

Slope-based geocentric descriptions in Chiapas Zoque: linguistic resources and patterns of use

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With the notable exception of the proposed link between productive “terminologies for object parts and spatial regions” and a dispreference for observer-based frames of reference (FoRs; Bohnemeyer and Pérez Báez (2008)), the connection between the linguistic resources of a language and the pattern of FoR use exhibited by its speakers is discussed infrequently in the literature. In this presentation, I will discuss the connection between the structure of spatial descriptions in Chiapas Zoque (a Mixe-Zoquean language spoken in the southern highlands of Mexico) and the pattern of use of a slope-based geocentric FoR across the three spatial domains.

The argument to be made is as follows. In CZ, the FoR-free semantics of those postpositions expressing horizontal spatial relations means that in order to describe the horizontal location of a figure relative to an explicitly stated ground object it is necessary to use a relational noun, as in example (1).

- (1) teʔ poʔkstək=ʔis j-tseʔɨna=ʔomo ʔit-u tumə pelota
DET chair=GEN 3PSR-RN:side.region=in EXIST-CMP one ball
‘There is a ball to the side of the chair’

The lack of a relational noun associated with the uphill/downhill part of an object therefore means that when locating an object using this geocentric FoR the ground object is left unstated and must therefore be retrieved from context, as in example (2).

- (2) teʔ karo ʔit-u kəsmə
DET truck EXIST-CMP above
‘The truck is further up the hill’

I argue that this underspecification of geocentric locative statements in CZ is connected to the low frequency with which they appear in my data. Given their differing conceptual structures (specifically, their lack of an obligatory ground) geocentric descriptions of orientation and motion in CZ do not suffer from the same issues of underspecification as described for locational descriptions. The considerable frequency with which geocentric descriptions occur in both of these

domains therefore counts as evidence in support of my thesis and against the notion of a general dispreference for geocentric descriptions.

Bohnemeyer, J. & G. Pérez Báez. 2008. Field manual: Mesospace, spatial language and cognition in mesoamerica. Manuscript.

URL: <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/jb77/MesoSpaceManual2008.pdf>