

Spatial language and visual attention: A new approach to test linguistic relativity.

Florian Goller

University of Vienna, Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Soonja Choi

University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Ulrich Ansorge

University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Abstract

It is debated how far-reaching effects of language on cognition are - if they exist at all. Using a visual search paradigm, we tested whether native Korean and German speakers are differentially sensitive to visual 3D-object composites that only the Korean, but not the German (nor the English), language semantically distinguishes as tight- versus loose-fit. We instructed our participants to search for a colour-defined target composite among distractors. However, targets were also implicitly signalled by their tight- or loose-fit composites. Only Korean speakers picked up on this implicit target-defining characteristic, reflected in attention capture by target-similar composites. As these concepts are not grammaticalised in the German language, our results demonstrate that language can determine which visual features capture attention. Our research introduces a novel approach because processing of the linguistically discriminated visual characteristics was neither instructed nor necessary for the task, demonstrating a case of linguistic relativity of cognition.