
How motion event framing changes in synchrony: evidence from Italian native and heritage language speakers

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This contribution presents two studies on how motion event framing changes in synchrony, providing evidence from Italian native monolingual (L1) and heritage language (HL) speakers. Language contact, particularly in HL contexts where speakers experience “extreme language contact” and may lead to the production of linguistic innovations (Kupisch & Polinsky 2022), is considered a significant factor in driving language variation and change. Drawing on research by Talmy (1975), we examine the alternation between verb-framed and satellite-framed constructions in Italian, which may be influenced by cross-linguistic contact with SF languages like German.

In study 1, we asked 30 Italian monolinguals (mean age = 22.1 years, age SD = 3.0) born and raised in Italy, and 33 HL speakers (mean age = 16.15, age SD = 4.45) to describe 15 short videos depicting different motion events. In study 2, 39 HL speakers (mean age = 21, age SD = 12.62), completed a within- and an across-language priming task in two separate sessions. They had to describe in Italian 30 target videos showing ME after being presented with 30 primes (15 VF and 15 SF), each coupled with a video. Primes were either presented in Italian (within-language task) or in German (across-language task).

The results of study 1 revealed that HL speakers produce significantly more SF constructions than L1 speakers, suggesting cross-linguistic influence from their dominant language. The results of study 2 showed that it is possible to prime motion events both within and across languages suggesting that language contact may foster linguistic innovations, with across-language priming contributing to replicating these changes.

The findings suggest that HL speakers amplify linguistic tendencies present in their heritage language, particularly in structures that already exhibit variability. This study contributes to our understanding of language change mechanisms in bilingual contexts and highlights the importance of exploring variability in both syntactic and semantic domains to predict which structures are more susceptible to change.

References. Kupisch, T. & M. Polinsky (2022). Language history on the fast forward: Innovations in heritage languages and diachronic change. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 25, 1-12. • Talmy, L. (1975). Semantics and syntax of motion. In J. Kimball (ed), *Syntax and Semantics: Volume 4*. New York: Academic Press, 181-238.