

Describing Motion Events in Adult L2 Spanish Narratives

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1. Introduction

When learning a second language (L2), learners are faced with the challenge of having to learn appropriate word combinations from L2 input that –in many cases– are only implicitly available (Bialystok, 1978; Ellis, 1991; Krashen, 1982, 1985). This challenge becomes even more evident when the two languages differ on how semantic elements are represented at the sentence level. Learners have to reformulate their existing meaning-form patterns in order to incorporate other patterns that may respond to very different orders. We can attest that learners have incorporated the new L2 word combinations if they are successful at conveying their messages in a communicative situation. The purpose of this study is to research one example of language content that is presented implicitly: the lexicalization of motion events.

Talmy (1985, 1991, 2000) studied the lexicalization of motion in his attempt to understand how the meaning-form relationship varies across languages. The process of lexicalization should be understood as the way meaning becomes incorporated into a given morpheme in language specific ways.

In its basic form, a *motion event* refers to a situation that implies movement in space and during a time interval e.g., *The Pink Panther chased the little bird* (Frawley, 1992, p.170). However, not all descriptions of movement entail displacement in space or translational motion. There are other situations that also involve space and time, and yet movement itself is almost imperceptible. This kind of space event is known as *positional event* or *location* e.g., *The Pink Panther was in bed* (Frawley, 1992, p. 170). In this study, we concern ourselves with the lexicalization of translational motion in oral narratives in L2 Spanish. In other words, we would like to determine what lexical forms L2 Spanish speakers use to express events that imply displacement of an entity through space in the context of a story.

In his study, Talmy (1985, 2000) presents the following four elements as internal components of a motion event:

1. **Figure:** It indicates the object that is in movement or that is located with respect to another object.
2. **Ground:** It serves as a reference-point for the displacement of the moving object.
3. **Path:** It refers to the trajectory followed by the Figure in relation to the Ground object.
4. **Motion:** It expresses the existence of motion or location in the event.

In addition, Talmy also identified manner and cause as two properties that provide us with additional semantic information about the movement. In effect, *the manner of motion* shows that a specific movement may be the outcome of features such as speed (e.g., *pick up - snap up*) or intensity (e.g., *knock - hammer*). On the other hand, *the cause of motion* indicates that the application of a force induces the motion (e.g., *kicked the ball, pushed the chair*). The following sentences taken from Talmy (2000, p.26) exemplify the use of these semantic components in a basic motion event:

- a. *The pencil rolled off the table*
- b. *The pencil blew off the table.*

In these two examples, the Figure is *the pencil*, and *the table* functions as the ground. Path, on the other hand, is described by preposition *off*. As to the verbs, both of them indicate motion; however, *rolled* also indicates manner, whereas *blew* indicates cause.

2. Lexicalization of motion in English and Spanish

In his typological description, Talmy (1985, 2000) showed that a semantic category like motion may be expressed in various lexico-syntactic sentence frames. He also demonstrated that speakers do not randomly generate such frames; on the contrary, they respond to systematic patterns of each language. In this context, Talmy presented English and Spanish as examples of languages whose canonical frames for the expression of motion respond to different typologies. In effect, empirical evidence has demonstrated that in spontaneous descriptions of motion scenes, English speakers favour the use of intransitive verbs that conflate motion and manner or cause (e.g., *The Pink Panther walked to the bridge*, *The Pink Panther ran to the river*). Path, on the other hand, is expressed by particles that accompany the verb (e.g., *up*, *down*, *out*) and leave information about the location (*the ground*) to be inferred (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Naigles, Eisenberg, Kako, Hightler, & McGraw, 1998; Naigles & Terraza, 1998; Özçalışkan & Slobin, 1999; Slobin, 1996, 2003; Talmy, 1985, 1991, 2000). While this is a general tendency of English, note that speakers may also structure utterances with motion and path conflated in the main verb (e.g., *The Pink Panther left the house*). Frawley (1992, p.178) argues that the lexicalization of the manner of motion is common in colloquial English, though in formal speech speakers tend to use more path verbs such as *ascend*, *descend*, *enter*, *cross*, etc.

Conversely, numerous studies on motion production in Spanish have shown that speakers' descriptions of motional scenes largely conflate motion and path in verbs followed by prepositions *a* ("to"), *de* ("from"), and *para* ("to/for/towards") to indicate ground information (i.e., goal, source, or location) e.g., *La Pantera saltó del puente* ("The Panther jumped from the bridge"). They also specify the location of the figure using prepositional phrases e.g., *en la calle* ("on the street") that may even precede the motion event itself (Aske, 1989; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Özçalışkan & Slobin, 1999; Slobin, 2003). On the other hand, manner appears as less salient to Spanish speakers and it is optionally encoded in adverbials or gerundives e.g., *salió corriendo* ("exited flying"). While path conflation is the general lexicalization pattern of the language, Spanish speakers certainly can conflate motion and manner, namely in intransitive verbs (see Aske, 1989; Naigles, Eisenberg, Kako, Hightler, & McGraw, 1998; Slobin & Hoiting, 1994).

Regarding rhetorical style, Berman & Slobin (1994) indicated that Spanish narratives are rich in ground information for setting up scenes. Many of these locative descriptions may even appear before the motion event is described. As a result, Spanish speakers omit redundant post-verbal grounds, yielding copious *bare* path verbs.

The literature on the description of motion events in English and Spanish is based mainly on studies on the language production of children and adult monolingual speakers (for details, see Berman & Slobin, 1994; Naigles, Eisenberg, Kako, Hightler, & McGraw, 1998; Naigles & Terraza, 1998; Özçalışkan & Slobin, 1999; Slobin & Hoiting, 1994; Slobin, 1996, 1997, 2003; Talmy, 1991). For the most part, these studies have aimed at empirically validating Talmy's proposal. Nevertheless, and to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated the lexicalization of motion events in interlanguage. In this context, the present research is a first attempt to investigate crosslinguistic effect in L1 English-L2 Spanish adult speakers for the typologically determined motion conflation patterns in Spanish. We propose that the lexicalization of path—understood as a systematic preference of Spanish—constitutes the most salient aspect of the motion event and native speakers acquire it as part of their L1. We may wonder then what happens to learners of the Romance language whose L1 systematically induces them to stress other aspects of motion?

In this study, we attempt to shed some light on this issue by addressing the following research questions: (1) To what extent do advanced L2 Spanish speakers build lexicalization patterns of motion on the lexicalization patterns of their L1? (2) Does the process of learning to lexicalize motion in a second language entail relearning to view motion scenes from the "perspective" that native speakers consider is more salient?

3. Method

Participants. The participants in this study were ten L1 English-L2 adult proficient Spanish speakers (6 females, 4 males), professors and students at the University of Alberta and college-educated residents from Edmonton, Alberta, with a mean age of 36 years. As to their language training, all of

the participants had been enrolled as adult students in different Spanish programs at the post-secondary level for more than two years. Moreover, all of them have had the opportunity to enhance their language skills while visiting Spanish-speaking countries on different occasions and for various lengths of time. In addition, there was a group of ten L1 adult Spanish speakers (6 females, 4 males), mean age 34 years, made up of students at the University of Alberta and college-educated professionals from Edmonton, Alberta. These participants came from various Spanish-speaking countries.

Materials. The stimuli were two video excerpts from the Pink Panther cartoon (2 minutes each) presented sequentially. The first story was about the Pink Panther struggling with a very determined cuckoo clock that had been bought to help the Panther wake up in the morning. The second story showed the Panther trying to control a jet plane that took on a life of its own and had the Panther at its mercy. Although these stories were silent, they had a clear plot that was rich in temporal and causal sequences, displacement from place to place, location, etc. We would like to stress the value of using video films as stimuli for eliciting data. This technique enables participants to describe a motion scene based on an actual dynamic figure that is in displacement within a given context. As a result, participants have access to a more accurate and realistic observation that triggers a natural use of motion frames. Previous studies of motion descriptions largely depended on picture stories. This kind of stimuli yielded interesting results, though participants were faced with the challenge of having to infer motion events from static images (Naigles et al., 1998).

Procedure. First, the participants were invited to watch the two video excerpts in a laboratory of the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta. They were then asked to tell the stories orally in Spanish to a native speaker of Spanish. The oral narratives were conducted individually and video taped.

Coding. All narratives were transcribed using CHAT (MacWhinney, 2000). Seventy percent of the utterances produced by the participants had one main verb and we only considered the main verbs. We coded verbs as manner or path using verb categorizations and examples available in the literature (Naigles et al., 1998; p. 530; Özçalışkan & Slobin, 1999, p. 547; Slobin, 1996b, p. 198). For doubtful cases or verbs that did not appear in previous categorizations, we prepared a list and asked five L1 Spanish speakers to classify them in two columns each of which contained a prototypical path-like and manner-like example as a guide. Moreover, we coded the data for verb transitivity and presence or absence of ground expressions.

4. Results and discussion

Our analysis of the data aimed to address the research questions which have motivated this study. We present the results for each analysis separately: how L2 Spanish speakers encoded path verbs e.g., *La Pantera Rosa fue sola*; manner verbs e.g., *La Pantera Rosa caminó sola*; and adverbial constructions e.g., *hasta la casa*.

4.1. Motion conflation patterns

Figure 1 shows the total number of manner and path verbs (both transitive and intransitive) produced by the L2 and L1 Spanish speakers. As can be observed, L2 Spanish speakers used more path conflation than manner conflation; however, this difference was not overwhelming. Across all files, participants produced a mean of 22.00 path verbs (SD 13.32), and 10.00 manner verbs (SD 9.82). Conversely, the L1 Spanish group clearly used more path conflation. Across all files, participants produced a mean of 34.20 path verbs (SD 8.50), and 8.50 manner verbs (SD 2.72).

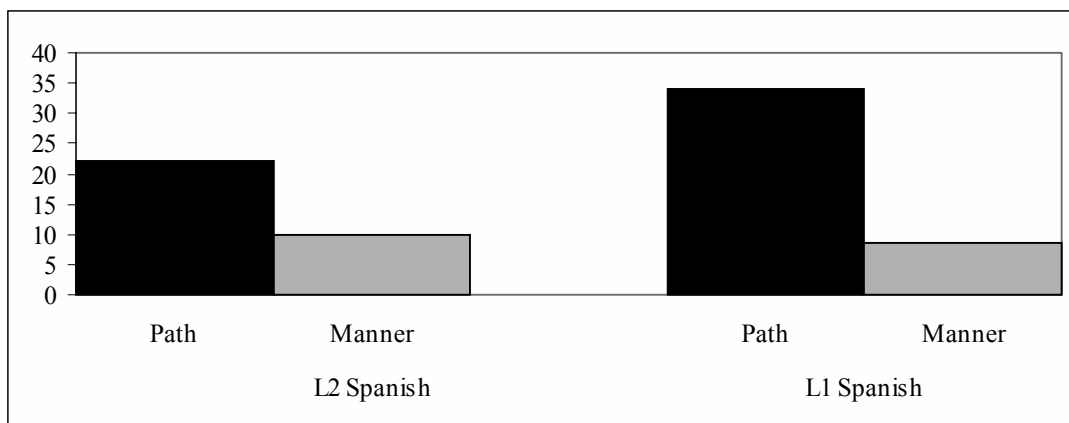


FIG.1. Mean number of path and manner conflation by speaker group.

We compared the two groups for their percent use of path conflation. The two groups differed in the number of verbs they used, so we performed this calculation on the percentage of path conflation each person used. That is, we calculated the percentage of path verbs out of the path + manner verbs used by each participant. The results showed that from the 316 L2 Spanish motion verbs, 69% were path verbs (mean 71%, SD 16%). The L1 Spanish group, on the other hand, produced 427 motion verbs and 80% were path verbs (mean 81%, SD 6%). A two-tailed independent samples T-test indicated that the difference in path verb use between the two groups was not significant ($t(18) = 1.83$, $P < 0.08$). Put differently, the L1 Spanish speakers did not produce significantly more path conflation than the L2 speakers.

4.2. Motion verb transitivity and complement use

As mentioned earlier, Spanish speakers preferably conflate motion and path in verbs followed by different kinds of prepositional phrases (Aske, 1989; Özçalışkan & Slobin, 1999; Slobin, 2003). In order to verify whether our L2 data conform to these patterns of Spanish, we decided to investigate the percent use of transitive and intransitive path verbs and the kind of post-verbal phrase, whenever there was one. From the 220 L2 path verbs 184 were intransitive (84%) and 36 were transitive (16%). Similarly, the L1 speakers produced 342 path forms, 302 were intransitive (88%) and 40 were transitive (12%). In sum, our results showed that both language groups clearly preferred conflating path in intransitive verbs. Our next analysis shows the percentage of post-verbal structures produced by the two groups of speakers. In this paper, we are only reporting on adverbial phrases accompanying path intransitive verbs.

Figure 2 below shows that from the 184 L2 path intransitive verbs, 160 (87%) were followed by an adverbial construction, whereas 24 were bare path verbs (13%). In other words, whenever the L2 speakers used intransitive path verbs, they were also ready to provide additional information about the figure using a descriptive phrase. The 302 L1 intransitive path verbs were divided into 235 forms with a post-verbal phrase (78%) and 67 as bare path verbs (22%). Although the L1 group had more verbs with some kind of post-verbal structure, they resorted to bare forms more than the L2 group. A two-tailed independent-samples t test confirmed that L1 speakers used bare path verbs significantly more than L2 speakers ($t(18) = 2.75$, $P < 0.02$). This result seems to suggest that the L2 Spanish speakers have not fully acquired the use of bare verbs as a property of Spanish rhetorical style. On the contrary, they mostly opted for the English pattern of producing intransitive verbs followed by a phrase (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Talmy, 1991).

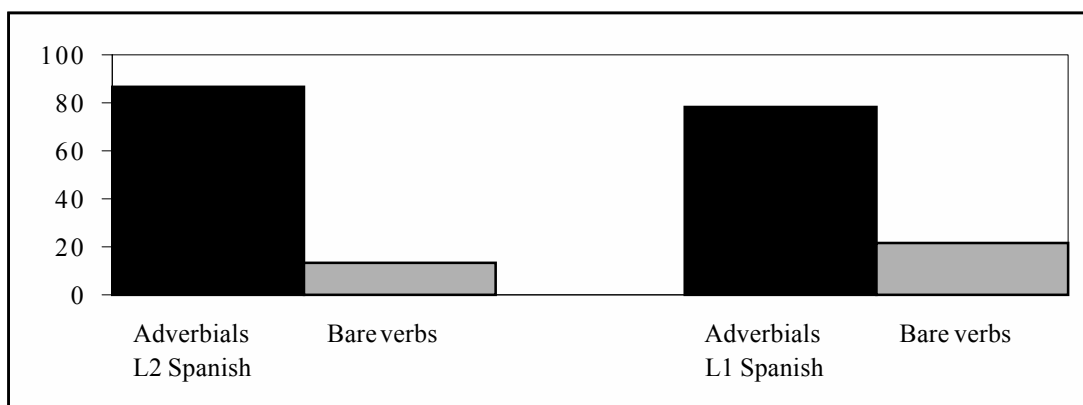


FIG. 2. Percent of intransitive path verbs with adverbial phrases and bare verbs divided by speaker groups.

A further analysis of the types of post-verbal constructions revealed that from the 160 L2 structures produced, 84 of them (53%) were phrases introduced by prepositions *a*, *de*, and *para* to express ground information. Moreover, 76 phrases (47%) were adverbials and gerundives functioning as manner expressions. These results for the L2 group are congruent with Aske's (1989) claim that most path ground phrases serve to indicate the goal, source or location in Spanish. In contrast to Aske's findings, from the 235 L1 post-verbal structures only 99 of them (42%) indicated ground information and 136 (58%) functioned as manner expressions. These results support the notion that L1 Spanish speakers convey manner in adjunct expressions instead of verbal conflation (Naigles et al., 1998).

5. General discussion

In this study, we investigated the lexicalization of motion events in the oral narratives of L1 English-L2 Spanish adult speakers. Following Talmy (1985, 2000), English and Spanish present different conflation patterns for motion events. This difference makes it interesting to explore whether advanced L2 Spanish speakers lexicalize motion events following their L1 patterns and also whether L2 speakers learn to view the motion scenes in the same way as native speakers, that is to say, by focusing on aspects that native speakers find most salient. Our analyses showed that the L2 Spanish speakers have almost fully achieved the L1 Spanish pattern for the description of motion events in oral narratives. They clearly described the video excerpts stressing the most salient aspect of motion in Spanish: path. As shown above, 69% of the 316 L2 verbs produced were path and 84% of these verbs were intransitive.

It was also observed that L2 speakers, more than L1 speakers, produced path intransitive verbs followed by a post-verbal phrase and this result was interpreted as a possible influence of English on the L2 narratives. L1 speakers, on the other hand, resorted more to bare path intransitive verbs in agreement with the Spanish rhetorical style (Berman & Slobin, 1994). An analysis of the L2 post-verbal phrases was congruent with previous findings that indicated that L1 Spanish speakers use these structures to describe the source, goal, or location. While the L2 speakers produced fewer post-verbal manner expressions than the L1 group, our results confirmed that they compensated for this difference by producing more manner verbs. Curiously enough, L1 speakers showed just the opposite patterns. They produced fewer manner verbs, but they balanced this by including a larger number of post-verbal adverbials and gerundives.

In sum, our results have demonstrated that even though there are still some traces of English in these L2 Spanish narratives, these speakers present a clear trend towards a complete acquisition of the Spanish typology. This observation is particularly relevant if we consider that motion verbs are not formally presented as part of the L2 Spanish language curriculum. Thus, L2 learners are implicitly exposed to this kind of input while communicating with their language instructors or native speakers in naturalistic situations. Notice that motion or the idea of figures in motion is a recurrent topic in human communication (Talmy, 1985, 2000). Therefore, L2 learners have multiple possibilities of negotiating

meaning that involves movement or its description. As a result, the L2 meaning becomes transparent and comprehensible for the learners. This, in turn, enables them to notice and naturally acquire the syntactic mapping which conveys this meaning at the sentence level (Krashen, 1982, 1985; Schmidt, 1990, 1993; Van Patten, 1989, 1990).

The present study has given clear evidence of an acquisition process that entails a substantial reformulation of the meaning-in-form language pattern (Talmy, 2000). These findings have also opened up grounds for future research that will provide us with further evidence of how and when, over the course of acquisition, L2 Spanish learners incorporate the L1 Spanish syntactic mapping for the expression of verbs of motion.

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