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Authors

Schimmel, Emerson

Madar, Clarissa

Wu, Sarah H.

et al.

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Does Experiencing an “Inner Voice” Predict Language-Driven Categorical Perception?

Emerson Schimmel

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Clarissa Madar

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Sarah Wu

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Liantao Shan

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Norah Waldorf

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Stephen Flusberg

Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, United States

Kevin Holmes

Reed College, Portland, Oregon, United States

Abstract

Some people say they routinely think in an “inner voice,” while others assume this phrase is just a figure of speech. Across two preregistered experiments ($N = 190$), we investigated whether such subjective differences in internal verbalization predict attested effects of language on perceptual discrimination. Participants completed a canonical discrimination task assessing language-driven categorical perception of facial expressions, plus a self-report measure of internal verbalization and other modes of mental representation. The results replicated the behavioral signatures of categorical perception—faster and more accurate responses for cross-category than within-category discriminations. However, the strength of these effects was unrelated to participants’ propensity for internal verbalization. Our findings suggest that subjective experiences of inner voice use are not a reliable indicator of linguistic involvement in perceptual discrimination. These findings add to an emerging body of research showing that even large differences in mental experiences often lack clear behavioral consequences.