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Cross-linguistic transfer of informativeness biases in the kinship domain

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Abstract

Different languages map words to concepts in distinct ways, and this can result in "semantic accents" in multilingual individuals. For example, Hindi kinship terms make several distinctions not made in English, e.g., "older sister" (didi) vs. "younger sister" (behen). This study expands on previous literature to assess whether informativeness biases present in one's native language impact word choice when speaking non-native languages, particularly in development when semantic networks are in flux. We expect that, when asked to refer in English to individuals who differ along dimensions such as seniority or lineage, Hindi native-speaking children will more frequently use modifiers such as "older" or "maternal" than English native-speaking children. Preliminary results from Hindi-speaking participants (N = 74, M(age) = 14;2) suggest that their use of modifiers decreases as their level of English proficiency increases, in line with recent research proposing distinct but mutually influential lexical networks in multilingual speakers' languages.

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