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# A universal developmental path in the construction of exact number concepts



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**INTRODUCTION** In the first years of life, conceptions of exact numbers develop gradually, as children are exposed to number words, and three milestones have been described:  
1- understanding that counting is a tool to assess quantities (age ~3½ years)  
2- mapping number words to numerical quantities outside of counting situations (age ~4½ years)  
3- understanding that addition/subtraction are essential to the structure of the set of integers (age ~8 years)

**PARTICIPANTS** We studied a group from the Amazon, the Mundurucu [see Pica et al. 2004]. Mundurucu speak a language with a restricted number lexicon. They all have some experience with Portuguese number words, although the level of bilingualism or instruction is very heterogeneous.

Twenty-seven participants (mean age 31.7 years, 7 to 75; 16 females) were tested on the Give-a-number task, the Symbolic Comparison task, as well as the Number-Space task.

Is this developmental path dependent on the input western children receive for learning numbers?

## TASKS

### Give-a-Number Task [after Wynn, 1990]



"give me three seeds!"  
**Stimuli:** um, dois, quatro, cinco, sete, nove, dez

### Comparison Task [after Le Corre, under review]

"which is more, five or six?"

**Stimuli**  
**Small vs. small:** um/dois, dois/tres  
**Small vs. large:** um/cinco, dois/cinco, dois/nove, dois/dez, tres/quatro, tres/nove, tres/dez  
**Large vs. large:** quatro/cinco, cinco/sete, cinco/dez, nove/dez

### Number-Line Task [after Siegler & Opfer, 2003] [see Dehaene et al., 2008]



"Where does five go on this line?"



**Stimuli:** um, dois, tres, quatro, cinco, seis, sete, oito, nove, dez

## PATTERNS OF PERFORMANCE IN WESTERN CHILDREN

Age < 3 ½: "Subset knower"  
Can produce sets for numbers up to 1, 2, or 3;  
Give the same quantity for all numbers larger than this upper limit.

Age > 3 ½: "Counter"  
Can produce sets for any number in their counting range.

Children understand the order principle in the counting list **1 year after** they become able to use counting to produce sets.

Age < 4 ½: "Non-Mapper"  
Can compare two small numbers (e.g. 2vs3), or a small number vs. a large number (e.g. 1vs8).  
Fail at comparing two large numbers (e.g. 6vs10).

Age > 4 ½: "Mapper"  
Can compare any pair of numbers.

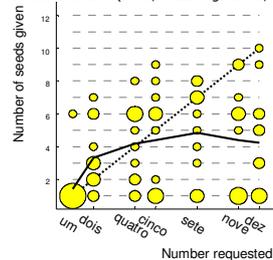
For a line flanked with **arabic numbers** and the scale **1-100**:

First grade: compressed mapping  
Placing consistent with the order of the numbers, with more space devoted to the small numbers.

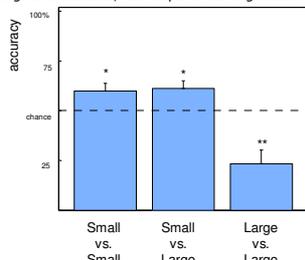
Third grade: linear mapping  
Numbers placed evenly.

The performance of the Mundurucu across tasks follows the same pattern as in western children: **None of the participant succeeded at the comparison task while failing at the give-a-number task.** Moreover, the patterns of failures in each task reproduced the failures observed in western children.

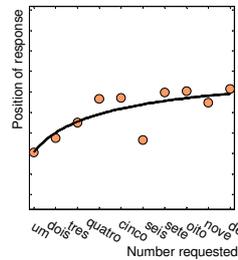
Non-counters (N=8, mean age 39.3, 6 females) (selection: on give-a-number, the slope is non significant on numbers >4):



linear regression on individual responses for numbers larger than 4; test of the slope vs. zero: **8/8 failures**

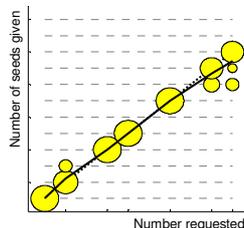


binomial test of individual responses vs. chance level (50%): **8/8 failures**

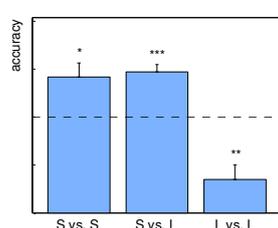


**Responses essentially flat**  
Regression with two regressor, linear and logarithmic:  $R^2=0.52$   
No significant effect of either regressor ( $ps>0.24$ )

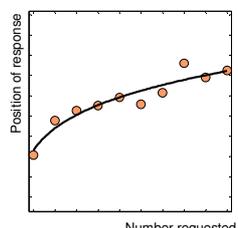
Non-Mappers (N=8, mean age 28.6, 4 females) (selection: on give-a-number, the slope for numbers>4 is significantly positive + at chance overall for comparison):



linear regression on individual responses for numbers larger than 4; test of the slope vs. zero: **8/8 successes**

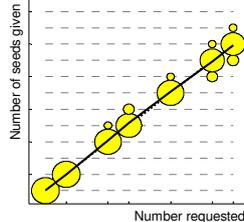


binomial test of individual responses vs. chance level (50%): **8/8 failures**

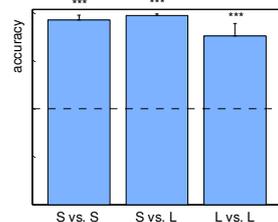


**Responses essentially compressed**  
Regression with two regressors, linear and logarithmic:  $R^2=0.87$   
 $P_{lin}>0.74$   
 $P_{log}=0.070$

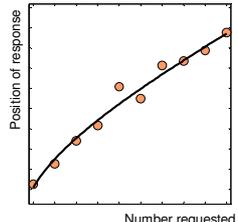
Mappers (N=11, mean age 28.5, 6 females) (selection: on give-a-number, the slope for numbers>4 is significantly positive + significantly better than chance overall for comparison):



linear regression on individual responses for numbers larger than 4; test of the slope vs. zero: **11/11 successes**



binomial test of individual responses vs. chance level (50%): **11/11 successes**



**Responses essentially linear**  
Regression with two regressors, linear and logarithmic:  $R^2=0.97$   
 $P_{lin}=0.013$   
 $P_{log}=0.093$

**CONCLUSION** Despite huge differences in the exposure to number words (content of input and age of exposure), Mundurucu follow the same developmental path in the acquisition of Portuguese numerical symbols than western children, both within and across tasks. This result suggests that the progression across the stages of the acquisition of number words is not dependent on the input received or of the age of the participant. Rather, this path seems to be constrained by some universal laws of the human mind.

**References**  
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