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Putting knowledge to the test: a conceptual feature rating task with tundma ‘to feel’ in Estonian

Abstract:
This study focuses on the meaning extension from perception to cognition, exemplified with the Estonian tactile perception verb tundma ‘to feel’. Results of a conceptual feature rating task (Troche et al., 2014, 2017) will be presented. Although much has been written on the relationship between perception and cognition (Ibarretxe-Antunano, 2008; Evans & Wilkins, 2000; Storch & Aikhenvald, 2013a; Viberg, 2015), the previous work has been mostly descriptive. The present study aims to show whether the kind of knowledge that is expressed by a perception verb, in this case the Estonian verb tundma ‘to feel’, can be shown to exhibit characteristics conceptually motivated by the physical act of perception itself.

In Estonian, the verb tundma ‘to feel’ expresses a deep, thorough knowledge of something or someone. The task aimed to find out whether the tundma-knowledge is perceived as being more “bodily” in comparison to other types of knowledge, expressed with abstract knowledge verbs like teadma ‘to know’ or aru saama ‘to understand’. It was expected that the tundma-knowledge is perceived to be more concrete, as it is lexically tied to the physical experience of feeling.

To this end, 70 participants completed a modified version of a conceptual feature rating task (Troche et al., 2014, 2017). Six cognition-related senses of tundma were included in the task, each represented with six sentences. Each sentence was paired with an equal sentence, where tundma was replaced with an abstract knowledge verb. Thus, participants rated altogether 72 sentences on six cognitive dimensions shown to represent the distinctions between abstract and concrete concepts (ibid.). The presentation order of the sentences was randomized. A 7-point Likert scale was used.

A significant difference was expected between the sentences with tundma and the sentences with an abstract knowledge verb. For example, it was hypothesized that the tundma-sentences would be rated higher on the dimension of emotion than the abstract-verb sentences. To test the hypothesis, a linear mixed effects model was fitted for every dimension, testing the relationship between rating on the Likert scale and choice of verb. However, the results show no significant difference between the two types of sentences. We believe this is because the scale of concreteness-abstractness is not specific enough to represent the differences in the conceptualisation of these two types of knowledge. Other, more specific characteristics of the perceptual act (e.g. subjectivity, physical contact) might be the motivation behind the conceptualisation pattern.
References:


