

The role of language and words in conceptual coordination

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While previous research has shown that people tend to align their descriptions of referents (Brennan & Clark 1996), little is known about language's role in underlying conceptual coordination. When people attempt to coordinate their conceptualisations of things in the world, language can be involved at at least two levels. First, dialogue can be used to discuss and coordinate concepts explicitly. Second, the particular words that people use to label their categories can help others understand their conceptualisations. But is language crucial to conceptual coordination, or does it become redundant when people have an alternative and more direct heuristic of each others' concepts? In particular, how important are dialogue and category labels when pitted against direct referential snapshots of concept extensions?

I am investigating these questions using a free classification paradigm (Malt et al. 1999) with participant pairs and fluid spaces of stimuli. Participants carry out a sequence of categorisation tasks, in each of which they freely sort a set of pictures of objects or shapes into self-labeled categories. In each task, their goal is to partition the pictures as similarly as possible to their partner. The key variables being manipulated are whether participants are allowed to speak to each other during the tasks, and what kind of feedback participants receive of their partner's categories after each task (i.e., their picture groupings, their category labels, both or neither). To date, results suggest that dialogue greatly improves conceptual coordination, while the more subtle impact of category labels is still under investigation.

References

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