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Author

Fernandes Henrique, Alice

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It runs in the blood: what do words have to do with the body?

Alice Fernandes Henrique
Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, Brazil

Abstract

Words are not detached from the world: they simulate embodied experiences. Concrete words, for being closer to sensorial information, are normally understood as “easier” processed (in word naming, lexical choice or recall tasks, for example), what is commonly called “concreteness effect”. Nevertheless, some studies show a better performance in abstract words, probably due to their emotionality or lexical associations. With the objective of better elucidating this discussion, we created 18 novel words (6 concrete, 6 emotional abstract, and 6 social abstract), that were presented in a sentential context. Then, we applied 4 behavioural tasks: free recall, lexical decision, free-form definition, and multiple-choice definition. Our results showed recurrent closeness between concrete and emotional abstract words in both lexical and semantic tasks, in contrast to a distinct pattern for social abstract words, which also showed lower reaction times in the lexical decision task, probably due to their ease in lexical associations.