoded in the particle XiaQu (down). The tight combination of manner and path is the most distinctive feature of this lexicalization pattern. Based on this, we predict that the information of manner and path should be expressed simultaneously by a single gesture with both a circular manner and a downward path in Chinese sign language.

Chinese Sign language and spoken Chinese native users have been asked to view a 10-minute silent film known as the "Pear Story" (Chafe 1980) which is full of motion events. The subjects were then asked to give a description about what they had viewed. After the test, ten serial verb expressions has been extracted and analyzed. The quantitative comparison shows that "path+ manner" descriptions are the most common one in those two languages. For example, Spoken Chinese normally encodes manner of motion and uses obligatory prepositional phrases or particles to indicate path; Chinese Sign language uses a single gesture to express the same serial construction. The result proves that the two languages are of the Satellite-framed type. However, the data also indicates that there are still a few Chinese Sign language speakers using two gestures to express Gun XiaQu (roll down). Therefore, we conclude that CSL is a less prototypical Satellite-framed language than spoken Chinese. The dichotomy proposed by Talmy should be a gradient categorization instead of absolute one.

With a comparison between spoken Chinese and Chinese sign language, this finding not only provides a revision for Talmy's theory, but also contributes to our knowledge of how motion events are encoded in natural human language.

Key words: CSL; spoken Chinese; serial verb construction; cognition; motion events

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