Do numerical concepts depend on possession of language?

Brian Butterworth
Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London
b.butterworth@ucl.ac.uk

Two kinds of argument have been presented that possession of a language is needed to have concepts of numbers. The first is that recursion comes 'free' with language, and that is what enables us to construct number concepts of arbitrary size. The second, which has been the subject of much experimental work, emphasises that the list of integer terms (one, two, three, etc.) is what enables us to construct numerical concepts beyond the span of apprehension (about 3). I will argue that the first argument is defeated by evidence from neurological patients with severe syntactic and other language deficits still able calculate, and that second is problematic evidentially and logically. New evidence from speakers of languages with restricted number vocabularies will be presented.