

Multimodal recipient mentions in possession-transfer event descriptions: language specificity outweighs conceptual peripherality

When describing events, speakers often do not include all event participants involved.¹ One reason for such omissions is the conceptual prominence of each participant role. Across languages, conceptually peripheral roles (e.g., RECIPIENTS, INSTRUMENTS) are mentioned less than conceptually prominent ones (e.g., AGENTS, PATIENTS).² However, not all conceptually peripheral roles are born equal. For instance, certain verbs conceptually “require” an otherwise syntactically optional recipient (e.g. *X sends a message to their friend*), while others “allow” one (e.g. *X bounced the ball to her friend*).³ Although this theoretical distinction is confirmed by English speakers’ judgments,⁴ it is unclear how it affects speakers’ syntactic choices in free event descriptions across languages. Further, speech is not the only modality used to describe events, and it is possible that omission of a participant role in speech is compensated by its inclusion in gesture.⁵ Here, we investigate how underlying conceptual requirements (i.e. the require-allow distinction) influence the content of multimodal possession-transfer event descriptions across languages. We use two typologically distinct languages (English, Turkish) that differ in the grammaticality of event participant omissions (Turkish allows argument drop, English does not) and the use of gesture (Turkish culture is high-gesture).⁶

Sixty participants (30 L1 Turkish, 30 L1 English) described short videos of everyday events ($n=36$) to a naïve interlocutor with maximal informational needs (friend of the speaker who could not see the events). Test events involved 12 possession-transfer events (6 require-recipient, 6 allow-recipient). We coded for recipient mentions in speech and gesture within the same clause as the main verb that described the event (e.g., *X bounced the ball to her friend*). We hypothesized that speakers should mention recipients more frequently when conceptually required than allowed, across both languages and modalities. Given that language-specific event encodings in speech also persist in gesture,⁵⁻⁷ we anticipated that recipients would be dropped more frequently in Turkish than in English in both modalities.

Beginning with recipient mentions in speech, a mixed-effects logistic regression showed no effect of Verb Type (require vs. allow) ($p = .807$, n.s.). Contrary to our predictions, speakers of both languages mentioned required and allowed recipients equally frequently ($M_{\text{Require}}=0.84$, $M_{\text{Allow}}=0.77$). Crucially, the model yielded a significant effect of Language ($p = .0041$) in the expected direction: English speakers mentioned recipients more frequently than Turkish speakers ($M_{\text{ENG}}=0.84$, $M_{\text{TUR}}=0.77$). Next, we analyzed recipient mentions in gesture. Observation of the data indicated that these were all gestures that co-occurred with mentions in speech. As in speech, there was no effect of Verb Type ($p = .599$, n.s.), but a significant effect of Language ($p < .001$). Interestingly, this effect was in the opposite direction: recipient gestures were used more frequently in Turkish than in English ($M_{\text{ENG}}=0.20$, $M_{\text{TUR}}=0.33$). Finally, we analyzed recipient mentions in both modalities. This revealed an effect of Language, with recipients being mentioned more in English than in Turkish ($p = .009$, $M_{\text{ENG}} = 0.71$, $M_{\text{TUR}} = 0.70$).

We found that language-specific encoding patterns heavily affect mention of recipients in free event descriptions across modalities. When both speech and gesture were considered, speakers of Turkish used recipients less frequently than speakers of English. In line with prior research,⁶ we found that recipient gestures were used more frequently in Turkish than in English. However, these were co-speech gestures that did not add additional information beyond what was encoded in speech. Taken together, these findings suggest that argument drop in Turkish persists across modalities. Contrary to our predictions, the require-allow distinction did not affect speakers’ mentions of recipients in any modality. We conclude that linguistic planning for recipient event roles is more heavily affected by language-specific encoding options than the gradient conceptual prominence of the roles.

References

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