Cross-linguistic patterns in the verbalization of experience

Marianne Mithun
University of California, Santa Barbara

Throughout his career, Wallace Chafe has continually opened up waves of new research by taking novel vantage points and asking new questions. Especially fruitful has been his focus on the nature of consciousness and the processes involved in moving from thought to its expression in language (1977a,b, 1979, 1980a,b, 1994, 1998, etc). In work on the verbalization of experience he posited three stages: i) schematizing, i.e., breaking up the experience into parts, ii) framing, i.e., establishing significant participants and identifying events, and iii) categorization of these ideas into specific lexical items. This scenario raises intriguing questions about the role of individual languages in the processes: at what stage do the structures and lexicon of the particular language begin to shape the message?

As linguists have always known, it is one thing to compare grammatical structures across languages, but quite another to control the cognitive point of departure. To address this issue, Chafe established a novel tool in the 1970's that has been widely used ever since: the Pear Film. This brief film presents a series of incidents involving various characters and scenes, without language. It provides spectators a common experience which they can then describe, i.e., turn into language.

Here a set of Pear Film narratives is examined to explore the question of where the process of the verbalization of experience might show the effects of particular language structures. The languages involved are typologically diverse in ways that should be pertinent. Five unrelated languages are represented: Hiligaynon (Philippine), Mongolian, Central Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo, Navajo, and Mohawk. The languages vary substantially in the ways they package information. They vary in their degree of synthesis: the amount of information they package into single words. They vary in the order of morphemes within words (uniquely prefixing, uniquely suffixing, mixed) and the relations among the morphemes (templatic or hierarchical). They vary in their distribution of information between nouns and verbs. They vary in their ordering of constituents in the clause (predicate-initial, predicate-final, variable), and the principles underlying this ordering (rigidly syntactic, partly pragmatic, fully pragmatic). Perhaps most interesting, they show intriguing patterns of organization at higher levels of structure, beyond the level of the sentence. Three of the languages, Mongolian, Yup'ik, and Navajo, have grammatical devices that group grammatically independent sentences in various ways according to their relationships to each other and to the larger discourse.

This snapshot reveals considerable similarity at larger levels of discourse organization, and increasing diversity at ever smaller levels of grammatical structure. Prosodic structuring, however, is remarkably similar at all levels, from the episode, through the prosodic sentence, down to the intonation unit, a unit which, as Chafe points out, tends to reflect a single focus of consciousness.

References

Chafe, Wallace 1977a. Creativity in verbalization and its implications for the nature of stored knowledge. In Freedle, R. ed., *Discourse production and comprehension,* 41-55. Ablex.

Chafe, Wallace 1977b. The recall and verbalization of past experience. In Cole, Roger W. (ed.), *Current issues in linguistic theory,* 215-246. Indiana.

Chafe, Wallace 1979. The flow of thought and the flow of language. In Givón, Talmy (ed.), *Discourse and syntax*. Academic.

Chafe, Wallace 1980a. The deployment of consciousness in the production of a narrative. In Chafe 1980b, 9-50. Ablex.

Chafe, Wallace 1980b. *The pear stories: cognitive, cultural, and linguistic aspects of narrative production*, Ablex.

Chafe, Wallace 1994. *Discourse, consciousness, and time: The flow and displacement of conscious experience in speaking and writing*, Chicago.

Chafe, Wallace (1998). Things we can learn from repeated tellings of the same experience. *Narrative Inquiry* 8. 269-285.