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Environmental interaction and spatial grammar: A fieldwork-based investigation of linguistic intercommunity variation

Studies have shown that speakers of different languages use different linguistic strategies to locate entities in space (e.g. Majid et al. 2004). For example, the location of a ball in relation to a tree can be described by an egocentric term such as 'left', but the location might also be described as 'towards the sea from the tree', 'downriver from the tree' or 'north of the tree'. The nature of this linguistic variation is a central question. While it has been argued that spatial language and cognition are influenced by the physical environment (Li & Gleitman 2002; Palmer 2015), more recent studies of variation within a single community have shown that different speakers of the same language use different strategies based on their environmental experiences, cultural settings and demographic factors (e.g. Bohnemeyer et al. 2014, 2015; Dasen & Mishra 2010; Palmer et al. 2017). This suggests that the linguistic variation is a result of a complex multi-directional interplay between environment, culture, cognition and language.

The proposed research is focused on a fieldwork-based case study of the spatial language in an Indigenous Australian language. To investigate the spatial language, I will utilise a battery of standardised, highly comparable linguistic tasks. I will compare the results with both standardised non-linguistic spatial tasks as well as broader sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies. Using these methods, I will document the way the community interacts with the environment and how space is represented in the grammar of this language in the Indigenous Australian community. The study of the patterning of linguistic variation will result in a better understanding of the relationship between the environment, culture and language in both general and specifically Australian contexts. Understanding these complex patterns of variation is crucial as the world is rapidly losing both linguistic and environmental diversity.

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