Audience Design and the Selection of Spatial Frames of Reference in Tseltal Maya and English
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Background and Research Questions

Spatial configurations can be described by identifying the anchor, the figure and the ground. Anchors can lie with the context of the conversation or with the speech participants themselves.

While English and Tseltal population both use the egocentric intrinsic (direct) frame of reference, only English speakers favor the egocentric extrinsic (relative) frame. Because egocentric frames require the establishment of the anchor with a speech participant, they provide us insight into how a speaker designs a spatial description for their interlocutor.

However, audience design also requires assessing what your interlocutor knows about the situation in order to decide how to best facilitate their understanding. Speakers can modify their descriptions based on a number of different factors such as age, language, gender and type of task (Bohnemeyer et al 2015). Mainwaring et al 2003, Schober 1993, 1995, we tested to see if the following things would have an effect:

1. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the age of the addressee?
2. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the gender of the addressee?
3. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the changes in perspective alignment?
4. Will speakers of different linguistic groups modify their descriptions differently?

The Task and the Participants

Pairs of participants (a director and a matcher) were presented with arrays of dolls and a chair that the director described the matcher to rebuild.

Participants built arrays either aligned with the perspective of the matcher or aligned with the director (no-perspective alignment). Every participant saw both types of trials. Trial presentations were counterbalanced across the data set.

The Data

Spatial descriptions were coded as addressee-centered, speaker-centered, or both-centered. Descriptions were both-centered if they could be interpreted successfully without having to anchor the descriptions with one of the participants. Addressee-centered and speaker-centered descriptions required understanding that the description was centered with either the speaker or the addressee to interpret it correctly. Both-centered descriptions were preferred by English and Tseltal speakers. However, English speakers also used a number of speaker- and addressee-centered descriptions.

Analysis

Multinomial logistic regression was used to test for differences in audience design strategy (addressee-centered, both-centered, speaker-centered) and p-values were calculated from z-scores.

We asked:

1. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the age of the addressee? No.
2. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the gender of the addressee? Yes.
3. Will speakers modify their behavior based on the changes in perspective alignment? Yes. 4. Will speakers of different linguistic groups modify their descriptions differently? Yes.

Conclusions

Speakers may tailor their utterances to their interlocutor, but they are guided by the task at hand. Tseltal speakers used fewer speaker-centered descriptions than addressee-centered descriptions in perspective-aligned trials. But, perspective aligned trials decreased the use of speaker-centered descriptions over all. Speakers were also more likely to use addressee-centered descriptions in no-perspective aligned trials if they saw perspective-aligned trials first. While linguistic community membership may guide speakers to choosing a particular spatial frame of reference, speakers also use information about the task to decide how to anchor an interaction.

Selected References and Acknowledgements

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