Reference to Space in Chinese and English Poster Descriptions

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The present study compares reference to space in Chinese and English oral discourses elicited on the basis of a poster description task. In the last two decades, reference to space has received a lot of attention from linguists and acquisitionists alike. The typology for the expression of space in languages as proposed by L. Talmy instigated a lot of these studies cross-linguistically. Whereas reference to space is very much linked with our perceptual and cognitive systems (and may therefore be considered to be guided by universal factors), recent studies also show that languages have very different ways of expressing spatial information. For example, English is proposed to be satellite-framed, expressing manner of motion in the verb and path in the satellite; Chinese, on the other hand, seems to be an equipollent language (Slobin) that expresses path in both main verbs and satellites. These raise questions in the acquisitional context regarding the factors guiding acquisition: are they of a universal cognitive or of a language-specific nature? The comparison of discourses by English and Chinese natives will allow to address this question in more detail. In addition, the present task requires, on the part of speakers, not only spatial knowledge (introducing a spatial setting, keeping track of the hierarchical ordering of spatial information, etc.), but also knowledge about discourse coherence and cohesion overall.

Results of the present study show that Chinese resembles English with respect to frequency of the expression of explicit spatial relations and this is largely task-specific. The two differ in aspects such as the place of the location with respect to the rest of the information in the utterance, and types of spatial relations expressed in the poster description; and this is mainly of a language-specific nature.