

Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time



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Abstract

Does the language you speak affect how you think about the world? This question is taken up in three experiments. English and Mandarin talk about time differently—English predominantly talks about time as if it were horizontal, while Mandarin also commonly describes time as vertical. This difference between the two languages is reflected in the way their speakers think about time. In one study, Mandarin speakers tended to think about time vertically even when they were thinking for English (Mandarin speakers were faster to confirm that March comes earlier than April if they had just seen a vertical array of objects than if they had just seen a horizontal array, and the reverse was true for English speakers). Another study showed that the extent to which Mandarin–English bilinguals think about time vertically is related to how old they were when they first began to learn English. In another experiment native English speakers were taught to talk about time using vertical spatial terms in a way similar to Mandarin. On a subsequent test, this group of English speakers showed the same bias to think about time vertically as was observed with Mandarin speakers. It is concluded that (1) language is a powerful tool in shaping thought about abstract domains and (2) one's native language plays an important role in shaping habitual thought (e.g., how one tends to think about time) but does not entirely determine one's thinking in the strong Whorfian sense.