Title
Cognitive biases for word order between numeral, classifier and noun

Authors
Wang, Fang
Kirby, Simon
Culbertson, Jennifer

Peer reviewed

Cognitive biases for word order between numeral, classifier and noun

Fang Wang
University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Simon Kirby
The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Jennifer Culbertson
University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Abstract

Numeral classifiers are a noun categorization device found in many East and Southeast Asian languages. Their syntactic status is debated: some theories treat them as forming a constituent with the noun, others with the numeral. Typological data on how classifiers, numerals, and nouns are ordered largely support the classifier-with-numeral hypothesis: orders in which the noun intervenes between the numeral and the classifier are unattested. However, typological evidence is problematic in this case, because the distribution of classifiers is highly geographically constrained, and ordering tendencies may reflect language contact. In this study, we look for evidence of the syntactic status of classifiers using artificial language learning experiments. We test whether learners' preference among patterns are predicted by one of these two accounts. Results suggest that, if anything, learners in fact prefer orders that group classifiers with the numeral.