

Day 1 - Rediscovering the past

Session 1D:

Constraints of language on thinking and behaviour

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Abstract

The relationship between language and thought has been a question for researchers from a variety of fields. In linguistics, the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (known as linguistic determinism) states that all human thoughts and actions are bound by the constraints of language, and the weaker version (known as linguistic relativism) says that language shapes our thinking and behaviour only to a limited extent. From the time of its formulation in the early 1950s, the strong hypothesis has been greatly criticized, whereas the weaker hypothesis has been supported by evidence from various empirical studies. However, it is still unclear as to how precisely and to which extent a particular language can constrain thought and behaviour. Moreover, over the past half-century, the proportion of bilingual and multilingual speakers has steadily risen across the world, and in Singapore in particular. In this talk, I will use examples from English and Chinese to illustrate how the distinctive features of a language – such as lexical word formation, phrase structure, and metaphorical expressions – can shape culturally-dependent patterns of thinking in different ways. Examples from English-Chinese bilingual speakers in Singapore will also be used to illustrate how the language-dependent thought patterns of bilinguals relate to the norms for the languages they speak.