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Journal

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

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Publication Date

2021

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Re-examining cross-cultural similarity judgements using lexical co-occurrence

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Abstract

Is "cow" more closely related to "grass" or "chicken"? Speakers of different languages judge similarity in this context differently, but why? One possibility is that cultures co-varying with these languages induce variation in conceptualizations of similarity. Specifically, East Asian cultures may promote reasoning about thematic similarity, by which cow and grass are more related whereas Western cultures may bias similarity judgements toward taxonomic relations, like cow-chicken. This difference in notions of similarity is the consensus interpretation for cross-cultural variation in this paradigm. We consider, and provide evidence for, an alternative possibility, by which notions of similarity are equivalent across contexts, but the statistics of the environment vary. On this account, similarity judgements are guided by co-occurrence in experience, and observing or hearing about cows and grass or cows and chickens more often could induce preferences for the relevant grouping, and account for apparent differences in notions of similarity across contexts.