

IEVA STASIŪNAITĒ

Vilnius University
ieva.stasiunaite@flf.vu.lt

On spatial relations in cross-linguistic studies: Different approaches to prepositional semantics

Although O’Keefe’s and Nadel’s (1978) discovery of the “GPS” inside our brain attests to the fact that spatial position and spatial memory are determined by universal neurophysiological features, cross-linguistic studies pinpoint some variation of space conceptualization across cultures in terms of a variety of spatial terms used (Comrie and Polinski 1998; Majid et al. 2004). In this presentation, the treatment of spatial semantics, prepositions in particular, as demonstrated by abundant papers on linguistic data from various languages will be examined. The traditional (descriptive) approach deals with prepositional meaning with respect to other words, i.e. syntagmatically and paradigmatically (Bennett 1975; Lindkvist 1976; Ambrazas 1997; Valiulytė 1998, Šukys 1998, among others). The other framework employs the principles of cognitive linguistics, highlighting the importance of the conceptual structuring of entities or relations in extra-linguistic reality for prepositional semantics (Herskovits 1988; Vandeloise 1991, 1994). This approach also attempts to account for prepositional polysemy and synonymy in terms of radial categories and the prototype theory (Lakoff 1987; Cuyckens 1993; Tabakowska 2010; Šeškauskienė and Žilinskaitė 2014, to name but a few). In the presentation, the benefits of both lines of investigation will be discussed so as to exhaust the intricacies of spatial semantics in one language and/or cross-linguistically, thus contributing to the development of lexicography, translation as well as in the process of learning and teaching.

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