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Usage frequency predicts lexicalization across languages

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Abstract

Languages are more likely to have lexical items for some concepts (e.g. CHILD) than others (e.g. PARENT). We propose that the communicative need of a concept influences how often it is lexicalized across languages, and test the hypothesis that usage frequency (which also reflects communicative need) predicts lexicalization across languages. Our analyses consider more than a thousand concepts, and demonstrate that average usage frequency across dozens of languages is a relatively good predictor of the typological prevalence of lexicalization across hundreds of languages. This finding implies that cross-linguistic regularities in lexicalization can be attributed in part to shared communicative need across cultures.