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Title: Relativity versus universals – an obsolete dichotomy

Abstract: The debate over language and thought has traditionally been framed by the opposition between ‘relativity’ and ‘universals’. We will present two recent results from the domain of color that do not fit neatly in either camp, as well as initial extensions of both results beyond that domain. The first result is that color naming affects color cognition, but does so primarily in the right half of the visual field – and much less, if at all, in the left half – a pattern predicted by the functional organization of the brain. This result is supported by ERP and fMRI studies and has been extended to domains outside of color. The second result is a computational model that suggests how color naming may be shaped by both universal and language-specific forces. The model accounts for color naming data from a broad range of languages, and we are currently exploring to what extent it may also account for semantic structure in domains other than color. We conclude that there is no conflict between the existence of some universal tendencies in semantic structure and the shaping of local perceptuo-cognitive processes by non-universal semantic structures.