

Applied Linguistics Research Circle Weekly Talk

Representation of time in bilingual cognition: The case of duration

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Abstract

Time provides essential structure to human experience. People tend to talk about time using spatial concepts of distance and quantity (Casasanto & Boroditsky, 2008). This tendency exhibits considerable crosslinguistic variation. In English and Swedish, distance metaphors are typically used to convey duration (i.e., *long time/lång tid*). In Greek and Spanish, duration is commonly expressed through quantity metaphors (i.e. *poli ora/mucho tiempo*, 'much time'). Previous research shows that these language-specific tendencies to talk about time as distance or quantity affect the psychophysical experience of time in speakers of these languages. Specifically, findings from a duration estimation task, where stimulus duration conflicts with its physical growth, show that when reproducing duration, Swedish and English speakers are misled by stimulus length, and Spanish and Greek speakers are misled by stimulus size/quantity, consistent with the prevalent metaphors in their respective

languages (Casasanto, 2008; Bylund & Athanasopoulos, 2017). The current set of studies test the scope of such effects in bilingual cognition. We show that Spanish-Swedish bilinguals performing the duration estimation task in both languages behaved differently depending on language-specific contextual cues, and individual differences emerged as a function of frequency of language use and age of onset of bilingualism. These findings, interpreted under an associative learning account, reveal the malleable nature of representation as part of a highly adaptive computational system, where both the first and second languages can serve as powerful cues in transforming humans' experience of time.

Panos Athanasopoulos is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University. His multi-disciplinary research program addresses two fundamental questions in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The first concerns the extent to which language representations interact with cognitive processing of the perceived world (the classic Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that language shapes our thinking). The second probes the dynamic nature of these interactions, investigating the cognitive consequences of learning a new language with contrasting representations from the first (do bilinguals think differently?). His work on the representation of categories such as number, colour, gender, aspect, motion, space and time, has appeared in some of the most impactful journals in the fields of Linguistics and Psychology such as Applied Linguistics, Cognition, Language Learning and Psychological Science, as well as in documentaries for the BBC, in Science Magazine, and in the TEDx Talks series.