Kinship Terms as Tools for Thinking

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Culturally evolved and transmitted "tools for thinking" shape, facilitate, and enhance human cognition.

We argue that conceptual structures underlying particular words and constructions can be considered such tools: when learning to use them in language, their representational power opens new possibilities for our reasoning capacity, not replacing but complementing existing ones.

Our results suggest that subjects reason with routinised complex concepts as fast and accurate as with their less complex counterparts while still being able to access the conceptual constituents underlying those complex concepts in full. This is consistent with the idea that, given certain constraints on reasoning capacity (e.g., working memory), the actual performance can be enhanced through usage of "thinking tools" acquired in a cultural environment.

Experiment

Method

Hypothesis

Operationalisation

Results accuracy

Results RT

Interpretation

References

Human social and cultural transmission takes place through imitation, instruction, and collaborative learning, but also implicitly through language: The symbolic representations that children learn in their social interactions with other persons (pick-up spade, say "cat") are of categorising experience within a culture, using a series of culturally evolved and transmitted "tools for thinking". These are conceptual structures underlying particular words and constructions that are familiar to us, and that are themselves acquired through our cultural heredity.

The conventions of our languages commit us to categorising the world in a specific way, which then determines our thinking (Tomasello, 1999).

We hypothesise that packages have the same effect on the efficiency of reasoning as cognitive tools that are familiar to us, and that are themselves acquired through our cultural heredity. These are conceptual structures underlying particular words and constructions that are familiar to us, and that are themselves acquired through our cultural heredity.

We argue that conceptual structures underlying particular words and constructions can be considered such tools: when learning to use them in language, their representational power opens new possibilities for our reasoning capacity, not replacing but complementing existing ones.

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Experiment

see handout for more details

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Results RT

Interpretation

more complex terms do not complicate reasoning

References


Boyd & Richerson 1985; Tomasello 1999; Mesoudi 2011

cf. Steven Pinker (2007)

cf. Benjamin Whorf (1956)

cf. Lera Boroditsky (2011)

Tomasello, M. (1999, 95-96)

cf. Jerry Fodor (1975)

cf. Tomasello 1999; Dennett 2000