

Labeling keeps our knowledge organized, study shows

December 4 2007

A popular urban legend suggests that Eskimos have dozens of words for snow. As a culture that faces frigid temperatures year-round, it is important to differentiate between things like snow on the ground (“aput”) and falling snow (“qana”). Psychologists are taking note of this phenomenon and are beginning to examine if learning different names for things helps to tell them apart.

In a study appearing in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Carnegie Mellon University researchers Gary Lupyan and David Rakison, and their colleague James McClelland of Stanford University asked whether all other things being equal, learning names for unfamiliar items or people really makes it easier to learn to categorize them.

In a series of experiments, college undergraduates played a game where they were asked to imagine that they were explorers on planet “Teeb” while subtly distinct “aliens” would appear individually on a computer screen in front of them. Their goal was to categorize these aliens into two types: those to be avoided and those to be approached.

Participants pressed different keys to indicate which aliens they believed they should approach and which should be avoided. After each response, they would hear a buzz or a beep to let them know if their response was correct.

One group of participants was told that previous visitors to the planet

have found it useful to refer to the two types of aliens as “grecious” and “leebish.” After each response, participants in this group saw or heard the label that corresponded with the friendly aliens and those to be avoided. The other group completed the categorization task without the labels.

Even though all participants had the same amount of practice categorizing the aliens, the group that learned names for the two kinds of aliens learned to categorize them much faster.

These results suggest that regardless of familiarity, having different names for things makes it easier to place them into the correct categories. In other words, a Southern Californian could differentiate the many different types of snow just as well as an Eskimo, as long as they learned the proper labels.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Labeling keeps our knowledge organized, study shows (2007, December 4) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-12-knowledge.html>

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