

Revisiting linguistic relativity: Lessons from colour, body part and object naming studies

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Most studies of colour naming and categorisation have since the year 1969 been driven by the extremely influential universalistic theory by Berlin and Kay whose thesis postulates that 1) every language has evolved colour terms and 2) so-called ‘basic colour terms’ emerge to language in a certain way during the process of their evolution. However, the thesis of every language having between 2 and 11 basic colour terms has strongly been opposed by scholars embracing the idea of linguistic diversity, i.e. the concept that languages seem to differ in how they categorise and name colour. Using a typological database of colour, containing data of list, colour-naming and sorting tasks of numerous languages, both genetically close and distant, as my reference point, I will illustrate why I believe that the idea of languages having universal colour categories is oversimplified. Thereafter I will also extend my hypothesis to other linguistic categories, such as body part terms and everyday house-hold objects, and based on these lexical-semantic domains, I will demonstrate some aspects of language diversity.