

English and Mandarin Speakers May Think about Time Differently, but for a Different Reason

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Abstract: Do English and Mandarin speakers think about time differently? Boroditsky (2001) claimed they do, but the claim did not stand in three failed replications (Chen, 2007; January & Kako, 2007; Tse & Altarriba, 2008). Recently she and her colleagues reported data from a different task to support the claim (Boroditsky, Fuhrman, & McCormick, 2010). We repeated their study with English speakers in US, Mandarin speakers in Taiwan and Mandarin speakers in China. The Mandarin speakers in Taiwan showed an opposite pattern of results than the English speakers, but the Mandarin speakers in China performed similarly to the English speakers. These results are interpreted as reflecting differences in orthographic directionality adopted in different linguistic communities, uniformly horizontal in US and China, but horizontal mixed with vertical in Taiwan. English and Mandarin speakers may think about time differently, but not because of the different metaphorical usages in the languages.