

Re: Tribe Looks Forward to Past

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2005-02/2786.html>

From: John Swindle (jcswindle_at_msn.deletethispart.com)

Date: 02/27/05

Date: Sun, 27 Feb 2005 11:39:35 GMT

"Dan Clore" <clore@columbia-center.org> wrote in message
news:38dee7F5c2ihuU2@individual.net...

> <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/edit/archives/2005/02/27/2003224800>

>

> *Tribe looks forward to the past*

> *For the Aymara people living in the Andes, the past lies ahead and the*

> *future lies behind. Take a look at how different languages reflect -- and*

> *shape -- our conception of time*

>

> *THE GUARDIAN , LONDON*

> *Sunday, Feb 27, 2005, Page 9*

>

> *The old man shields his eyes against the fierce light of the Altiplano and*

> *considers the question. When he talks about his ancestors, does he mean*

> *the Incas? No, he replies in a sort of Spanish creole, he means his*

> *great-great-grandfather. And with his right hand he makes a rotating*

> *gesture up and forwards from his body. The Incas, he adds, came way*

> *earlier. And with the same hand he sweeps even further forward, towards*

> *the mountains on the horizon.*

> . . .

> *Lakoff and Johnson realized that not only could different languages use*

> *different metaphors for time, but a single language could contain more*

> *than one metaphor. In English, for instance, speakers switch between at*

> *least two different frames of reference when discussing the order of*

> *events, a trick Nunez has demonstrated in a simple experiment. Ask any*

> *randomly selected group of English speakers to answer this question: if a*

> *meeting scheduled for Wednesday is moved forward two days, what day will*

> *it fall on?*

>

> *"More or less 50 percent of the people will say Friday, and 50 percent*

> *will say Monday," Nunez says.*

>

> *The word "moved" allows the ambiguity that the meeting is either being*

> *moved forward in time, meaning it will happen later, or being brought*

> *closer in time to the person. The reason for the split in answers is that*

> *half the people are using themselves as a reference. Time is moving*

> *towards them, so "forward" denotes into the future, hence Friday. But it*

- > *is also possible to think in a temporal reference frame that excludes ego,*
- > *as in, "Monday follows Sunday."*
- >
- > *In that case, it is as if the speaker is looking out onto a landscape or*
- > *conveyor belt of time from which he or she is removed. And on that*
- > *conveyor belt, later events come after, or behind earlier ones. So moving*
- > *the meeting forward means moving it to Monday.*
- >
- > *A complex system of rules governs which metaphor is appropriate in a given*
- > *context, but as Nunez's experiment demonstrates, some situations are*
- > *ambiguous. . . .*
- > . . .
- >

I have long wondered why we say in English both that our fathers were here before us and that the future lies before us. Surely one or the other should be behind us. And, of course, both are! The past is behind us, and our descendents will come after us.

Does anyone think the «Guardian» article resolves the paradox satisfactorily for English?

Also, does any language lack such confusion? American Sign Language has it or can be made to have it, I think; all you have to do is have the guys follow one another, and there's my late father out in front of me again, instead of behind me where references to the past belong (unlike Aymara gesture). Or am I remembering ASL wrong?