

## Oops! Describing and remembering accidental agents in English, Spanish and Japanese

How do people talk about causal events? Do people say different things when talking about intentional events and accidental events? Do descriptions of these events differ across languages? Though cross-linguistic variation in causal language has been examined from several theoretical perspectives, little usage data exist to address these questions. Given that humans reason about agents and objects in causal events throughout life – often with important consequences such as attribution and sentencing of agents in legal contexts – it is worthwhile to consider the language that covaries with these situations. In addition to characterizing real language use, understanding how speakers of various languages differ in their descriptions of intentional and accidental events grounds predictions about variation in other social and cognitive causal reasoning across groups of speakers. In the current studies, we examined the relationship between talking about causal agents and memory for causal agents in speakers of English, Spanish and Japanese.

One source of variation in causal event descriptions is: *Jon broke the vase* (agentive) vs. *The vase broke* (non-agentive). Though both kinds of expression are grammatical in English, Spanish and Japanese, anecdotal reports suggest that the relative frequencies of agentive and non-agentive expressions in accidental event descriptions may differ across these groups of speakers. Because agentive expressions linguistically highlight agents of causal events, speakers who describe events using agentive language may better remember causal agents than speakers who describe the same events using non-agentive language. In our studies, monolingual speakers of English, Spanish and Japanese completed a causal agent memory task and a causal event description task. In the causal agent memory task, participants passively viewed videos of 16 causal events. Two causal agents appeared in four intentional and four accidental events each. After a brief delay, participants viewed videos in which a previously unseen agent performed each event. After viewing each video, participants answered the question “Who did it the first time?” by selecting one of two pictures of the original causal agents. Following the memory test, participants described each video.

Causal event descriptions in the three languages differed in an interesting way: Though speakers of all languages described intentional events using predominantly agentive language, they differed in their descriptions of accidents. English speakers used the most agentive language, followed by Spanish speakers, followed by Japanese speakers. Memory for agents patterned in a similar way, such that speakers of English and Spanish remembered intentional agents similarly well, but English speakers remembered accidental agents better than did Spanish speakers. Though Japanese speakers appeared to remember less information overall, current data suggest a trend such that Japanese speakers remembered intentional agents better than accidental agents. Speakers of English, Spanish and Japanese diverged in the extent to which their descriptions of accidental events mentioned causal agents, and also diverged in their memory for accidental agents. Habitual patterns of language use may bias memory: speakers who describe causal events differently remember causal events differently.