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Moving between languages:

Comparison of systems for construing motion and translations of journeys

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As part of their ideational resources, all languages have systems for construing our experience of an entity moving through space — for construing the direction and path of motion, the phases of motion, the manner and means of motion, and so on. However, languages vary considerably in how they construe motion; for example, they vary in the division of labour between the logical mode of construing the experiential mode, they vary in how they distribute features of motion among processes, participants and circumstances, and they vary with respect to which features of motion tend to be lexicalized. Lexicalization patterns were explored by Talmy (1985), and since his seminal contribution he and others have developed his original study further as a contribution to linguistic comparison and typology (e.g. Talmy, 2000; Slobin, 2003; Lemmens, 2005). This has included work on the translation of representations of motion (e.g. Slobin, 2004), revealing how languages differ depending on the “affordances” of their systems for construing motion. This last point relates to James Lantolf’s comparison of the division of labour between language and gesture in the construal of motion in English and Spanish — his findings are important for interpreters moving between English and Spanish.

In this paper, I will interpret the comparison and typology of systems for construing our experience of motion through space in systemic functional terms, and relate this to an ongoing exploration of the translation of construals of motion in text, focussing in particular on registers where motion is foregrounded — narratives of journeys and topographic procedures (cf. Teich, 1999, and this symposium for the significance of register in translation and comparison, and the work on the CroCo project). In translating, we are always choosing among different interpretations of the source language text and among different possible ways of recreating the meanings of our preferred interpretation. Thus I will focus on choices in the construal of motion through space. I will relate comparison of systems to the study of the translation of instances (as part of a

general field of multilingual studies: see Matthiessen, Teruya & Wu, 2008). The point here is that an empirical theory of translation must draw on evidence from all points along the cline of instantiation.

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