

Goal bias in using spatial language to describe changing quantities

Vinicius Macuch Silva

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Alexandra Lorson

University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Greg Woodin

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Bodo Winter

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

Numbers and space are associated in the mind, and in language. We investigate 6,400 instances of verbs indicating vertical movement (e.g., rise, fall, decline) or size-based changes (e.g., contract, grow, extend) in four corpora, showing that 60% of all uses occur in quantitative contexts (e.g., ‘prices rose’). For concrete spatial language, it has been found that movement goals are more likely encoded than sources (e.g., Lakusta & Landau 2005, Stefanowitsch, 2018). We demonstrate that this asymmetry carries over to spatial-numerical language, which more often encodes goals (e.g., ‘revenue went up to 48 million’) than sources (e.g., ‘share prices rose from \$7.13’). In line with their path-related meaning, vertical verbs showed a much higher propensity to encode endpoints (20%) than size-based verbs (10%), a large effect (Cohen’s $d = 2.0$). These results show that the goal bias attested for spatial language carries over to abstract conceptual domains.