

A nice cross-cultural (or cross-linguistic) [study](#) appeared in the last Cognition. Asifa Majid, James Boster, and Melissa Bowerman have studied the variations in the use of words for "cutting and breaking" actions across 28 (very) different languages. The principle of the experiment is quite straightforward. Participants are shown video-clips of different actions that they have to describe. It is then possible to study the different verbs and constructions that are used, and to observe the categories into which actions are thus grouped. This allowed the researchers to show that despite a great variety of verbal constructions, some deep commonalities can be found in the underlying categorizations. The abstract and some short comments below the fold.



A cutting event NOT used in the study
(and misleadingly described as a 'scratch' by its victim).
(You can enjoy the video [here](#))

The cross-linguistic categorization of everyday events: A study of cutting and breaking
Asifa Majid, James S. Boster, Melissa Bowerman
Cognition 109 (2008) 235-250

The cross-linguistic investigation of semantic categories has a long history, spanning many disciplines and covering many domains. But the extent to which semantic categories are universal or language-specific remains highly controversial. Focusing on the domain of events involving material destruction ("cutting and breaking" events, for short), this study investigates how speakers of different languages implicitly categorize such events through the verbs they use to talk about them. Speakers of 28 typologically, genetically and geographically diverse languages were asked to describe the events shown in a set of videoclips, and the distribution of their verbs across the events was analyzed with multivariate statistics. The results show that there is considerable agreement across languages in the dimensions along which cutting and breaking events are distinguished, although there is variation in the number of categories and the placement of their boundaries. This suggests that there are strong constraints in human event categorization, and that variation is played out within a restricted semantic space.

It is worth noting that this study has been made possible by the means available to the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. They have anthropologists and linguists all over the world. Participants can then be tested by someone they know, in their own language. This is probably the best (the only?) way to carry out good cross-cultural research on a large scale, and it is good to see that it is indeed possible to do it.

Also noteworthy is the idea that some categories may have emerged during, or for, the development of artifacts. As the authors note, "the manufacture and use of tools for purposes of cutting and breaking has been dated back at least 2.5 million years to the East African Rift area" (p.237). Would it be possible to look for similar categories in apes (who presumably do not need them for their artifacts)? It would then suggest that we may be dealing with a genuine adaptation for the creation or understanding of artifacts.