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Interdisciplinary Master Programme
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Language and Thought: Spatial Semantics & Spatial Cognition from Infancy to Adulthood

Languages differ significantly in the way they categorize spatial relations. For example, English makes a distinction between containment (e.g. putting an apple IN a bowl) and support (e.g. putting a cup ON a table), whereas Korean makes a distinction between loose fit and tight fit regardless of containment and support. In Korean, the verb KKITA 'tight fit or interlock' is used for both a tight-fit containment relation such as 'putting a book tightly in its box-shaped cover' and a tight-fit support relation such as 'putting a Lego piece tightly onto another'.

The extensiveness of cross-linguistic differences in spatial semantic categorization found in recent studies on adult grammars raises questions about when and how children acquire the spatial semantic system of their native language, and more generally, about the relationship between language and cognition in children and adults. In this talk, I present studies that examine language-specific input and spatial cognition in learners and adult speakers of English and Korean. In particular, I examine whether and to what extent language-specific semantics can influence nonverbal spatial categorization involving tight fit, containment and support. Overall, my studies show that there is a dynamic interaction between language and cognition from an early age and that language starts to influence spatial cognition as children use spatial words productively. However, some perceptual aspects persist and contribute to spatial categorization in certain contexts regardless of language-specific input.

13.01.2012 | 13.30

Hörsaal 2i, NIG (Neues Institutsgebäude)

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Prof. Choi's talk is organized by the Cognitive Science Research Platform at the University of Vienna and the MEi:CogSci Programme (Middle European Interdisciplinary Master Programme in Cognitive Science).