

An examination of the lexical structure of languages throws some light on the relations between various aspects of human conceptualization. It has been theorized that the linguistic forms most closely associated semantically with the expression of relations – case inflections in languages exhibiting this category – are originally and basically spatial in meaning. A separate class of words aligns the vocabulary of sequential time with that of intensity, so repetition of the same activity again and again (to a European) is rather the intensification of a single activity. Spatial terms are also freely used in the expression of other, more abstract relationships: higher temperature, higher quality, lower expectations, summit of a career, far removed from any sensible course of action, a distant relationship, close friends, over and above what had been said. Although time is a continuum, people readily divide it up into bits and record it rather as they do materials extended in space: five years, three months, six seconds. An American Indian language is reported not to do this nearly so readily; it uses cardinal numbers only for discrete, countable objects. Certain differences in cultural attitudes and world outlook are said to accompany this kind of linguistic difference. Spatial relations and their expression seem to lie very deep in the content of vocabulary.