

Usage frequency predicts lexicalization across languages

Temuulen Khishigsuren

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Francis Mollica

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Ekaterina Vylomova

The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Charles Kemp

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Abstract

Languages are more likely to have lexical items for some concepts (e.g. CHILD) than others (e.g. PARENT). We propose that the communicative need of a concept influences how often it is lexicalized across languages, and test the hypothesis that usage frequency (which also reflects communicative need) predicts lexicalization across languages. Our analyses consider more than a thousand concepts, and demonstrate that average usage frequency across dozens of languages is a relatively good predictor of the typological prevalence of lexicalization across hundreds of languages. This finding implies that cross-linguistic regularities in lexicalization can be attributed in part to shared communicative need across cultures.