THE FORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF TEMPORALITY IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE WORLD

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Abstract

This article explores the formation and representation of the concept of temporality across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. By analysing linguistic structures, metaphors, and time-related expressions in different languages, the study reveals how temporality is not only a universal cognitive category but also a culturally constructed phenomenon. It shows that while all human languages express temporal relations, they do so in distinct ways that reflect underlying cultural models of time.

Keywords: Conceptualisation, communication, temporal relations, tense, aspect, adverbials, temporal metaphors.

Introduction

Temporality, or the experience and conceptualisation of time, is a fundamental category of human cognition and communication. Every language possesses grammatical and lexical means to express temporal relations, such as tense, aspect, adverbials, and temporal metaphors. However, the linguistic encoding of time varies significantly across cultures, suggesting that the concept of temporality is shaped by both universal cognitive structures and specific cultural influences. The objective of this article is to examine how different languages conceptualise time and how these conceptualisations reflect broader cultural worldviews. The study is situated at the intersection of linguistic anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and semantics, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of how temporality is linguistically and culturally constructed.

Methodology. The study adopts a comparative linguistic approach, examining data from a variety of typologically and geographically diverse languages.

Primary data sources include descriptive grammars, linguistic corpora, and scholarly studies on temporal semantics and metaphor. The analysis focuses on the following aspects:

- Grammatical encoding of time (tense, aspect, mood)
- Lexical expressions of time (temporal adverbs, calendar terms)
- Metaphorical models of time (e.g., time as space, motion, quantity)
- Cultural narratives and idioms involving temporality

Languages studied include English, Mandarin Chinese, Hopi, Amharic, and Aymara, each chosen for their distinct treatment of temporal relations.

Results. The analysis reveals several patterns in how temporality is encoded and conceptualised:

Grammatical and Lexical Strategies. Languages such as English and Russian use grammatical tense extensively to locate events in time, whereas others, like Mandarin Chinese, rely more on aspectual particles and contextual inference. Some languages, such as Hopi (according to Whorf), do not have tense in the conventional sense, challenging the idea of time as a linear sequence of events.

Spatial and Motion Metaphors. Many languages employ spatial metaphors to conceptualise time. For instance, English speakers often use expressions like "looking forward to the weekend" or "put the past behind," projecting time onto the spatial axis. In contrast, speakers of Aymara gesture backward when referring to the future, suggesting a different orientation toward the temporal unknown.

Cultural Models of Temporality. In Western cultures, time is commonly viewed as linear and commodified—"time is money." In contrast, some Indigenous cultures perceive time as cyclical or event-based, with a greater emphasis on natural cycles and communal activities. These conceptual differences are mirrored in linguistic structures, idioms, and discourse patterns.

Cultural Models of Temporality. The concept of time is not merely a grammatical or semantic construct, but a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon that shapes how individuals and communities perceive reality. Cultural models of temporality—collective cognitive frameworks that societies use to understand and structure time—differ considerably across linguistic and sociocultural environments. These models are reflected in language, customs, rituals, and

worldviews, influencing everything from daily routines to historical narratives and future planning.

Linear Time in Western Thought. In most Western industrialized cultures, time is predominantly viewed as **linear**, **measurable**, and **forward-moving**. This model, which has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and was solidified during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, sees time as a finite, divisible resource. The metaphor "time is money", popularized in modern capitalist economies, exemplifies this commodification of time. Calendars, clocks, schedules, and deadlines are central to this temporal model, underscoring values such as punctuality, efficiency, and progress. This linear view of time is also evident in language. English expressions like "looking ahead to the future", "putting the past behind", and "time flies" encode a unidirectional flow of time. This model supports an emphasis on planning, long-term goals, and individual achievement, which are often associated with Western educational, economic, and political institutions.

Cyclical Time in Indigenous and Agrarian Cultures. In contrast, many Indigenous and agrarian societies conceptualize time as **cyclical** or **event-based**. Time is understood in relation to natural rhythms—day and night, the lunar cycle, seasons, agricultural events, and rituals. In such cultures, the recurrence of phenomena takes precedence over linear measurement. The focus is on repetition, continuity, and harmony with the environment rather than on acceleration or productivity. For example, in many African cultures, time is often described using terms that relate to natural or social events. The Swahili language includes expressions like *"wakati wa mvua"* ("the time of rains"), which tie temporality to ecological cycles. Similarly, in traditional Chinese culture, rooted in Daoist and Confucian thought, time is conceived as a harmonious flow that aligns with cosmic and moral order, represented through concepts such as *yin and yang* and the **Five Phases (五行)**. This cyclical orientation is also mirrored in religious and philosophical texts. Hindu cosmology, for instance, posits vast cycles of creation and destruction (Yugas), indicating a non-linear, eternal recurrence of time. Such perspectives influence daily life, social structures, and even political ideologies, which may prioritise balance and renewal over rapid transformation.

Event-based Temporality in Oral Cultures. In many oral cultures, time is less of an abstract continuum and more of an **event-based** sequence. What matters is not the duration but the **occurrence** of significant actions. Events are remembered

and scheduled not according to precise dates but relative to social or natural markers—such as *"when the crops are ready"*, or *"after the birth of a child."* Time is experienced through its connection to human and environmental events, and is often flexible or fluid in social contexts.

For instance, among the Amondawa people of the Amazon, researchers have found no lexical items corresponding directly to "time" as an abstract noun. Instead, they track life stages and changes in status. In such settings, the lack of rigid temporal units does not indicate a primitive worldview but rather an alternative conceptualisation of temporality that is intimately bound to social and ecological interrelations.

Reverse Temporal Orientation: The Aymara Case. A particularly intriguing model comes from the Aymara people of the Andes. Studies have shown that Aymara speakers gesture **backward** when referring to the **future** and **forward** when speaking of the **past**, suggesting a conceptual inversion of time compared to the Western norm. The rationale is that the past is known and therefore visible—it lies "in front" of us—whereas the future is unknown and thus lies "behind." This metaphorical system reflects a philosophical orientation that values historical memory and collective experience over speculative anticipation.

The Digital-Age Model of Temporality. With the advent of globalisation and digital technologies, a new cultural model of temporality is emerging—characterised by **acceleration**, **simultaneity**, and **real-time responsiveness**. In many societies, especially urbanised and hyperconnected ones, time is increasingly perceived as compressed. Multitasking, instant communication, and the 24/7 cycle of media and commerce contribute to a sense of temporal immediacy. This has begun to alter linguistic practices as well, with emergent expressions like *"FOMO" (fear of missing out)* and *"real-time updates"* reflecting new perceptions of temporal flow and urgency. Cultural models of temporality illustrate how deeply time is embedded in linguistic and cultural systems. These models shape not only how time is spoken about but also how it is **perceived**, **valued**, and **lived**. Recognising this diversity is essential for understanding cross-cultural communication, translation, and the broader cognitive implications of language.

Discussion

The linguistic landscape of temporality reflects deep-seated cultural beliefs and cognitive orientations. While the existence of temporal expression is universal, the specific ways in which time is constructed vary greatly. This supports the hypothesis that language not only reflects thought but also shapes temporal cognition (cf. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis). Moreover, the metaphorical structuring of time provides insight into the interplay between language and conceptualisation. The predominance of spatial metaphors in many languages suggests that humans conceptualise abstract categories through embodied experiences, aligning with theories from cognitive linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These findings have implications for translation studies, intercultural communication, and AI language modelling, where mismatches in temporal frameworks can lead to misunderstanding or data misrepresentation.

Conclusion

Temporality is a core element of human experience, yet its linguistic realisation reveals remarkable diversity. The study confirms that while humans share the need to express time, the ways they do so are shaped by cultural, cognitive, and linguistic factors. Understanding these differences is essential for fostering intercultural understanding and for advancing theoretical models of language and cognition.

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