

Scott Jarvis (Ohio University): “Explorations in conceptual transfer”

Scholars have long understood the distinction between conceptual knowledge and linguistic knowledge, with a necessary interface between the two (e.g., Chomsky, 1979). Linguistic theory has traditionally focused only on the latter, but relatively recent developments in both theory and empirical research have advanced our understanding concerning the ways in which both the content and processing mechanisms underlying human conceptual systems guide language use (e.g., Langacker, 1987; Levelt, 1989), and also concerning how certain facets of conceptual systems are language-specific (e.g., Lakoff, 1987; Talmy, 1988; Slobin, 1991; von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987). These advances have led to research on crosslinguistic influence designed to explore the hypothesis that some of the crosslinguistic effects that can be found in the language use of language learners, bilinguals, and multilinguals owe to influences that occur at the conceptual level either independently of or in combination with interactions that occur between their linguistic systems. This hypothesis is referred to as the Conceptual Transfer Hypothesis (Jarvis, 2007), and it intersects in various important respects with related hypotheses proposed by Levelt (1989), Kellerman (1995), Slobin (1991), and von Stutterheim and colleagues (e.g., von Stutterheim, 2003; von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987; von Stutterheim & Nüse, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to explore the Conceptual Transfer Hypothesis, first by clarifying the relationship between human conceptual systems and linguistic systems, then by discussing both clear cases and problematic cases of conceptual transfer and linguistic transfer, and finally by describing some of the most recent empirical work that has been done in this area.