Homework III Experiment Write-Up

The Aymara peoples use metaphor to describe the past as being in front of them and the future behind. They do this through both words and gestures. This is counterintuitive to English speakers who use the opposite spatial metaphor to describe time. I would be interested in knowing if speakers of the Aymara language think about the past and the future differently from English speakers. My hypothesis is that they see the past as more important than the future because they are facing it. They may also believe that since the future is behind them, it is something that cannot be predicted.

The experiment would start with a story about a boy who goes through life and makes various decisions based on what has happened to him in the past and what he expects will happen to him in the future. Subjects will then be asked to rank these decisions based on what they think made the most sense or were the most important. They will also be asked to explain why they made their choices. My hypothesis is that the Aymaran speakers will show preference for the decisions based on the past and the English speakers will prefer the future-based decisions.

This study has major limitations, especially with the story. The translations need to be accurate and it needs to be clear why the boy makes the decisions he does. It should also avoid spatial time metaphors, to prevent priming the readers and influencing their ranking at the end. The study also lacks a measurable result that does not involve language.

The result that would confirm my hypothesis is one where the Aymaran speakers rank past decisions higher than future ones compared to the English speakers. This would suggest that they do trust what they ‘see’ in front of them more than the unknown (the past and future, respectively). The opposite result (with Aymaran ranking future decisions higher) would be a very interesting one and hard to characterize. Perhaps because you see the past and already know what happened, it doesn’t matter if you use that information in the present. Either way, both results would confirm relativity for a difference between these languages.

The final result would be a mixed bag of answers, with speakers from both languages raking decisions inconsistently. This would suggest there is no relativity, the experiment was flawed, or both.