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Authors

Gudde, Harmen
Coventry, Kenny

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Language and Spatial Memory in Japanese and English

Harmen Gudde

University of East Anglia

Kenny Coventry

University of East Anglia

Abstract: Demonstratives are among the most frequent words in all languages, but demonstrative systems vary considerably between languages. In two experiments, we tested demonstrative use and the influence of demonstratives on spatial memory in Japanese and English – languages with purportedly very different demonstrative systems. Participants engaged in a ‘memory game’, tapping their use of demonstratives to describe objects located on a sagittal plane (Experiment 1) and the influence of demonstratives on memory for object location (Experiment 2). In addition to distance from speaker, the experiments also manipulated the position of a conspecific (next to or opposite participants). Distance and position of conspecific both affected demonstrative choice and memory in Japanese, with similar effects in English even though English does not explicitly encode the position of a conspecific. We discuss possible universals underlying demonstrative systems and the influence of language on memory.