Encoding Events Across Languages

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Abstract

All languages must describe the same events in the world, yet the resources that languages have available for expressing certain types of events vary, giving rise to rather different ways of expressing such events across languages. The best known example of this type of cross-linguistic variation involves differences in the expression of motion events --- differences which have long been noted in manuals of translation and have more recently been introduced into the typological literature by Leonard Talmy. This talk will investigate systematic cross-linguistic similarities and divergences in the expression of events, primarily through a case study of the expression of motion events. Taking Talmy's observations as a starting point, I propose that differences among languages can be characterized in terms of the compositional resources available for expressing telic (i.e., bounded) events, rather than in terms of an inherent difference in language type (i.e., Talmy's path vs.~manner languages), as is more commonly done. This approach receives support from cross linguistic variation in the expressions of certain other event types, which can also be understood as involving compositional resources. In addition, I briefly discuss the implications of such systematic divergences across languages for natural language processing, in general, and machine translation, in particular.