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Principled connections guide semantic feature production

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Abstract

When people think about the features of scissors, they often spontaneously recall a central feature of scissors: they cut things. They tend not to recall other features of scissors, e.g., that they have handles. The present paper posits a novel explanation for the behavior: the features people recall first and most often reflect semantic generalizations of kinds. A recent taxonomy of such generalizations suggests that people represent privileged links between kinds and their features known as principled connections (Prasada et al., 2013). Principled connections can reflect norms, and one way to diagnose the presence of a principled connection is to test the acceptability of sentences of the form all normal Xs have feature Y, as in all normal cars have four wheels. We tested whether participants accept generalizations about the normality of features produced in a semantic feature production task. Two experiments provided participants with generalizations about features listed first and most often as well as features that people list less frequently. Both experiments found that people readily accepted generalizations about the normality of frequently produced features. The results corroborate the view that principled connections help people recall the features of conceptual categories.