Spatial frames of reference in Yucatec: Referential promiscuity and task-specificity

Juergen Bohnemeyer

Department of Linguistics, University at Buffalo, 609 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, United States

Abstract

A referential communication task conducted with five pairs of native speakers of Yucatec Maya produced evidence of “referential promiscuity” in the selection among spatial frames of reference (FoRs): speakers switched freely between FoRs and pervasively combined multiple types in single descriptions. In contrast, a recall memory experiment conducted with 18 speakers revealed a strong bias towards responses consistent with the use of geocentric, as opposed to egocentric, FoRs. It is argued that referential promiscuity makes FoR selection more task-specific, preventing the linguistic conditioning of spatial reference in internal cognition that has been predicted for populations with more constrained linguistic usage.

Keywords: Spatial reference frames; Yucatec Maya; linguistic relativity

1 Phone +1 716 645 0127, Fax +1 716 645 3825, E-mail jb77@buffalo.edu