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The cognition of categorisation: nominal classification systems

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Abstract

Systems of nominal classification act as a functional means of categorisation, yet the number and type of categories within these systems vary considerably across languages. The impact of vastly different classification systems on the cognitive representations of concepts is intriguing. We designed a suite of experiments to compare classifier systems in six Oceanic languages, chosen because their inventory of classifiers ranges from two to 23. Effective categorisation needs to be informative to maximise communicative efficiency, but also simple to minimise cognitive load. Our sample languages allow us to investigate the trade-off between the two principles of informativeness and simplicity to shed light on the relative optimality of their classification systems. Results from 122 participants across three experiments (free listing, card sorting, video vignettes) indicate that cognitive salience varies as a function of classifier inventory. We discuss the implications of these results for the nature of nominal classification.

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