

The Path not Taken: Modality Effects and Grammatical Affordance in the Expression of Source, Goal and Path

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The spatial notions of Source, Goal and Path play an important role in our conceptualization of events, not only in the expression of spatial events, but also in events of other semantic fields such as possession, temporal expression and change of state (Gruber 1965, Jackendoff 1990). Spoken languages express and encode these relations in different ways, e.g. by lexical means, adpositions, particles and case morphemes. Usually, the grammatical morphemes involved encode the Source and the Goal notions ('from' and 'to'), while Path is inferred from the use of Source and Goal morphemes. Sign languages express these notions as well, but they do it in a slightly different way than spoken languages: the hand moves from a location in space associated with the Source towards a location associated with the Goal. The Path is explicitly expressed by the motion of the hand, and the Source and Goal are encoded by the direction of motion – the initial location of the sign is associated with the Source, and the final location with the Goal. The expression of Source, Goal and Path in sign languages is therefore iconic; the direction of motion is determined by real-world spatial relations.

I argue that the iconicity and the explicit expression of the Path available in the signed modality steer sign languages into specific linguistic uses that are different from those of spoken languages. Specifically, sign languages can express directly a rich array of types of paths (zig-zag, bumpy, ascending, descending and many more, including combinations of the above). However, they cannot use a Source-Goal Path to express change-of-state events (such as '*the light went from green to red*') because of the iconic and explicit expression of Path. Sign and spoken languages, then, express the spatial notions of a Source-Goal Path, but they do so by using different means, made available by their different modalities. These formal differences steer languages of the two modalities into different types of expression and grammatical uses.