

Anne White – Abstract

Categorization of Everyday Objects: A Cross-Linguistic IRT-Study

Cross-linguistic research has shown that boundaries for lexical categories differ from language to language. Exploring these language specific differences by means of an IRT-approach (Item Response Theory) enabled us to evaluate within group differences in relation to between group differences. A category judgment task for four roughly equivalent categories with 40 items per category was performed by monolingual Dutch- (N=400) and French-speaking (N=300) Belgian adults (age 17 to 75). The stimulus sets consisted of pictures of storage containers, including good, borderline, and bad examples for each of the target lexical categories. Differential Item Functioning Analysis identified large differences in the internal category structure of roughly equivalent categories in the two languages. In spite of these large differences between the two language groups, a mixture IRT-approach did not succeed in identifying the two language groups based on categorization patterns. Per category, two to five latent groups of categorizers were identified that only partially corresponded with the two language groups. A multinomial logistic regression analysis showed that apart from language, age played a significant role in the prediction of membership of a particular group of categorizers. Complex patterns of lexical variation thus exist, not only shaped by language but also by age.