

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

How our minds construct the past, present and future depends on our relationship with time

January 3, 2018 10.43am GMT

Pexels

Author



Sarah Duffy

Senior Lecturer in Languages and Linguistics, Northumbria University, Newcastle

New Year has arrived, or have we arrived at New Year? While both statements convey the same idea, they are viewed from two different perspectives on time.

On the one hand, we may think of events as things that are on the move, heading towards us. “Holidays are coming” is a classic example of the “moving time” perspective. Time is seen as an unstoppable train, hurtling towards us from the future and into the past.

On the other hand, we might imagine ourselves as being on the move through time, as in: “We’ve arrived at the moment of truth” – the “moving ego” perspective. Here, time is seen as a path for us to move along, into the future.

While these perspectives differ, they both see the past lying behind us, the present as the place where we are, and the future as ahead of us. But does our perspective on time simply boil down to a matter of preference or are other factors also at play?

Join our readers who subscribe to free evidence-based news

[Get newsletter](#)

Forwards or backwards?

Although many languages across the globe picture the future as in front of us and the past as behind us, there are notable exceptions. The Yupno community of Papua New Guinea, for instance, point downhill towards the mouth of the river when talking about the past, and up the mountain to the source of the river when discussing the future. An expression like “a few years ago” (omoropmo bilak) roughly translates as “down there other side year”.

In other languages, people’s perspectives on time differ radically from the way they speak about time. That is, there are “disassociations” between the two. A case in point is Darija – a Moroccan dialect of modern Arabic – where both the future and the past can be seen as something that lies ahead of us.

In one study, speakers of Darija completed a number of time related tasks, such as matching objects to boxes representing the future and the past. Here, individuals were more likely to position the future as behind the speaker and the past as in front of them – opposite to the arrangement found in the Arabic language.



Janus, the Roman God of beginnings and endings, looking into the past and future. Author provided (no reuse)

One suggested reason for this is that compared to many Europeans and Americans, Moroccans tend to be more past focused. They place more value on tradition, as well as more importance on older generations. In this way, people who focus on the past devote more attention to it – as though past events were objects that they could see with their eyes.

In other words, differences in perspectives on time can be rooted in what we focus on. But does our focus always remain the same or does it change from time to time?

Temporal milestones

Temporal milestones, such as landmark birthdays, the changing seasons, as well as new beginnings can affect people’s mindsets – particularly their perspectives on time.

For many, New Year provides an opportunity to start afresh, to reset the clock, or to make resolutions for the future. Google searches for gym visits, as well as commitments to pursue goals – such as learning something new or helping others – all increase at the start of the year.

In this way, the arrival of New Year can interrupt our attention from our day-to-day activities. The effect is that people are more likely to psychologically distance their “current” self from their “past” self – as they take a big picture view of their lives and aspire towards their new, more positive self image.

For better, for worse

Another culprit that affects people’s perspectives on time is how they feel about an event in question. When asked to imagine a negative event in the future, like an examination, people are more likely to

think of it as approaching them. By contrast, positive events in the future, like weddings, are seen as things that we actively move towards.

Of course, there are also personality related differences in attitudes towards events in time. The anticipation of lengthy social gatherings – such as birthday parties or reunions – may sound more appealing to extroverts than introverts. In the words of the introverted author Sophia Dembling:

If parties were roller coasters, extroverts would be the riders with their arms in the air, and introverts would be the ones hanging on with a white-knuckled grip

All in all, this paints a quite a complex picture of time. Differences in perspectives emerge on every level, from language and culture, to temporal milestones and personal attitudes. And in this way, how you see in the New Year might actually reveal more about your frame of mind than you had realised.

So whether you've arrived at New Year or New Year has arrived, whether it's in front of you or behind, whether you doffed your hat to it quietly from the comforts of your own home or from a crowded room – whatever your view, one thing's for sure, it happens regardless.



[Time](#) [Language](#) [Papua New Guinea](#) [Culture](#) [New Year](#) [New Year 2017](#) [Arabic](#)
[time zones](#)