

Language Shapes Thought: An Experimental Study on English and Mandarin Native Speakers' Sequencing of Size

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Abstract : Does the language we speak affect the way we think? This question has been discussed for a long time from different aspects. In this article, the issue is examined with an experiment on how speakers of different languages tend to do different sequencing when it comes to the size of general objects. An essential difference between the usage of English and Mandarin is the way we sequence the size of places or objects. In English, when describing the location of something we may say, for example, 'The pen is inside the trashcan next to the tree at the park.' In Mandarin, however, we would say, 'The pen is at the park next to the tree inside the trashcan.' It's clear that generally English use the sequence of small to big while Mandarin the opposite. Therefore, the experiment was conducted to test if the difference of the languages affects the speakers' ability to do the different sequencing. There were two groups of subjects; one consisted of English native speakers, another of Mandarin native speakers. Within the experiment, three nouns were showed as a group to the subjects as their native languages. Before they saw the nouns, they would first get an instruction of 'big to small', 'small to big', or 'repeat'. Therefore, the subjects had to sequence the following group of nouns as the instruction they get or simply repeat the nouns. After completing every sequencing and repetition in their minds, they pushed a button as reaction. The repetition design was to gather the mere reading time of the person. As the result of the experiment showed, English native speakers reacted more quickly to the sequencing of 'small to big'; on the other hand, Mandarin native speakers reacted more quickly to the sequence 'big to small'. To conclude, this study may be of importance as a support for linguistic relativism that the language we speak do shape the way we think.

Keywords : language, linguistic relativism, size, sequencing

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