Biases in language, cognition and linguists.

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Humans the world over share a common experience of the world: we walk, we sleep, we eat and drink, we tell stories, we live on the planet earth and are subject to its gravitational force. But the 7000+ languages we speak vary in myriad ways. Of particular interest to cognitive linguists are structural parallels between the language a person speaks and their mental representation of the world. Some such parallels (such as the distinction between self and other being grammaticized as person distinctions in pronouns) are (near-)universal across speech communities, and can be attributed to language reflecting the basic architecture of our minds. But in other cases, we see marked differences between speech communities. Debates over whether these differences are attributable to language shaping thought, thought shaping language, or both language and thought being shaped by some external force, are as old as linguistics as a discipline.

This talk will review a range of evidence that language structures bias their speakers towards certain descriptions of the world they inhabit, and that these linguistic biases in turn feed and reinforce biases in cognition. Such biases might be seen in German speakers habitually describing spatial relationships using terms like *links* 'left', rather than *Ost* 'east', while the reverse is true for Kune speakers. Or the fact that English speakers think of *the generations ahead* as their future descendants, while for the Yanyuwa they are the ancestors. Or the fact that Kuuk Thaayorre speakers represent the flow of time from east-to-west but English speakers represent it from left-to-right. This talk will also consider a different kind of bias—the binary bias fed by the framing of the 'linguistic relativity' debate—which I argue impedes our understanding of language, cognition and the relationship between the two. Here I will reflect on how my understanding of my own (and collaborators') findings has evolved over time, arguing that the empirical data point to a more nuanced relationship between language and thought than a polarized debate can do justice to. There is no single cause that explains why reflexes of Proto-Paman **kungkarr* denote 'north' in Umpila, 'east' in Kukatj and 'northwest' (Kuuk Thaayorre); or why cardinal direction terms like these are used more frequently by some subpopulations (e.g. fishermen in the Maldives) than others; or why for many English speakers *north* is not interpreted as a cardinal direction at all, but rather denotes the direction extending forwards from the speaker's viewpoint. Each of these phenomena result from human attempts to resolve a multiplicity of competing cognitive and communicative pressures. Cumulatively, these studies point to the fact that Cognitive Linguistics as a field is strengthened by a diversity of perspectives, diversity in methods, diversity in researchers and diversity in languages studied.