

# **Analogical comparison of semantic categories across languages challenges beliefs about category discreteness**

**Sarah Q. Husney**

Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

**Andrew Kopel**

Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

**Kevin Holmes**

Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

## **Abstract**

People often categorize the world in absolutes, believing that certain words demarcate categories with discrete boundaries. This belief in category discreteness is a signature of psychological essentialism that stands in contrast to the observation that category boundaries differ markedly across languages. Here we show that learning about such semantic diversity via analogical comparison reduces the tendency to think of categories in discrete terms. Participants who compared contrasting categories from different languages in several semantic domains were less likely to endorse statements about category discreteness than those exposed to the same categories separately or those in a no-exposure control group. These results suggest that comparing the semantic systems of different languages, and thereby discerning alignable differences between them, can facilitate more flexible conceptions of categories. To the extent that cross-language comparison occurs spontaneously in individuals with access to more than one semantic system, such conceptual flexibility may be a natural consequence of bilingualism.