The semantic domain of dressing and undressing cross-linguistically

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Although putting on and taking off clothes are among the most basic human activities, their linguistic expression has not been systematically studied so far. This paper approaches differences and regularities in how this semantic domain is cross-linguistically treated. Data were collected using a set of 32 specifically designed video clips as stimuli, involving a variety of pieces of clothing and accessories, such as socks, glasses, etc. Spontaneous descriptions of these events were recorded for a sample of 25 languages from a total of 75 speakers. Data were coded for identity vs. non-identity of the main lexical verbs of the response across stimuli (e.g. whether for putting on trousers and scarfs the same or a different verb was used) and the matrices thus obtained were analyzed using Multidimensional scaling (Figure 1).
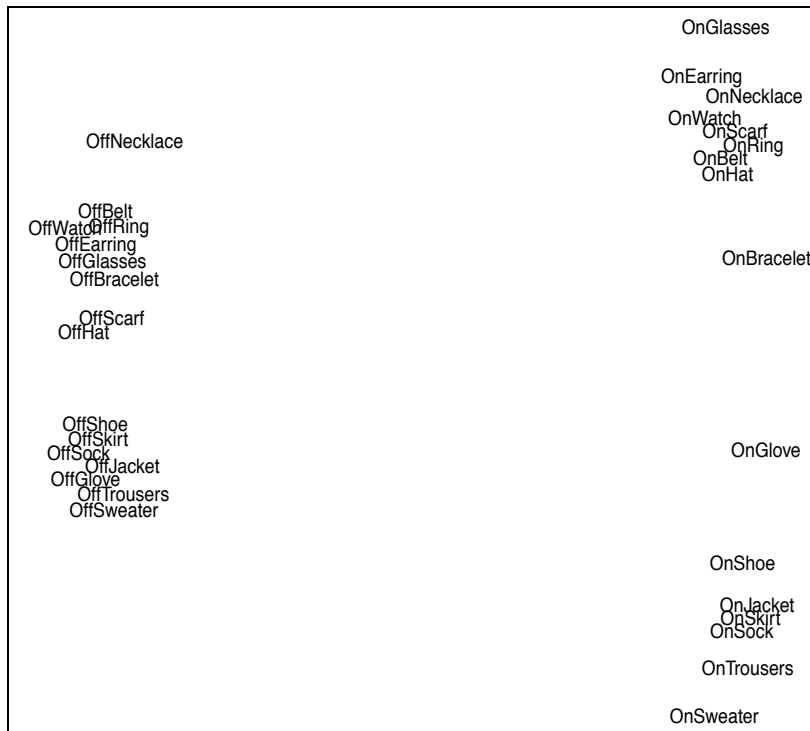

Figure 1: Multidimensional scaling plot of verbs for taking off and putting on clothes and accessories across 25 languages. The distance between the labels for events represents the number of languages in which the event are described by the same verb.

Here we report on two main results from this study. First, there are great differences in the number of verbs employed for events of putting on and taking off clothes. For instance, Haitian Creole speakers use only two verbs (one for putting on, one for taking off), while some speakers of German use up to 17 different verbs.

These differences are related to the distinction between verb vs. satellite frame languages: As suggested by Slobin (2003), satellite frame languages have rich manner-differentiated verbal lexica, while verb frame languages have fewer verbs.

Second, our data clearly show that the subdomain of putting on clothes is cross-linguistically far more differentiated than the subdomain of taking off clothes, i.e. languages tend to have more verbs for putting on than for taking off clothes. (Figure 1: To the left events of taking off, to the right putting on). This can be interpreted as a consequence of the *source-goal asymmetry*, i.e. "a fundamental cognitive basis in spatial representation, with preferential attention paid to endpoints of motion rather than sources" (Narasimhan et al. 2012:3), which has been postulated based on more limited data of related semantic domains. Additionally, languages clearly differentiate between clothes in a narrow sense (towards the bottom in Figure 1) and accessories such as jewelry and glasses (towards the top in Figure 1).

References

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