The role of words and language in categorisation

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What is the relationship between words and categorisation? There is a range of theoretical positions on this question. According to the strong Whorfian view, words determine our categories (Whorf 1956). On the other hand, the universalist view claims that our categories are independent of language (Chomsky 1975). Several decades of empirical research have shown that neither of these extremes is tenable: language appears to influence but not determine our categories and concepts. However, this general weak Whorfian position is quite vague, and will remain such until we know more about when and how much words affect categorisation, and can explain how and why they do so.

One important but unresolved weak Whorfian issue concerns the social aspects of language. There is evidence that people converge on common labels for objects via linguistic interaction (e.g., Markman & Makin 1998). However, not much is known about how such social linguistic interaction might affect subsequent non-linguistic categorisation.

In this talk, I will first introduce an empirical framework based on "linguistic" and "non-linguistic" categorisation tasks, largely borrowed from Malt et al. (1999). I will then show provisional results of a replication experiment demonstrating a dissociation between linguistic and non-linguistic categorisation, in line with Malt et al, and in conflict with a strong Whorfian position. Finally, I will present the basic design of my current experiment, which concerns the social issue described above. In particular, the experiment tries to assess whether coordinated linguistic interaction between individuals brings their non-linguistic categorisation closer together.

References

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