

CLASSIFIERS AND CATEGORIZATION OF OBJECTS BY NATIVE AND NONNATIVE SPEAKERS OF CHINESE

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Abstract:

The impact of classifier categories on object concepts has always been an enlightening research topic to explore the relations between language and concept. Though previous findings were controversial, recent studies suggested that classifier system may not affect conceptual organization so much as assumed. However, the typical experimental tasks adopted in these studies, such as the Categorization match task or the Similarity task, could not exclude the possible influence from the inherent similarity among stimuli. This study used a modified Categorization match task to investigate whether a language featured by numeral classifiers affects conceptual structure of speakers. With the manipulated stimuli, which would not present distinctly similar or different features to the extent that they can be easily identified, a questionnaire booklet containing 22 triads of objects was constructed, each consisting of the target, classifier item and control item. The study tested two groups of participants, 25 native speakers of Mandarin (a classifier language) and 25 native speakers of English (a language without classifiers), with the booklet in their language version respectively. The results from two versions of match task show that there was no significant difference ($p=0.188$) between two groups on the overall rate of classifier item choice and thus no significant effect of language here. Speakers of English chose slightly more same-classifier items (52.55%) than control items. However, the opposite was true for speakers of Chinese, with slightly less same-classifier choices (48%) than control ones. The findings could verify that two groups might not organize their object concepts in drastically different ways. Moreover, this study indicates that, speakers of a classifier language are not more sensitive to the organization of classifier categories than speakers of a non-classifier language. The seemingly counter-intuitive phenomenon, which is somewhat different to key previous findings, is discussed.

Keywords:

classifiers; object concepts; categorization; linguistic relativity