

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

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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

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