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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

It's Complicated: Improving Decisions on Causally Complex Topics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/18d6t38s>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 43(43)

Authors

Kleinberg, Samantha

Marsh, Jessecae

Publication Date

2021

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Peer reviewed

It's not so simple: morphosyntactically simpler languages are not always easier to learn

Arturs Semenuks

University of California, San Diego, San Diego, California, United States

Abstract

Are morphosyntactically simpler languages easier to learn? In theory building and empirical work alike, researchers often assume so. While plausible, this assumption nevertheless requires empirical confirmation. To test it, we manipulate form-to-meaning transparency (FtMT) and morphophonemic cohesion (MC) in three large-scale artificial language learning experiments with English and Mandarin participants. We find that (a) FtMT doesn't affect learnability for all semantic domains (for English speakers, the more transparent marking of plural number in a separate morpheme increases learnability with nouns, but not with pronouns); (b) MC similarly affects learnability in a domain dependent fashion (expressing subjects and verbs in two words, as opposed to one concatenated word, increases learnability with nouns, but not with pronouns); (c) the effects are L1 dependent (pronouns behave like English nouns in regards to plural marking for Mandarin speakers). Taken together, the results falsify the strong hypothesis that simpler languages are necessarily easier to learn.