

ABSTRACT

Steffen Koch (Universität Bielefeld): Do linguistic interventions change minds?

Linguistic interventions are deliberate attempts to reshape linguistic practices. They include introducing new terms for previously neglected phenomena (“postpartum depression,” “sexual harassment,” “climate crisis”), assigning new meanings to familiar words (“queer,” “marriage,” “racism”), retiring problematic expressions (“Rasse,” “hysterical,” “fake news”), and introducing new words to refer to familiar things (“undocumented immigrant,” “death tax”). Such interventions have a long history. Their core rationale is that altering how we speak will alter how we think, and ultimately how we act. In this talk, I scrutinize this rationale. I first examine and challenge the common view that linguistic interventions affect (expand or contract) our conceptual repertoire, thereby shifting the realm of our thought possibilities. I then develop a more empirically grounded alternative: linguistic interventions do not enable previously impossible thoughts; rather, they shift the salience of categories, thus influencing the likelihood that people will use them in categorization and other cognitive processes.

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