

Uniformity and variation in Tseltal reference frame use

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Abstract

Tseltal (Mayan) speakers have been described as favoring absolute frames of reference (FoRs) in spatial language and cognition, relying on a rich meronymic system in intrinsic descriptions (Levinson 1994), and making no more than marginal use of relative FoRs (Levinson 2003; Brown 2006). We present the results of a new referential communication task conducted in three Tseltal communities. The data show an overall preference for object-centered and landmark-based descriptions over absolute ones, which may be task-specific. The use of absolute FoRs varied drastically across the communities in correlation with the salience of topographic features. We argue that this variation does not represent evidence for environmental determinism of FoR use as proposed by Li & Gleitman 2002, but merely for environmental constraints on FoR use. These constraints derive from more general cognitive principles. We also consider evidence of change in FoR use due to contact with Spanish, as some speakers are introducing relative uses of ‘left’ and ‘right’.

Keywords: Tseltal, frames of reference, space, semantic typology

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