

“Feedback stabilization of category distinctions”

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In previous work I have argued that pressures to maintain contrast between lexical categories (e.g. words) can indirectly promote contrast maintenance between sublexical sound categories (e.g. phonemes; Blevins and Wedel 2009). Here, I discuss how category learning, perception and production behaviors may contribute to category stability even in the absence of significant communicative function. The existence of categorial distinctions has been shown to suppress perceived difference within a category and (possibly) expand it near category boundaries (e.g., Kuhl 1991, Goldstone 2001). As a result, not only do we tend to group similar things into the same category, but things in the same category are in turn perceived to be more similar. This sets the stage for a potential feedback loop between (i) learning a category and (ii) the behavior providing evidence for that category for subsequent learners. This type of feedback loop itself has the potential to stabilize category distinctions against noise over generations of learners - even for category distinctions that are not highly functional.